

turning out or turning off?

An analysis of political disengagement
and what can be done about it



Lewis Baston and Ken Ritchie
with Roger Mortimore and Mark Gill (MORI)

This booklet had been published by the Electoral Reform Society as a contribution to the debate on participation in elections. The views expressed, however, are those of the authors and should not be assumed to be those of the Society.

Foreword

Politicians of all parties have recognised the seriousness of low turnouts in elections and we welcome the efforts that have been made to encourage more people to vote. In particular, we commend the Government for many of the changes it has made in our electoral arrangements and for its initiative in establishing the Electoral Commission with a remit which includes encouraging participation in elections. But the causes of low turnout are complex: their roots are in the nature of our politics, national and local, and present strategies to tackle the problems through changes in how we vote do not address the underlying problems.

In this booklet we look at the wider problems of political disengagement and at practical steps which can be taken to overcome them. We argue that existing programmes to increase turnouts through changes in how we vote should be developed cautiously and in a way that minimises the risks to the integrity of our electoral process and we propose other actions which should be considered. But we conclude that political disengagement is a consequence of our political culture and the nature of our political institutions, and that only a change to our voting system, rather than our voting methods, is likely to promote the changes that are needed.

We are grateful to Roger Mortimore and Mark Gill of MORI for their contribution to this work. Their chapter which provides polling evidence on how people relate to politics provides the starting point for much of our analysis.

We would like to record our thanks to Tim Pateman who has assisted us in gathering data and in drafting sections of the text, to Frances Clemson for her detailed work in checking the proofs and to Tom Carpenter for meeting a tight deadline for design work. We are also grateful to many others, including Alex Folkes and David Griffin in the Electoral Reform Society and Ben Marshall of the Electoral Commission, who have contributed ideas and comments. Responsibility for the contents of the booklet, however, is ours alone.

Lewis Baston and Ken Ritchie

Lewis Baston is Research and Information Officer at the Electoral Reform Society and Ken Ritchie is the Society's Chief Executive.

1. Opening paragraph of
'Delivering democracy? The future
of postal voting', Electoral
Commission August 2004.

“The most important factor in improving participation is persuading voters that the election (and the political process more generally) is relevant to them and that their vote matters. That is the responsibility of politicians – of all parties, and at all levels of governance – and, arguably, the media.”

The Electoral Commission¹

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In the 2001 general election only 3 out of every 5 electors bothered to vote. The turnout of 59% was the lowest for any general election since 1918, and as that was a year when many electors were still returning from military service in Europe, the 2001 turnout can be considered the worst on record. For the first time since 1923 the number who did not vote was greater than the number that voted for the winning party.

Was this simply a blip – a freak result of little significance? Is it not just a sign that the electorate are broadly content? Are our turnouts not just following a trend seen in most Western democracies?

Our answer to all of these questions is 'No'. Certainly 2001 was an election in which the outcome was regarded by many as a foregone conclusion; an election marked by lacklustre campaigns from the parties and providing little in the way of distinctive choices for the voters. We will argue that these characteristics of the 2001 election, as well as the turnout, indicate that something is going badly wrong with our politics. And even if turnouts are falling elsewhere, albeit not as dramatically, that should not be a source of consolation.

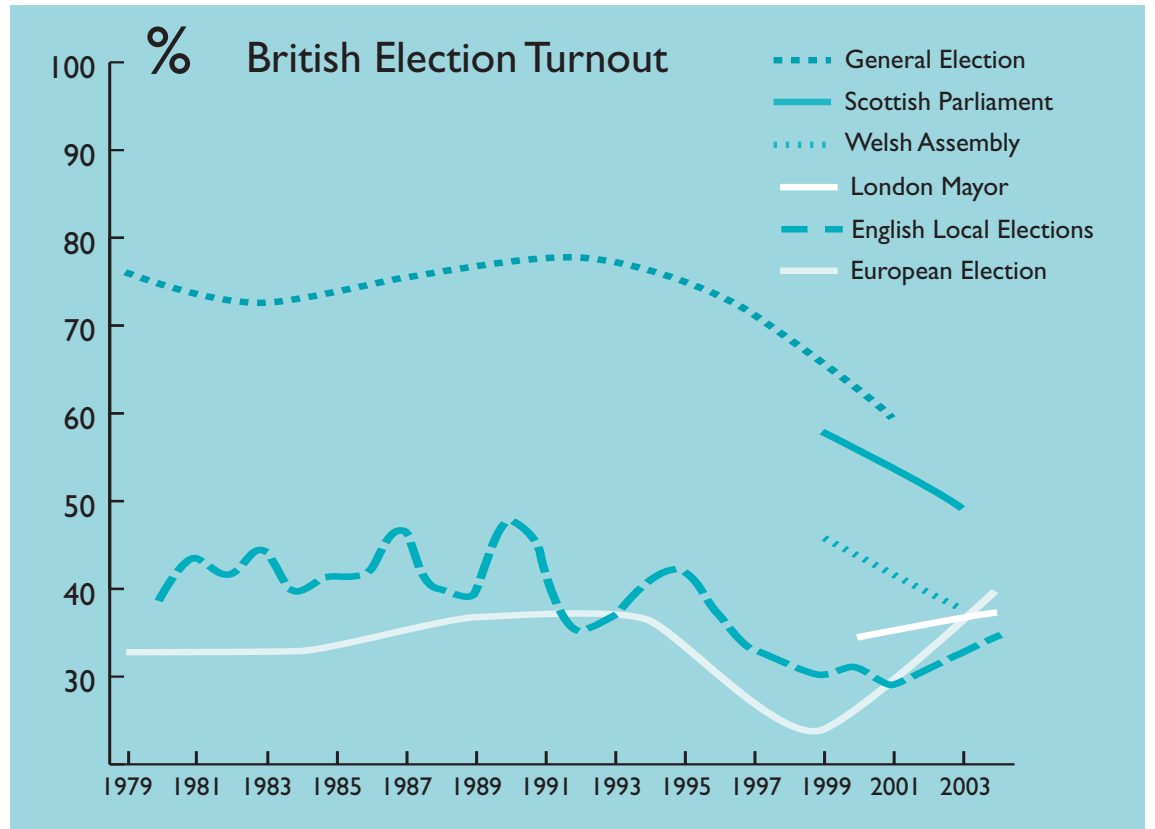
It is not only with general elections that we have problems – apparent interest in other elections is even lower. Although polls suggest that the Scots are happy to have their own Parliament, barely half of them voted in the 2003 elections to decide who the Parliament's members should be. In Wales that year, where people have been more ambivalent about devolution, only 38% turned out to vote in the Assembly elections. Holding local and European Parliament elections on the same day in 2004 might have boosted turnouts in both, but we cannot get excited about increases over the abysmal 23% turnout in the 1999 Euro elections and past local government elections in which turnouts are never much above a third of the electorate.

Yet in 1997 we elected a new Government committed to reforming our democracy. In the run up to that year's elections there was talk of building a 'stakeholder democracy' in which people would be more involved in the decisions that affect them. What is more, the Government has delivered many of the democratic reforms it promised – devolution, improved electoral systems, the restoration of London government and at least a start to the reform of the House of Lords. So what has gone wrong?

Turnout in elections is important. We reject the arguments of those who say that turnout is not important, that we should not worry if people are indifferent about who wins elections or simply not interested. Turnouts concern us, both because a reasonable turnout is needed to give democratic legitimacy to our institutions of government and because low turnout is an indicator of a wider malaise – a disengagement of many citizens from formal politics. If electors do not turn out, it is more than likely that they have been turned off.

Low turnouts must be a concern for any democrat as they are unlikely to provide electors with representative government. We are critical of the electoral systems used in Britain at present, and particularly of the 'first-past-the-post' system used to elect MPs and local councils. But even the best electoral system can only produce a result representative of those who voted – it cannot guarantee an outcome that reflects the views of the entire electorate. The smaller the turnout, the greater the danger that we will not have representative government, and the greater will be the risk that extremist parties, such as the BNP, can win seats.

Low turnout is also a concern for politicians. Our first-past-the-post electoral system allows candidates to win elections with less than 50% of the votes in their constituencies: in the 2001



general election more than half of winning candidates did so. When we then consider the number of people who actually voted, we find that only 99 MPs (15% of the total) were elected with the support of at least a third of their electorates. That hardly gives them a strong mandate as constituency representatives.

We accept that democracy is about more than turnouts in elections. Turnout measures the quantity of votes, but not the quality of the decisions which lead electors to vote for one candidate rather than another. Moreover, it does not measure, at least directly, the engagement between electors and politicians between elections, the extent to which citizens can influence decisions, or the degree to which politicians are responsive to public concerns.

Nevertheless, low turnouts are a sure sign that our democracy is not working as it should. Not only are they undesirable in their own right but they indicate deeper problems of disengagement: unless we get to the roots of these problems, any measures to boost turnout are likely to have limited success and may only hide a growing crisis in our political affairs.

We do not pretend that there is any single or easy solution to these problems, but in this booklet we consider what can be done and what needs to be done to breathe new life into our politics. We begin, however, with a chapter by Roger Mortimore and Mark Gill of MORI which provides us with statistics on the dimensions of the problems.

Voting and politics: the public view

Dr Roger Mortimore and Mark Gill

2

This chapter summarises recent research by the MORI Social Research Institute into the key factors that underpin people's propensity to vote, and considers how far there is a distinction between a commitment to vote at elections and a wider feeling of civic responsibility and citizenship.

Turnout has received considerable attention over recent years, especially since the record low turnouts in both general elections (2001) and parliamentary by-elections (Leeds Central in 1999). Over the past couple of years, the Government has experimented with several methods to increase turnout, such as making voting easier by prescribing all- postal ballots and combining the European Parliament elections with local government elections earlier this year. Many of these experiments seem to have had some, if limited, success at getting more people to vote. Turnout in this year's European Parliament elections was declared as 38.2% in Great Britain, compared

with 23.1% in 1999 – though it is not yet clear how much of this rise can be attributed to the use of postal voting as opposed to combining these elections with those for local authorities, where applicable.²

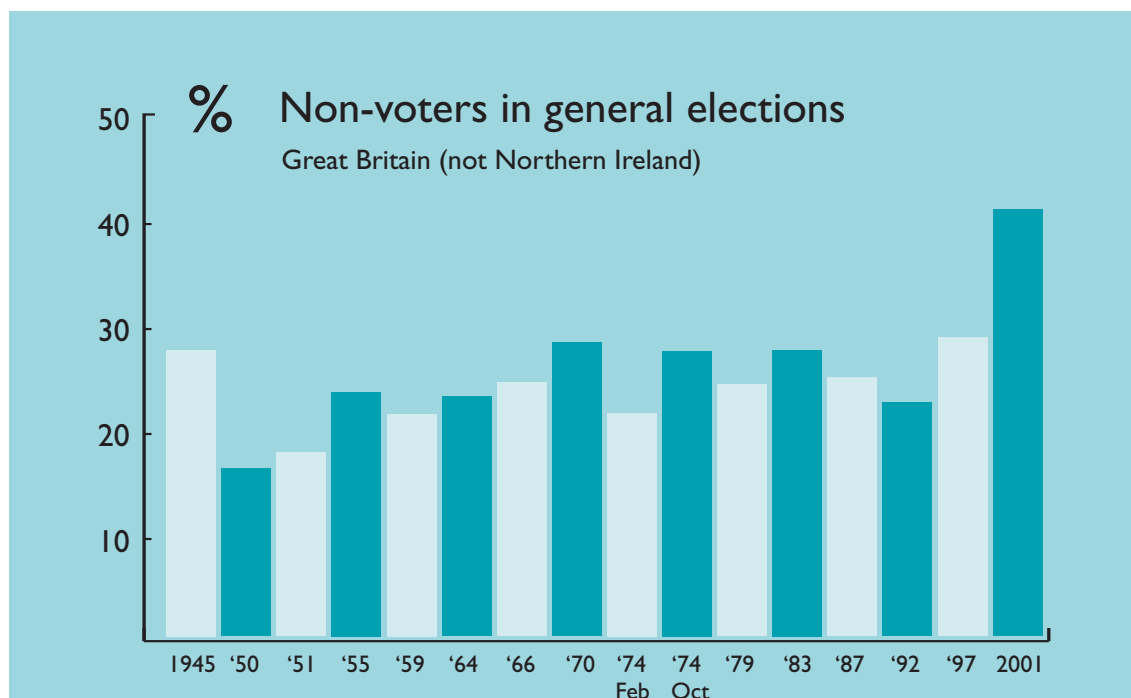
As well as examining how voting can be made more convenient for people, much research over recent years has tried to explore people's underlying attitudes to participation in the electoral process, and to see how this fits into their wider views of politics. MORI has conducted a fair amount of research about this recently, notably for The Electoral Commission and The Hansard Society.³

The following graph demonstrates the scale of fall in turnout by illustrating the percentage of the registered electorate who **did not vote** in each General Election since 1945. This shows, perhaps most clearly, that low turnout in the 2001 General Election was exceptional by any standards.

1. Dr Roger Mortimore is Senior Political Analyst and Mark Gill is Head of Political Research at the MORI Social Research Institute. Their contribution of this chapter should not, of course, be taken to imply that MORI supports or rejects the arguments and recommendations contained in other chapters.

2. Some of the increase must also be attributed to a change in the calculation of the figures. The official turnout figure for 2004 includes, for the first time, ballot papers that were not included in the count of votes – blank papers, papers that had been spoiled (deliberately or accidentally) and those rejected because the documentation required to accompany a postal vote had not been properly completed. Calculated in the conventional manner the turnout in 2004 was 37.2%. This inflation of turnout figures by the inclusion of electors who failed to record a vote seems more likely to provoke public cynicism about official statistics than to ease concern about the demographic deficit implied by low turnouts.

3. In particular see *An audit of political engagement* (December 2003) and *Rules of engagement?* (August 2004), both can be found at www.mori.com or www.electoralcommission.org.uk



It may well be that to some extent the low turnout in 2001 reflects particular issues around that election. Nevertheless, the general trend of falling turnout through the 1990s, exhibited at local and European as well as general elections, suggests there is probably also some deeper-seated factor operating. The causes of this abstention have been investigated in considerable depth by various academic and survey research teams. As would be expected given the broad range of research and the complexity of the issues involved, no single, simple answer has emerged to explain why; but a number of key themes are common to almost all of the findings.

What is clear is that this cannot be simply described as “apathy”, nor is it a symptom of wider decline in civil responsibility. Many of those who do not vote nevertheless feel strongly about issues that others would feel come within the political sphere. Many of those who do not engage in any “political” activity are active and enthusiastic in communal activities they see as “non-political”. The problem is that not everybody sees a connection between the two – and that not everybody sees that as a “problem”.

In survey research about people's attitudes, we find strong support for the principles of voting. Over half the public (53%) say they feel a sense of satisfaction when they vote (23% disagree); three-quarters (75%) say they want to have a say in how the country is run (13% disagree). Overall, there is still a high level of belief that it is one's *duty* to vote: again, three-quarters (74%) believe it is their duty to vote, and only 15% disagree. However, younger people are much less likely to agree that it is their duty to vote than the middle-aged or old.

Historical data is lacking to determine whether this is a new phenomenon, or whether younger people have always been less convinced of this

**Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
“It is my duty to vote”**

	All	18-24	25-34	35-54	55+
	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	74	58	61	76	85
Disagree	15	24	20	15	9
Neither/ don't know	11	18	19	9	6

Source: MORII/Electoral Commission/Hansard Society, December 2003

duty. Yet if this does reflect a generational shift, with the implication that the middle aged and older people of tomorrow will be less likely to see voting as a duty than do these age groups presently, then the task of improving voter turnout (perhaps of even maintaining it as a majority event) can only become more difficult. And to look at what needs to be done, we need to look at some of the underlying attitudes towards voting.

One striking theme to emerge from research is the role of political parties (though this is a theme that has perhaps been under-researched, particularly by statutory bodies for obvious reasons). The evidence suggests that political parties have a key role in encouraging people to turn out to vote by demonstrating it matters which party wins the next General Election, through making it easier for the public to discriminate between the main parties. People who identify with one of the political parties, or feel attached to them, are much more likely to vote than those who do not.

However, public regard for political parties is low. They are the least trusted of political institutions and as measured by the regular *Eurobarometer* surveys this is not confined to Britain, but across the EU at the very least. In the latest survey, conducted in February and

March 2004, just one in 10 UK adults said they “tend to trust” political parties and 78% said they “tend not to trust” them. And while over recent years we have seen trust in other political institutions fluctuate quite considerably, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, trust in political parties has remained stubbornly low.

Q. I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.

	Tend to trust %	Tend not to trust %
The army	67	20
Charitable or voluntary organisations	65	22
Radio	59	29
The police	55	35
Television	54	37
The United Nations	45	33
The religious institutions	37	45
Justice/the British legal system	37	50
Trade unions	34	42
The British parliament	25	61
The press	20	73
Big companies	19	65
The European Union	19	55
The British government	19	69
Political parties	10	78

Source: Eurobarometer 61 (European Commission)
Base: 1,343 United Kingdom adults, 22 February-17 March 2004

If political parties have so intimate a relationship with engagement of the electorate, it becomes important to understand their relationship in a general sense, if not in terms of specific ideologies, policies and personalities. During the 1997 and 2001 elections, MORI adapted a model used to explore the relationship between companies and their

stakeholders (the “MORI Excellence Model”) to measure the interaction of the three main political parties with voters. In particular, it measured the extent of positive or negative “advocacy” – how many of the public were prepared to recommend voting for or not voting for a particular party to somebody else, especially without being asked to do so.

Ignoring the differences in advocacy for the individual parties, there are two findings that stand out. First, that substantially lower levels of positive advocacy correspond to the lower turnout at the election in 2001. Second, and more worrying, that the total numbers who say they would discourage somebody else from voting for a party *without being asked* were higher than the number who would encourage them to do so, with the gap being wider in 2001. At the last two elections negative advocacy of political parties has been more common than positive advocacy. It would not be surprising if this were connected with low levels of electoral turnout.

A further theme to emerge from research is how the public view the act of voting, and what the election is seen to mean to them personally. Recent MORI analysis of the *Audit of Political Engagement* conducted for The Electoral Commission and The Hansard Society shows that the factors that most closely relate to propensity to vote are a belief that involvement in politics works (“efficacy”) which is much the most powerful influence, and a feeling of knowledge about and interest in the political institutions. Efficacy is defined by belief that getting involved in politics can change how the country is run, feeling a sense of satisfaction when one votes and wanting to have a say in how the country is run, believing that being active in politics is not a waste of time and that people have a duty to vote. At present, the scorecard on this is mixed. For example, a majority of the public (55%) disagree that being active in politics is a waste of time, although

Q. Thinking of the ... Party, please pick one statement from each section on this card according to which best reflects your behaviour and opinions with respect to the Party.

	Con		Lab		Lib Dem	
	1997	2001	1997	2001	1997	2001
<i>Base: c. 1,000 British adults, 22 April 1997 and 8 May 2001</i>	%	%	%	%	%	%
I support the Party so much I encourage others to vote for it, without being asked	3	2	10	6	2	1
If someone asked my opinion I would encourage them to vote for the Party	11	10	21	17	9	7
If someone asked my opinion I would be neutral about voting for the Party	42	57	45	57	60	68
If someone asked my opinion I would discourage them from voting for the Party	22	16	11	11	11	11
I am so strongly opposed to the Party that I discourage others from voting for it without being asked	12	10	3	4	4	5
Positive Response	14	12	31	23	11	8
Negative Response	34	26	14	15	15	16
Net	-20	-14	+17	+8	-4	-8
Don't know /No opinion	10	5	9	4	14	8

Source: Worcester & Mortimore (2001)

22% agree. On the other hand, only just over a third think that “when people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way the UK is run”. If we want to increase voter turnout, we need to persuade non-voters that it is worthwhile bothering to vote. This will probably become even more the case if fewer voters accept the existence of a duty to vote, and feel a need to be specifically motivated each time they turn out.

The second dimension about knowledge and participation is not surprising. Much past research has shown that the more people know about an institution, the more favourably

disposed they are towards it, and generally the more likely they are to connect with it – a principle encapsulated in the maxim “Familiarity breeds favourability, not contempt”. In politics, those who claim to know more about politics say they are more likely to vote. Yet we should be careful not to overstate or to simplify this into a causal relationship. Those who are involved through voting, or even contacting their MP, are most likely to have, and to seek greater knowledge about politics and political institutions than those who do not, and vice versa. This leads to a cycle of success; the converse cycle of failure is perhaps a closer model of the present situation.

Yet, whatever the cause of declining turnout at elections, and whatever the possible solutions to remedy it, we should also recognise that turnout is a very simple measure, which does not necessarily reflect the wider health of civic engagement. Political engagement is much more multi-dimensional, and simply persuading people of their greater civic responsibilities will not necessarily improve turnout. Our most recent analysis of political engagement shows that being prepared to help organise charity events, for example, or playing an active part in non-political organisations – neither of which have shown a decline over recent years – are *not* related to propensity to vote. They are seen as separate and distinct activities. Therefore, those who are good citizens in many other ways do not view voting as an important part of their civic responsibilities. It is not simply a case of non-voters being on a lower rung on the citizenship ladder – they are on a different ladder altogether.

Reinvigorating public participation in politics, therefore, may involve accepting that it can no longer be presumed that voting is a civic duty, and ensuring instead that citizens come to understand how each opportunity they have to vote has personal relevance to them. Alternatively, it may conceivably involve a wholesale recasting of civic values, particularly of the youngest generation of adults, to persuade them that voting – regardless of its personal relevance to them – is one of the responsibilities that they have to the rest of society. The “government of the people, by the people, for the people” that Lincoln spoke of lays an onus on the people as well on the government.

3

The roots of disengagement

1. 'Why politics needs marketing', paper for the Political Marketing Conference, Aberdeen, 2002

2. Catherine Bromley, John Curtice and Ben Seyd 'Is there a crisis of democracy?' CREST research paper May 2004.

3. W S Gilbert, from 'Iolanthe'.

Roger Mortimore and Mark Gill's evidence makes it clear that we are not just facing a problem of turnouts but one of faith in politics. They report that only one in four trust Parliament, only one in five trust the Government and only one in ten trust political parties. Rather than seeing politicians as their representatives who will work on their behalf, it appears that many people see politicians as at the best irrelevant, and at worst as part of their problems. Elsewhere Roger Mortimore has written:

"The very perception that a body or individual is in some sense "political" may now be damaging; the public, it seems, are always prepared to believe the worst about politicians, rarely if ever to give the benefit of the doubt."

They also make the point that the problem cannot simply be dismissed as apathy. Research² has shown that people's political involvement in a broad sense is not diminishing. Over 2 million turned out to protest against the war in Iraq, many support charities and pressure groups concerned with global poverty, human rights, GM crops, threats to the environment, etc. and numbers who claim to have signed petitions or contacted their MPs has if anything risen over the past decade. What we are seeing is not disengagement from political issues, but disengagement from formal politics. People generally are concerned and have views on current affairs, but they appear to be losing their faith in the ability of politicians and political parties to provide solutions.

Falling turnouts therefore appear to be manifestations of a change that has been taking place between citizens and their elected representatives. The reasons for this change are complex, but it is evident that

- society has been changing;
- politics has been changing, and
- how politicians communicate and relate to the electorate has changed.

Let us look briefly at these in turn. In the past British society was more class-based, with two main parties representing class interests. Those of the manual working class, often employed in heavily unionised manufacturing industries, aligned themselves with Labour (which was of course created to represent them), while the middle classes and many white-collar workers tended to support the Conservatives. The circumstances of your birth generally determined your political allegiance. As Gilbert put it in an earlier period,

"...every boy and every gal that's born into the world alive is either a little Liberal, or else a little Conservative".³

Although there is still a strong correlation between socio-economic status and party affiliation, the class divisions in our society are now more blurred. For many, increasing incomes and greater social mobility have resulted in the ideological divide between left and right losing its relevance and parties can no longer take the support of their traditional constituencies for granted. From a democratic perspective, this is a positive development: electors are more individualistic in their outlook and do not simply vote on the basis of class or tribal loyalty – they are likely to be more questioning of what one party or another will do for them. Like shoppers in a supermarket, they will look at the brands on offer, and if they do not like any they will not make a purchase. While this means that politicians need to work harder to win support, there is also a negative side to the development: the approach to politics tends to become consumerist rather than participatory.

But politics is also changing. With the dilution of the class structure of our society there has also been a dilution of the ideological divides in our politics. New Labour has had electoral success by reaching out into areas of policy which were traditionally the preserve of the

Conservatives – enterprise and wealth creation are no longer regarded with suspicion and privatisation is no longer a dirty word – and the Conservatives preach the value of decent public services. The two larger parties both recognise that the key to power lies in capturing the centre ground resulting in them fighting, along with the Liberal Democrats, on a much narrower political battlefield. When canvassers are told on doorsteps that “you’re all the same”, the electors have at least a point.

When the Labour Party was established, its politicians were generally representative, and not just representatives, of the working people. Now we have seen the development of politicians as a professional class and there is little difference between the social and educational backgrounds of politicians of the different parties.

Colin Crouch⁴ has spoken of our situation as ‘post-democracy’. In the 19th century the control of the state by a privileged elite led to demands for an extension of the franchise; when the right to vote was won we came closest to true democracy; but through time corporate interests and political elites have been able to develop new ways of exerting their influence on policy-making and role of ordinary people as participants in politics again become marginalised. As a result, they feel disconnected from political life and disinclined to vote. Whether or not we accept Crouch’s thesis in full, and particularly his view of international capital as a main obstacle to true democracy, it is not one we should easily dismiss.

The manner in which politics is communicated, and hence the relationship between electors and their representatives, has also changed. In the past the constituency MP was a major source of political news and link to national debates. Political rallies at election times could attract audiences of hundreds. Now, however, with round-the-clock news reporting on

television and radio and daily papers, often more concerned with political tittle-tattle than analysis and debate, the role of the MP is too often relegated to that of the party agent, relevant only when a local constituency concern needs to be raised. Politics has become a ‘permanent campaign’⁵ in which central party machines do daily battle to improve their opinion poll ratings. As a result, particularly with a media which often has only space for soundbites rather than more detailed reporting, political point-scoring takes precedence over serious debate.

The electorate, however, is not stupid. Prime Minister’s question times might show a high level of the kind of skill needed for a university union debate, but they cut little ice with most electors. That the work of Parliament is constantly exposed to public scrutiny is of course good, but the image of dark-suited men behaving like public-school boys does little to persuade people that politicians are their representatives dealing with their problems.

Robin Cook, when Leader of the House, often spoke of the absurdity of the Commons referring to citizens who watch their representatives in action from the public gallery as ‘strangers’. From the perspective of the electors, however, it is the politicians who are strange. The whole style of parliamentary discourse is far removed from the way in which ordinary people talk about issues – politicians appear to be in a world apart. As Stephen Coleman as noted,

*“Politics is too closed and obscure for most people. They literally do not understand what is going on...”*⁶

While this is not a new situation, it makes the job of political re-engagement that much harder. We will argue (chapter 9) that people need more information around election times, but if what is lacking is a basic understanding of

4. Colin Crouch, ‘Coping with Post Democracy’, Fabian Society, 2000.

5. A term coined by Sidney Blumenthal in ‘The Permanent Campaign’ (Boston: Beacon Press 1980), referring to the use of governing as an instrument to build and sustain popular support.

6. ‘A Tale of Two Houses’, Stephen Coleman, Hansard Society 2003.

7. *ibid*

what politicians actually do, and how they do it, more information on its own will not lead to an increase in participation.

But even if more information is accompanied by a greater knowledge and understanding of politics, we cannot assume that it will lead to greater respect for politicians and more engagement. The more that people see their MPs indulging in the ritualistic tribalism of Westminster, defending the indefensible or being needlessly oppositional before being marshalled through the division lobbies by their whips, the view that party politics is an irrelevant game might become more entrenched. The problem is not so much in the electors' lack of understanding of politics than in the nature of the system of politics they must try to comprehend.

If we want to people to re-engage with politics, then we need a type of politics to which they can relate – one they can respect and recognise as having relevance. Changing a political culture is not an easy thing to do but, as we will argue in chapter 9, the way we do politics is in part a consequence of our electoral system: a more sensible electoral system could encourage a more sensible form of politics. Politicians from other European countries with proportional voting systems often ask: “why is it necessary to be so adversarial?” Certainly there must be vigorous debate and opportunities to hold the executive to account, but why can politicians not conduct their affairs like rational adults?

Our politics are not therefore of a nature that encourages voter engagement. But what about our politicians? While it is tempting to blame them for the failings of our politics, it would not be wholly correct to do so. Even if most politicians are people with a high opinion of their self-importance, most are also high-minded people with a mission to make the world a better place, however they might

interpret that mission. Aside from the party-political repartee, there is good and essential work they do in formulating and scrutinising legislation and in raising issues of concern to their constituents. Unfortunately, unlike bankers, solicitors and insurance salesmen, they lack a professional body which speaks up for their contribution to society. When politicians make mistakes, rather than any balanced view being taken of their failings, they are savaged by political opponents, thereby fuelling public prejudices and cynicism.

In studying political engagement, Stephen Coleman⁷ has made an interesting comparison between politicians and contestants in the Big Brother house of the television series. Although Big Brother contestants are never likely to affect our lives (for which we should be thankful), votes for or against them are measured in the millions, in spite of viewers needing to pay the costs of their telephoned votes. As viewers, it appears that people can relate to contestants as people like them (or at least with jobs, desires and vices which they understand), while as voters they cannot relate to the politicians in the same way. Viewers might dream of being part of the Big Brother household, but not of being part of the House of Commons.

There are very few well-balanced people who would actually want to be like a politician, but what can be done to help politicians get a little more of the sort of support and recognition that Big Brother contestants enjoy? Roger Mortimore and Mark Gill have noted that “Familiarity breeds favourability, not contempt”: almost round-the-clock television exposure of the Big Brother contestants as real people certainly makes people familiar with them, warts and all, while electors seldom achieve this same level of familiarity with politicians – they are generally hidden behind the images they want to present (even although some MPs have private lives at least as colourful as any Big Brother contestants) and too often are

seen as actors playing out their roles to a party script. Stephen Coleman also makes the point that Big Brother viewers have a sense of control: it is they, the viewers, who decide who remain in the house and who do not. Although the process is similar to that of a public election, viewers at least have the perception that they can make a difference, perhaps a consequence of seeing the vote having an immediate and significant effect on the continuation of the programme. By contrast, voters rarely wake up on the morning after elections sensing that something has changed in their lives.

Politicians as a class have suffered from the changing nature of our politics. We have already referred to how the media focus on the national rather than the local, and that can result in people who achieve their lives' ambitions by being elected to Parliament finding that the reality is not as glamorous and ego-satisfying as they thought. Graham Allen MP does not pull his punches in putting modern MPs in their place:

“the 2001 General Election more than any other previously was a referendum on two Presidential candidates with individual MPs' results totting up on election night like so many places in an electoral college. While twentieth century MPs worked ever harder in their constituencies, the paradox was their localness had less and less influence on their electorate. Most MPs of all parties have an infinite capacity to delude themselves about their personal vote and personal popularity. The reality is that most electors do not know the name or party of their MP.”⁸

When constituency candidates are given little more than a walk-on part in national elections, it is hardly surprising that respect for them, and their effectiveness in mobilising voters locally, diminishes. Moreover, when they

reach the Commons, with our present voting system which can produce huge parliamentary majorities on a minority of the votes, MPs either find themselves on the opposition benches with little opportunity for influencing Government policy or, as Graham Allen describes it as, “rubber stamps for Executive laws”. Not only is this bad for MPs, but it is bad for our democracy: unless we have elections which produce a Parliament in which real debates are held and which is capable of holding the Government to account, we should not be surprised if many decide that voting for its members is not worth the effort.

What is to be done?

We have not written this booklet as yet another critique of our political affairs – our aim is to identify the practical actions which can be taken to make them better. Political disengagement, we have argued, has its roots in the nature of our politics. It arises from people feeling that politics and politicians are remote from them, that politicians and parties no longer represent them and are not to be trusted, and that voting is not likely to make much difference. We cannot change our political culture overnight, but unless we recognise the extent of the breakdown of our democratic machinery and start to make changes, our democracy may reach a crisis point.

In the following chapters we will examine what can be done. We can increase turnouts by making voting easier, and increasing turnouts is important as it will make our political institutions more representative and give them more democratic legitimacy. For similar reasons measures to increase turnouts by promoting participation in elections are worth taking. But we need to be aware that such approaches are tackling the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of disengagement. Compulsory voting might be the only way of ensuring high turnouts, but with the risk of

⁸ ‘The Last Prime Minister: Being honest about the UK Presidency’, Graham Allen MP (published by the author), 2001.

exacerbating the problems if it leads to a resentful electorate.

There is no easy route to greater engagement, but of all the measures we will consider, we will conclude that making an appropriate reform of our electoral system is the only one which is likely to impact on our political culture.

Making Voting Easier

the sticking plaster approach?

4

Although the evidence Roger Mortimore and Mark Gill have provided in chapter 2 makes it clear that problems of voter disengagement run much deeper, it is also evident that ease of voting is at least a factor which influences turnout. Whether electors regard an election as an opportunity to fulfil a civic duty, change society or register a protest, in deciding whether or not to vote, they will weigh what they perceive as the benefits of voting against the efforts required in doing so.

Reducing the effort required in voting is therefore likely to produce more votes, but whether it produces more informed votes or does more than putting a little bit of paper over an ever increasing crack is another matter. Turnouts, after all, have not been falling because voting has been getting more difficult, but because many people are deciding that the utility of voting is not sufficient to pull them from their other free-time options.

Nevertheless, even if making voting easier does not go to the roots of voter disengagement, it has been the Government's main strategy for increasing turnouts. This is quite understandable because, if the objective is solely to get more people voting in the short-term, then the strategy appears to work, even if it introduces new risks and costs.

In this chapter we look at four different approaches to making voting easier:

- postal voting, which has proved to be the most effective;
- e-voting;
- giving voters a choice of where to vote;
- weekend voting.

Postal voting

Postal voting is not new. It was introduced in 1918 for troops who were still returning from

the war in Europe, and over the years it was extended to people who were unable to vote at polling stations because of poor health or disability, absences for work reasons and, from 1985, even absences on holiday. However, up until 2000 postal voting was only an option for those who could give a reason for not being able to vote in person at a polling station.

That changed with the 2000 Representation of the People Act which opened the way for local authorities piloting different methods of voting. The first pilots were held in 2000, followed by more in 2002 and 2003 (none were held in 2001 as local elections were held on the same day as the general election). Of these pilots, 62 have involved all-postal voting – elections in which postal voting was not just an option but the only way of voting. A change in postal voting was also introduced before the 2001 general election: rather than an applicant needing to give a reason for requiring a postal vote, postal votes were made available on request, no questions asked.

The local government pilots

In terms of increasing turnouts, the pilots in local elections appeared to be a huge success. In all but 3 cases, turnouts increased, and in some pilots the increases were spectacular. Where all-postal voting was used in Gateshead, turnout more than doubled – up from 25% to 54%. Overall, turnouts in all-postal pilot areas in 2003 were about 15% higher than the national average. Moreover, where voting was all-postal in both 2002 and 2003, turnouts remained at a high level (although there was a slight decrease, international experience had suggested that turnouts might have fallen more when all-postal voting was not longer a novelty).

Not only did all-postal voting increase turnouts, but an overwhelming majority of electors gave it their approval: in the 2003 all-postal pilots 67% of voters felt that the change

1. 'The shape of elections to come' (p 6), Electoral Commission, 2003

made the whole process of voting better – only 5% felt it made the process worse.

It thus appears beyond contention that postal voting increases turnouts, even if questions remain over the size of the increases it can produce. It is possible that the pilots gave a rather rosy picture. Because they were pilots, they were accompanied by a lot of local publicity explaining the change to electors. The extra publicity was necessary and welcome, but publicity in itself could have generated an increase in turnout, even if there had been no change in the voting method. Moreover, the pilots were initiatives of local councils which had to apply for permission to conduct them and therefore had the active backing of the councils which had an incentive to make them succeed. If all-postal voting were to be imposed on local authorities reluctant to make the change, would there be the same drive for success?

The pilots which achieved the most remarkable increases in turnouts were generally the ones which went furthest in removing the safeguard of the declaration of identity. Nearly half of the 2003 pilots dispensed with the declaration of identity altogether, leaving them without any assurance whatsoever that the votes had been cast by those to whom they had been issued, while most of the others opted for simplified declarations which did not require to be witnessed. In the St Edmundsbury pilot, the only one to retain the standard declaration of identity, the turnout increased by only 0.5% over the previous comparable election. While it is probably the case that different types of declaration influence turnout because some make voting easier than others, there remains the unpleasant thought that fewer safeguards result in more people voting.

In spite of concerns over security, the pilots led the Electoral Commission to recommend that:

*“There should be a statutory presumption that all local elections be run as all-postal ballots unless there are compelling reasons why an all-postal ballot would be inappropriate or disadvantageous for a group or groups of electors”.*¹

That position is now, however, under review, the experience of more extensive pilots in June 2004 having provided a more sobering experience.

The June 2004 elections – a step too far and too fast?

The Electoral Commission's recommendation on all-postal voting was not, however, a green light for its wholesale introduction and in the approach to the 2004 European Parliament elections there was disagreement between the Government and the Commission on how extensive all-postal voting trials should be. In the end the Government got its way and four regions – the North East, North West, Yorkshire and Humberside and the East Midlands – with a total electorate of over 14 million, nearly a third of the total, used only postal voting.

Although Government ministers did their best to hail these elections as a success, they were far from Britain's finest. Yes, turnout in the European elections did rise over the abysmal 23% of 1999, but the arguments over which regions would trial all-postal voting resulted in last minute decisions, headaches for returning officers and their staffs, and ballot packs reaching electors at the last allowable moment (and in many cases later). Many voters found the postal ballot papers with their complicated folding instructions confusing while the need for a witnessed declaration of identity was off-putting for others. But the major concern, and not just in the regions using all-postal voting, was the number of allegations of fraud and the intimidation of voters (see box). It all led the Electoral Commission to conclude that all-

Alarm bells ring for postal votes

The joint local government and European Parliament elections in June 2004 were marred by allegations of intimidation and fraud. These included:

- that a postman delivering ballot papers was offered bribes by political activists and threatened with violence;
- that a pillar box outside a community centre was set on fire by a party's supporters who feared the box might contain many votes for a rival party;
- that members of ethnic communities were threatened with deportation unless they voted in a particular way;
- that children were paid to collect ballot packs which had not been pushed fully through letterboxes;
- that large numbers of voters had their ballot papers taken from them 'for safe keeping'.

Police found one candidate parked in a quiet road late one night with a large number of postal ballot papers which he claimed he "was sorting" (and no action was taken against him as he did not appear to be doing anything illegal).

The allegations have not yet been upheld in a court and it is not impossible that some are part of a dirty struggle for political power between rival groups. But even if the 2004 allegations cannot be proven or turn out to be false, they illustrate the vulnerability of postal voting to abuse. That such allegations can be made can only undermine confidence in the electoral process.

The problem is not just one for all-postal voting. Indeed, many of the more serious allegations arose in the West Midlands where postal voting was only available on request. By contrast, after the election in the North-West region where all-postal voting was used, the returning officer and a senior police officer reported:

"Our investigations show that...the scale of fraud and malpractice is broadly similar to previous years...While the nature of the allegations has changed this year, the scale has not increased and, if anything, it has decreased."

2. Reported in the Evening Standard, 25th May 2004 and in other media.

postal voting is not the way ahead and that a new 'foundation model' offering electors choice in how they vote should be devised.

The downside of postal voting

The problems in postal voting in 2004 were not new – electoral fraud has a long history and many had predicted that a change to postal voting would increase the risk of things going wrong and people doing wrong. These risks fall into three broad categories:

1. the risk of reliance on the postal service;
2. the risk that a ballot paper, by accident or design, gets into the hands of, and is used by, someone other than the elector for whom it was intended; and
3. the risk that the secrecy of the ballot might be compromised.

The experience of the pilots has shown that the risk of postal delays and errors is not insignificant. A few weeks before the 2004 elections it was reported that 6 million letters or packages are stolen or damaged each year and 8.5 million are lost or delivered late. In some areas it was claimed that less than 3 out of every 4 first-class letters were being delivered on the day after posting.²

However, while lapses by the postal service are unlikely to be politically motivated, the same cannot be said about the second category of risk, i.e. that of a ballot paper being used by someone other than its rightful owner. Even in a polling station there is some danger of 'personation', but each fraudulent vote requires the offender to visit the polling station with the risk of being identified as an imposter. But if a fraudulent vote is cast by post the chances of the culprit being identified are very slim.

At one end of the scale of gravity, a member of a household might decide to be 'helpful' in

completing the ballot papers of others who are away from home or simply not interested in voting. In other cases use might be made of ballot papers sent to people who have recently died or moved home. More serious offences can arise when bundles of ballot mailings are pushed into the communal letter box of a block of flats and gathered up by the first person who finds them. There have even been cases of fictitious electors being created at the time of electoral registration, providing extra votes for unscrupulous campaigners who do not need to present themselves at polling stations. While the number of allegations of fraud might have been low in postal voting pilots, that does not mean there is no problem – only that we do not have the means of spotting problems (especially where local authorities decided to dispense with declarations of identity).

There are, however, steps which can be taken to minimise this category of risk:

- i. Declarations of identity need to be retained. However, the standard form, which requires the signature of a witness, is unsatisfactory. There is little point in asking the voter and a witness to sign a declaration when there is no master list of signatures against which these can be checked. If the Returning Officer's staff had a list of signatures or of some other identifier (e.g. date of birth) against which declarations could be checked, then even an unwitnessed declaration of identity would provide much more security than at present.
- ii. Having a signature or other piece of identifying information on each voter would require individual electoral registration, rather than the present system in which one person can register a whole household. Such a change is on the Electoral Commission's agenda.

- iii. While it might be considered impractical to check all declarations of identity, returning officers should be required to check a sufficient proportion of them – 10%, say – to ensure that those tempted to use votes that do not belong to them know they have a real risk of being caught.
- iv. Electoral registration officers need adequate resources to conduct more spot checks on the accuracy of registers – otherwise we will continue run the risk of ballot papers being issued to people who have died, moved home, or never existed in the first place.

The Government appears to be moving towards acceptance of these measures. It has, for example, accepted the Electoral Commission's recommendation on individual registration as "a basis for consultation" and although it has accepted that Returning Officers should check samples of declarations of identity, it has avoided discussion of resources.³ These are issues on which action is needed now – it should not wait until after any further large-scale use of postal voting which we might see, for example, in a general election. (They are not the only measures which need to be taken but we highlighted these three as being of particular importance.)

The third category of risk – that the secrecy of the ballot might be compromised – is, however, a much more difficult one to deal with. Voters who do not vote in the privacy of polling booths may vote in the presence of a dominant family member who can exert undue pressure on the voter, or of an enthusiastic canvasser who goes well beyond acceptable persuasion in showing an elector how to vote. At the more sinister end of the scale, there is a danger of voters being intimidated and threatened with violence or other retribution unless they vote as directed.

No longer can we be certain that the voter has been able to freely cast their vote.

There is also a danger of votes becoming saleable commodities. There is little point in bribing a voter who can take the money and do as he or she pleases in the privacy of a polling booth, but it is another matter when the act of voting can be observed. When local elections can be won with relatively small numbers of votes and the rewards of office are not inconsiderable, the temptations of corruption pose a real threat to the integrity of our elections.

There is no way we can police people completing ballot papers in their own homes, but we can do our best to deter fraudsters and cheats. For example, we could

- i. introduce stiff penalties for those caught observing others in the act of voting or showing another how one's vote has been cast;
- ii. ensure that the rules and penalties for breaking them are prominently displayed in election literature and on the ballot paper itself;
- iii. make the handling of other people's ballot papers, other than by returning officers and their staff, an offence: while it might be permissible for a voter to allow a friend to take a completed ballot paper sealed in a ballot envelope to a postbox, others, and in particular those working on behalf of candidates, should not be allowed to assist in this way.

The secret ballot was introduced to protect voters from undue pressures, intimidation and bribery, and it is disturbing that the Government has appeared willing to remove the protection of the secret ballot with so little discussion of the risks involved. The above measures would not provide a defence against

4. Some have proposed a system of e-voting which would allow the voter to vote again, changing their e-vote before the close of the poll or even replacing it with a traditional vote in a polling station. This would certainly reduce the efficacy of intimidation and bribery.

people determined to commit fraud, but they would at least protect the secrecy of the ballot much better than at present.

In Britain we pride ourselves on having elections which are free and fair. We may mock the 'democratic' practices of other countries in which despotic rulers do not leave outcomes to chance and we joke, quite unjustly, about electors voting "early and often" in Ireland. We generally assume, however, that Britain, a mother of democracies, is beyond reproach in the way it conducts its elections. Even if that confidence in our electoral arrangements is not wholly justifiable, at present it appears to be the case that electoral malpractice is rare. The relative integrity of our electoral procedures is an important democratic asset: if confidence in these procedures were to be lost through a hasty move to postal voting, then overcoming the cynicism which many show towards politicians and parties might become an almost impossible task.

In conclusion, postal voting in its present form is fraught with problems. Although it appears that postal voting, and particularly all-postal voting, can improve turnouts, even if not always dramatically, action must be taken to reduce the risks (even if they cannot be removed) before there is any further extensive use of postal voting. Even with improved security, with any election a careful judgement needs to be made on whether the increased risk in extending the use of postal voting is a price worth paying for the anticipated increase in turnout. In our judgement, in elections in which turnouts of around 50% should be achievable – such as those for the Commons, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland and Welsh Assemblies – it would be a mistake to move to all-postal voting or even promote greater use of postal voting on demand: in these elections, voting in a polling station should be promoted as the safest option.

E-voting

E-voting – voting by telephone, text-messages, through the internet or digital television or in some other electronic manner from one's own home – is, like postal voting, a form of 'remote voting', i.e. voting away from a polling station. Types of e-voting have the potential, to varying degrees, to increase turnouts, but they all have problems similar to those we have considered with postal voting. With each method of e-voting the questions arise:

- how can we be sure the person voting is the person to whom the vote was issued, and
- how can we be sure that the vote is being cast freely and in secret?

While with postal voting a ballot pack containing a ballot paper, declaration of identity and envelopes is sent to each elector, with e-voting electors are sent identification numbers (in some pilots two different numbers have been sent separately for greater security) which enable them to vote. With postal voting there is a danger that ballot papers will fall into the wrong hands, but with e-voting the danger is that someone other than the intended elector gets hold of the identification number. And e-voting endangers the secrecy of the ballot in the same way as postal voting – it is possible for a voter to be observed in the act of voting, raising the same concerns we have noted with postal voting – the risks of voters being put under pressure to vote one way or another, the intimidation of voters and bribery.⁴

Thus while e-voting might for some be even more convenient than postal voting – it does not even involve a walk to the nearest post box – and it has the advantage of not being susceptible to postal delays and errors, it is not more secure.

However, e-voting introduces other elements of risk. Firstly there is the issue of transparency: with paper ballots there is hard evidence of how votes were cast, with e-voting we must have faith that the technology will correctly receive the votes and allocate them to the correct candidates. How can we be sure that no-one has tampered with the software or equipment? Secondly, with internet voting there is the added danger that a hacker might attack the system in the election period, or spread a virus which infects voters' computers, changing their votes without them being aware of it: while there was no evidence of such attacks in the recent e-voting pilots, if e-voting were used on a wider scale, for example in a general election, then the challenge for would-be hackers might present an irresistible temptation.

We also need to recognise that not everyone will be able to use the technologies involved. Not everyone has a personal computer or digital television, and for many people, particularly of the older generation, the internet remains a mystery. Many mobile telephone owners have never experimented with text messaging, and responding to a computerised voice on the telephone is something a lot of people will want to avoid. Thus while e-voting is an option that might be offered in elections, all-e-voting is a non-starter.

But the main downside of e-voting is that the recent pilots have not produced any evidence that it produces any significant increases in turnout. It appears that those who enjoyed the convenience of e-voting are people who would have voted by other means if e-voting had not been available. We have argued that the increased risks of alternative voting methods need to be weighed against the potential benefits in terms of turnout, but if there are no benefits, what reason is there for taking the risks?

Nevertheless, e-voting cannot be easily dismissed. Electronic communication is becoming the norm for many people and we can expect this trend to continue – it would therefore be foolish to assume that it will never be used for communicating votes. Moreover, it has two distinct advantages:

- Young people are much more likely to communicate electronically than their elders, and younger electors are much less likely to vote than other age groups. If e-voting could be shown to increase the participation of young people in elections, then there would certainly be a case for considering it.
- Voting on-line through the internet or by digital television makes it possible for an elector when voting to switch to websites giving details of the candidates and their policies. If this facility were available then it is possible that votes would be more informed votes, thereby increasing the quality and not just the size of the turnout.

Certainly there is a case for further experimentation, but the present risks in e-voting and the lack of evidence of its effect on turnout therefore leads us to conclude that we are not yet ready for its wider use. The Government has declared that any general election after 2006 should be 'e-enabled'. That appears to be foolhardy. Until the benefits of e-voting have been demonstrated beyond doubt and until there we can have greater confidence in the security of the technology, its development should proceed cautiously.

(E-voting is, however, only one aspect of e-democracy. We take a much more positive view of the potential of electronic communications in connecting electors to their representatives other than during elections.)

5. Borough of Watford Evaluation of Election Pilot Schemes 2000, conducted by Steven Lake on behalf of the Association of Electoral Administrators.

Providing a choice of polling stations

There are, however, ways of making voting easier which do not involve the risks associated with postal and e-voting. An obvious one is to offer electors more choice in where they vote. If it is difficult for an elector to vote in their own polling district, why not let them vote in a more convenient place? There has been some experimentation with polling stations in shopping centres and at other places where people congregate, but at present that is only possible with 'early voting', i.e. voting before polling day: registers then need to be marked with those who have voted early so that there is no risk of them voting twice.

But now that electoral registers are held electronically, it should be quite possible to allow electors to vote anywhere they want in the local authority area on the day of the election. If all polling stations had an on-line connection to the central register, an elector could vote at any polling station – for example at a bus or railway station on the way to work, at a shopping centre, or in a polling station outside the elector's own polling district – and that a vote had been cast would be recorded on the computerised register, preventing the elector from voting more than once.

With this approach there would be no increased risks to security over our traditional method of voting – indeed there might be less risk as absent voters would have less need for postal votes. The only risk which would need to be considered is that of technical failures in the on-line connection.

Weekend voting

Moving polling day to the weekend is a fairly frequent suggestion for improving turnout in elections. It is pure accident that the British

have settled on Thursday as an election day, and before 1935 the date varied (it was Saturday in 1918). The argument for weekend voting tends to be that many people work long hours, or travel long distances from home, and may be physically unable, or just too tired and distracted, to attend a polling station on a weekday. A weekend would enable a higher proportion of people to fit voting into a more leisurely day when they are more likely to be based at home. A whole weekend, rather than one day, is needed to accommodate people with religious objections to voting on either Saturday or Sunday.

The evidence that a move to weekend voting would raise turnout is scanty, despite the apparently appealing argument. A comparative study produced the curious finding that countries voting at weekends had higher turnout, but there was no particular benefit apparent in countries that had moved polling from one day to another.

In May 2000 there was a pilot weekend voting scheme in Watford. It was one of the least successful pilots, as turnout fell rather than rose, and it has not been tried again in the same form during the successive waves of pilots in local authority elections. The Watford pilot may not have been an entirely fair test of weekend voting. It took place the weekend after normal Thursday voting, and therefore after all the results from other areas had been announced and the impression had been given that the 'elections' were over. Watford Borough Council did try to promote the experiment, but were fighting an uphill battle.⁵ It is quite possible that the confusion generated by a small trial of weekend voting was responsible for the fall in turnout. In a further trial in Camden in 2002 the opportunity to vote the weekend before the usual Thursday passed almost unnoticed. In 2002 the Electoral Commission recommended that further trials of early or weekend voting should be attended

by conspicuous publicity in advance of the election, and that polling days should be consecutive rather than broken up as in Watford and Camden.⁶

Perhaps of all the potential technical and administrative improvements suggested, weekend voting is uniquely unsuitable for testing in small scale pilots. A national roll-out of weekend voting would be an entirely different matter from an isolated pilot in a local election. National and local election publicity would not be working in opposite directions, and the novelty would arouse comment. Watford did not encounter significant administrative problems in holding weekend elections, and those that it did raise stemmed from the short notice given for the experiment – some buildings had already been booked for other uses.

By-elections are another matter, however. If a weekend election were the only election taking place and the media was not focusing its attention on elections elsewhere on another day, there would be no sense of the election taking place after the event and the problem encountered in Watford would not arise. If there is to be further experimentation with weekend voting, there is a strong case for considering testing the change in by-elections.

Weekend voting is at best only a minor step towards higher turnout and engagement. No doubt many non-voters who plead work commitments as an excuse for absence on Thursdays would find family responsibilities, travel plans or hangovers sufficient reason to stay out of the polling station at weekends. In the Watford case the evaluation found very few younger voters at the weekend polls.

Multiple polling days (including a weekday and a weekend) would extend opportunities to vote without raising any important issues of principle. However, the balance of costs and

benefits might not be advantageous. The Watford pilot evaluation found that the number of people voting at the weekend who would otherwise have failed to vote was small – for the most part it substituted for postal voting or a less convenient Thursday trip to the polls. The additional costs were considerable – £30,000 in total for 12,954 votes, or a little over £2.30 per vote. Given that many of these were not genuinely additional, the cost per extra vote would be considerably higher. If all postal voting is to be adopted, then the whole question is moot because it essentially abolishes the idea of a polling day. In the absence of all postal voting it may be a minor but worthwhile reform.

In the case of European elections (and other elections which might be held at the same time as European elections) there is, however, a much stronger case for weekend voting. At present votes cast on a Thursday cannot be counted until the following Sunday when voting takes place in most other EU countries – an unsatisfactory situation both for candidates and returning officers and their staff. A move to weekend voting, allowing the votes to be counted immediately after the close of poll would seem a much more sensible arrangement.

6. Modernising Elections: a strategic evaluation of the 2002 electoral pilot schemes (August 2002)

5

1. 'Attitudes to Euro-elections and Electoral Reform', NOP, Feb 1998

2. In Great Britain – in Northern Ireland the turnout was 58%

3. 'Survey of attitudes during the 2001 General Election campaign', MORI, July 2001.

If making voting easier is not the full answer, what else can be done? In this chapter we look at other ways of encouraging people to vote. We begin with information, because we cannot expect people to be enthusiastic about voting if they do not know much about the candidates or the issues, or even why an election is being held. We then turn to the special problems in getting young people and members of certain ethnic minority groups to vote – two parts of the electorate for which turnout is particularly low. Finally, we suggest that our elections might be made a little bit more exciting and enjoyable – indeed, a celebration of democracy.

I. Tackling the information gap

In 1998 the Home Office commissioned NOP to run a series of focus groups on people's attitudes to the European Parliament and elections to it.¹ What NOP found was that awareness and understanding of the Parliament ranged "from the vague to the exceptionally low". Some respondents were unaware of the Parliament's existence; in six focus groups they found only one person who could name her MEP; and many were unaware that MEPs are elected. It is therefore of little surprise that in the 1999 Euro-elections only 23% of electors² bothered to vote.

Roger Mortimore and Mark Gill tell us that those who claim to know more about politics say they are more likely to vote. Unfortunately, as MORI research shows, those who "know more about politics" are a minority:

- only 42% can name their MP;
- only 42% "feel they know about politics"; and
- 57% know hardly anything or very little about how their local councils work.

A MORI survey³ prior to the 2001 general election found people agreed by 2:1 that "I don't know enough about the candidates who stand at general elections", and the Electoral Commission's report on the 2001 general election notes that polling evidence suggest that:

"information is a key driver in framing attitudes to voting".

So if at least some people don't vote because they do not have enough information, the solution would appear to be obvious – give them more. But it's not quite as simple as that. A frequent complaint at election times, particularly in hard fought contests, is that recycling bins overflow with mountains of unread leaflets, and for most people a party political broadcast is not so much a source of information as an opportunity for a comfort break. It appears that what people lack is real information – not party slogans and pamphlets which try to explain in as few words as possible why one candidate is so much better than all the others. Electors need to know what the elections are about, what the key issues and arguments are, and who is standing and why. They do not want complex analyses, but neither do they want to be patronised.

People get most of their information on politics from the media but, as we will note later (chapter 7), the media often contribute more to the problems of disengagement than to their solutions. Readers of the tabloid press may know as much as is worth knowing about politicians' sex lives, but come an election their exposure to debates on policy will not be extensive. Moreover, in general elections media coverage focuses on party leaders and the national scene – constituency candidates rarely get a mention; local government elections are often reported as little more than opinion polls on the state of the parties while local candidates must struggle to get a mention even in their local papers.

Political parties and candidates have in the past done much of the work, particularly in local elections, in making people aware of approaching elections and providing information on the issues, albeit written from their own campaigning perspectives. But the decline in the membership of parties (see chapter 8), together with the decline in activity of those who remain party members, creates a problem. In many parts of the country there has been little local campaigning because even the major parties have not had the foot soldiers to deliver their leaflets. This can put local party activity into a downward spiral – fewer people to campaign can mean fewer possibilities for identifying new support resulting in even fewer members – and as the ability of parties to generate interest in elections drops, so will turnout.

If we cannot rely on the media as a source of information which will encourage participation in politics and if parties are losing their capacity deliver their messages locally, what is to be done? There is no shortage of either ideas or opportunities⁴ – only of determination and resources. Here we cannot present a full menu of options and their likely effectiveness, but we make three key recommendations:

1. The Electoral Commission should be given much greater resources to allow it to do more – working through partners where appropriate – in publicising elections and their importance. Many major companies spend much more on marketing chocolates and cheap sofas than the Commission's entire budget. Ford, Renault and Vauxhall together spend around £200m on marketing, about ten times what the Commission gets for all of its work. Establishing the Electoral Commission, not just as a body to regulate elections but as one with a mission to "encourage people to take part" in the democratic

process through measures such as "promoting public awareness of electoral matters", is perhaps the most significant contribution the Government has made to our democracy. It needs to have a budget commensurate with the size of its task.

2. Local authorities and returning officers should have responsibilities and targets for improving turnouts. Although returning officers have statutory responsibilities for issuing public notices about elections, many take the view (at present perhaps rightly) that it is their job to conduct the elections but it is up to political parties and others to get people to the polling stations. However, the local pilots of alternative voting methods which we have seen in recent years (chapter 4) have shown just how imaginative some local authorities can be in making people aware of these electoral changes. We need the same creativity for all elections, whatever voting method is used. Some local authorities are doing just what we are proposing, but in this field we need to raise the game of all local authorities to that of the best.

3. Candidates should be given a free-post leaflet delivery for all elections. Candidates have this facility in Westminster elections and in the election of MEPs as do London mayoral candidates. This should be extended to all elections, particularly given the limitations of local parties in delivering leaflets, so that each elector (or household of electors) receives at least some information from each of the competing candidates. By

4. Readers wanting to know more will find 'Making an impact', Electoral Commission, 2003, a good starting point.

5. Report of the National Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools

6. CSV (Community Service Volunteers) report on Citizenship Education One Year On Summer 2003.

7. Nestlé Family Monitor/ MORI Young People's Attitudes towards Politics July 2003, fieldwork March to May 2003.

incorporating the leaflets into a booklet (as has been done for London mayoral elections) or by delivering all leaflets in a single envelope, postal costs can be limited and the risks of a candidate being disadvantaged through postal

2. Citizenship Education and Engaging Young People

In 1998, thanks to years of persuasion from Professor Bernard Crick and others, an official report⁵ recommended that 'citizenship education' be introduced in schools. This new programme would involve three related headings of activity – social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy. The first two headings are citizenship in a wide sense, attempting to instil a responsible relationship between the individual, others and the community in general. The political literacy element is most directly related to concerns about the formal process of voting. It involves education about how democratic institutions work and how people can participate most effectively in the life of the nation. The Government accepted the recommendations and, after a trial period, citizenship education was made compulsory in England with effect from September 2002, and in Wales from 2003.

With the advent of compulsory citizenship education, knowledge about politics has become part of the curriculum and young people should be receiving education in precisely the concepts and processes of voter engagement. Problem solved? Unfortunately not.

Citizenship is a very new subject, and even as a compulsory subject it will be several years before a significant proportion of the electorate have direct experience of it. Those born in 1991 will be the first cohort to have passed through

Turning out or turning off

An analysis of political disengagement and what can be done about it

the entire compulsory citizenship curriculum; they will attain voting rights in 2009 and probably first vote in a general election either in 2009 or 2013. Even in 2031 only those aged under 40 who have passed through the British secondary education system (a little over 30% of the electorate) will have experienced it at full strength and to some of those it will be a fairly distant memory. While useful, citizenship education is the furthest thing from a quick remedy to the problem of voter disengagement.

As yet, citizenship education is rather patchy. The Government started the programme by allowing a wide variety of approaches to provision, some of which will have been more effective than others. Teacher training in the area has advanced only very slowly, with most schools having only one accredited citizenship teacher (51%) and 9% having nobody with any training at all in the subject.⁶ Full, in-depth training is even scarcer and the throughput of teachers rather slow.

Although initial findings about the actual effect on the knowledge and attitudes of students have not shown a clear positive effect, it is not possible at this stage to disentangle different effects. There is the impact of different approaches to the subject, the accumulation of teaching experience and greater familiarity once students routinely experience the entire programme of work from 11-16. It will be some time before citizenship education has bedded down, and a body of experienced teachers will be aware of the most effective methods of teaching it.

There are limits to what citizenship education can achieve. Teachers and school activities are relatively low down the list of sources from which young people draw their political knowledge. In the spring 2003 Nestlé Family Monitor MORI survey, 35% of 11-18 year olds said that they got information on the issues facing Britain from teachers, placing schools between teletext (30%) and magazines (36%).

The three leading providers were media (television news 83%, newspapers 69%, radio 63%), followed by social interaction (family members 57%, friends 54%). 48% found the Internet a source of knowledge about issues.⁷ The poll is not exclusive, so of the 35%, a proportion will see teachers only as a secondary resource after the media or social interaction. A different survey found that 16% of young people thought citizenship was a very important subject (the young people already most politically literate might well be found within this group), and a further 54% thought it quite important.⁸ These figures may reflect the fact that citizenship education had only recently become compulsory, but even so it suggests that formal education is playing, and can play, only a limited role in increasing voter engagement even among the people it affects directly. There is even some evidence to suggest that the more knowledgeable young people consider themselves, the more likely they are to express cynical views.

However, this is not to say that the rise of citizenship education is not a development to be welcomed. Through its existence it sends a signal about the kind of participatory society Britain aspires to be. Although formal education might struggle to gain as much attention as other ways of gaining political knowledge, teachers are a high quality, trusted means of communicating information. In the same MORI survey 70% of young people said they trusted teachers to tell the truth, while 12% did not trust them – a net rating of +58. The ratings for television newsreaders (+19), politicians generally (-24) and journalists (-51) were all distrusted by comparison. Citizenship education is also part of the way in which the formal structure of authority first engages with people, and can have importance beyond the curriculum in affecting perceptions of the public realm. This leads on to a discussion about the voting age and what people do once they have finished compulsory education.

The Electoral Commission's report on the age of voting, which concluded that the time for lowering it to 16 had not yet arrived, conceded that:

There is some logic in the argument that enforcing a gap of two or more years between the end of compulsory citizenship education (at least in England) and the right to exercise some of the most fundamental citizen's rights in a democracy may be counter-productive and even encourage disaffection from the democratic process.⁹

Assuming a four year parliamentary term, the gap between being told about one's democratic rights and actually being able to cast a vote in a general election may be as long as 6 years, which is longer than the entire period spent in compulsory secondary education. The gap creates dissonance between the message of citizenship education and experienced reality, which risks leading to cynicism. It also means that the message of citizenship education can be easily forgotten, just as it is quite possible for a student to get an A in Maths one year and then, through lack of use of those skills, to forget how to solve simple equations the next. If citizenship courses could come to an end with something of a symbolic or actual sense of being admitted to the adult polity, by having the right to vote (or even exercising it in a class trip to the polling station for a local election!), students would be more inclined to see citizenship education as offering something real and worthwhile.

Reducing the voting age to 16 would probably have two effects on participation, working in opposite directions:

- It is historically true that when the franchise is extended, the newly enfranchised groups do not exercise their right to vote in the same

8. CSV report

9. Electoral Commission, *Age of Electoral Majority* policy report April 2004; para 4.14. See also the Votes at 16 campaign at www.votesat16.org.uk.

10. There are two papers to which the interested reader is particularly directed. One is Electoral Commission *Voter engagement among black and minority ethnic communities* Research Report July 2002; the other is R Ali and C. O'Connell (2002) *Our House? Race and Representation in British Politics*, Institute for Public Policy Research, London.

proportion as those ready on the register. This results in a one-off drop in turnout, although participation of course may increase.

- The longer term effect depends on the extent to which the new group is socialised into the political system and voting. Turnout has remained below average among young voters since the extension of the franchise to 18 year olds in 1969. The hope with votes at 16 is that it would be a bridge from citizenship education (and the enthusiasm for civic engagements that many school students demonstrate) into political participation through voting, and thus have a beneficial impact as time went on. Once in the system, it becomes more of a step to drop out than if one is never included in the first place.

Some argue that reducing the voting age of itself would be bad for the general level of engagement and participation, because of the likely initial fall in turnout. However, this is an overdone concern. Even if none of the approximately 1.5 million enfranchised used their vote, the effect (re-running 2001) would be to reduce the turnout from 59.1% to about 57.2%. A couple of percentage points of turnout here and there have no significance for the legitimacy of the process or the election. There is also a conceptual difference between different reasons for changes in turnout, which after all is one large number divided by another large number. If the turnout figure was all-important, a good way of increasing turnout might be to raise the voting age and establish educational or property qualifications for the vote, which is obviously absurd. Widening the franchise increases participation in absolute terms.

The education system, and the interaction between young people and the political

system, are obviously important matters in searching for a solution to the problem of voter disengagement. Citizenship education is obviously better than ignorance, and more could be done to give teachers the training and support they want for this demanding new role, and to sharpen the focus of the citizenship curriculum. But it can only make a small difference, over a long term. It would probably also help if it were not to be followed by the state effectively telling young people to forget all about this for a couple of years until they're old enough.

3. Reaching Minorities

The position of the ethnic minorities in the political system presents a particular case of disengagement. Even when turnout was generally a lot higher than it is now, it was still disproportionately low among Britain's black and minority ethnic (BME) population. The roots of disengagement are deeper among these communities than among whites, and they are tangled with long-standing problems of racism and social exclusion. Even though much is now being done to tackle racism in particular, it has left a blighted landscape, and shows that once established alienation and disaffection are very difficult to transcend. This brief section looks at three aspects of voter engagement and ethnic minorities.¹⁰

Registration

Non-registration is by its nature difficult to measure, but it is estimated that non-registration among black people is nearly twice as prevalent as it is among white and Asian people. Non-registration is particularly widespread among 18-24 year olds. Among reasons for non-registration there may be:

- Language barriers (not just the obvious case of people who do not

- have English as a first language, but also the offputting bureaucratic language of official forms);
- General distrust of authority and the uses to which information on official forms is put;
- Particularly among young people, frequent changes of address make registration difficult;
- Concerns over privacy and the potential for harassment;
- Worries over residency status and contact with officialdom.

Non-registration is a fairly extreme form of disengagement and addressing this problem is essential for making progress in other areas. The government have made changes such as restricting circulation of the unedited register, and introducing rolling registration, which should help. However, there is a vast administrative job to be done in registering these lost voters. Local campaigns can have a quite significant impact; Operation Black Vote ran a fairly small trial scheme in 1998 which encouraged 2,000 people to register through 90 information points set up in public buildings. In the 1980s the London Borough of Haringey decided to make registration a priority and achieved such success that had the additional electors been signed up earlier, the borough would not have lost its third seat in parliament in the 1983 boundary review. To make real inroads into the scale of non-registration would require a large and expensive effort, but many would consider it worthwhile in the interests of democracy.

Turnout

Turnout among some black and minority ethnic (BME) groups is difficult to measure with any great precision. Shamit Saggat's research on the 1997 election estimated turnout as follows:¹¹

Indian	82.4%
White	78.7%
Pakistani	75.6%
Bangladeshi	73.9%
Black – Caribbean	68.7%
Black – African	64.4%

¹¹ I. Saggat, as reported Electoral Commission .p13. Note that the figures are from a survey and overstate the actual turnout, which was 71.6% overall

Ethnicity is correlated with some other factors that make for low turnout, but even adjusting for these factors black people in particular are disengaged from the political system. Given that turnout fell across the board in 2001, and the fall was concentrated among those who were already least engaged with the political system, it is possible that Caribbean and African turnout fell more than average. Many of the seats with the lowest turnout were in inner city areas with high concentrations of black and ethnic minority populations such as Manchester Central (39.1%), Vauxhall (44.8%) and Camberwell & Peckham (46.8%), although predominantly white areas of urban poverty like Tyne Bridge also recorded very low turnouts. With many black people economically disadvantaged and feeling left out of the dominant neoliberal consensus, like the white and Asian poor they feel little incentive to participate.

Another fact most of the seats with significant proportions of black people have in common is that the result is never remotely in doubt. They are age-old Labour strongholds. There is little incentive for the parties to go into these areas and engage with voters. Labour can hold the seats with little effort, and the incentives of the first past the post system mean that 2,000 votes in a target marginal are worth many times as much as 10,000 in the strongholds. It would be quixotic indeed for the other parties to do much in these areas, although the Liberal Democrats have managed to build a local government base in some areas. If the parties are not very interested in the areas where most black people live, it is hardly surprising that turnout is low.

Asian voters are not so concentrated, and live in considerable numbers in areas like West Yorkshire and the London suburbs where there are seriously contested marginal seats. The strength of community institutions has also attracted politicians. Finding allies in bodies such as the Indian Workers' Association in Southall, or the local mosque, or more vaguely defined community leaders, can reap a rich harvest in votes and party activists. Labour's best constituency for membership, by a long way, is Ealing Southall. The history of Asian turnout in Britain has been a not entirely dispiriting one. In the 1960s few Asians bothered to vote, with only 13% voting in Bradford local elections, but for social and political reasons turnout converged with, and in the case of Indians surpassed, that of white voters over the next thirty years. The main reason is probably that Asian communities became more settled and permanent, and young people of Indian origin in particular born in Britain have become increasingly middle class; part of the reason was also the threat of Powellism and the National Front which aroused a counter-reaction. Politics started to matter, and Asian voters mobilised behind the Labour Party until comparatively recently.

A distinction should be drawn between voter disengagement and a lack of any connection with civil society and politics in its most general sense. A 2001 Home Office report found that black people were just as likely to take part in any kind of civic, social or volunteering activity as whites. Attitudes to politics in general are also not so different. BME people actually trust parliament itself more than white people; are equally likely to have a strong party identification, and equally take a general interest in politics. In areas where the BNP is a threat, black (and poor Asian, and white anti-racist) turnout is stimulated, a sign that when there is a clear danger political re-engagement can be rapid. When the political process can achieve something, if only to see off

a threat, it is used. But the rise of racist politics with all the poison it brings to society is too high a price to pay to achieve more engagement on the anti-racist side.

Representation

In surveys BME electors often say that the single most important thing which would make them more likely to vote would be better representation of their ethnic group in politics. Electors of all groups and ethnicities tend to feel that they would have more of a connection with politics if there were more people like them visibly participating. The current figures are not very encouraging, with a BME population of around 7% but only 1.8% of MPs. Representation on local councils, even in areas with ethnically mixed populations, varies widely. In Lambeth minorities, with 34% of the population, account for less than 10% of the council, while in Tower Hamlets (48% of population) the figure is nearly 60% of the council.

The political parties are far from unaware of the importance of presenting a face that looks like contemporary Britain, and have endeavoured to encourage BME candidates. The Commission on Candidate Selection suggested going further, by investing in head-hunting and candidate training concentrated on currently under-represented groups. The Labour Party in particular has made considerable progress in presenting a representative slate of candidates and in government has seen Paul Boateng, Baroness Scotland and David Lammy in prominent ministerial roles. After the next election there should be further developments, with more Asian and black candidates selected in seats where they are likely to win (token selections in hopeless seats have been a bit of a pattern in previous years). There should soon be exchanges across the floor between black and Asian Conservative MPs (Adam Afriyie and Shailesh Vara are standing in safe seats) and

black and Asian Labour MPs. The sense that political dialogue is open to all, and not just a closed club of white men, should be strengthened – that is, if anyone is paying attention to what is going on in Parliament.

However, representation of itself will not solve the whole problem. Elected representatives, of all communities, are necessarily unusual people – more middle class, articulate, professional and, well, *political*, than most. While fairer representation is progress, the gap between electors (and non-voters) and representatives is still going to be significant. Given that BME voters are disproportionately young, poor, socially excluded and living in urban Britain, there is still going to be a problem of disengagement. The solutions to this are ultimately in the realm of social policy rather than electoral engineering.

4. Celebrating democracy

People have languished in dark dungeons, endured hard labour in penal colonies, gone to war and even sacrificed their lives for the right to vote. If that right were removed, even in these apparently apathetic times we could expect rebellion. The right to vote is surely a possession to be prized, even if, like freedom, its value only becomes fully apparent when it is under threat.

Given the history of the struggle for the vote, that we can choose our political representatives in a secret ballot is something we should celebrate. Why, then, are our elections so dull? Certainly parties try to whip up enthusiasm, even if only amongst their own supporters, but many greet elections with a yawn and give a sigh of relief when they are over. Why can we not treat them with respect by making them into a celebration of our democracy?

When elections are called, returning officers issue notices which are displayed in libraries,

on village notice boards and in other public places. They are printed black on white and one could be forgiven for thinking that someone had gone out of their way to make them as boring as possible. (When did you last see a billboard poster that was only black text on white paper?)

However, the official notice of the election is a formality. But, other than party literature, many electors will be sent nothing other than their official poll card (unless the elector receives a postal vote). The form this takes is prescribed in the regulations, and there is no danger that people will mistake it for a party invite – most dentists are able to make a summons to have a tooth out more welcoming than the invitation to vote. Most electors are bombarded with mail from double-glazing salesmen, insurance agents, banks offering new credit cards and so on, all produced to the highest of design standards and full of colour: to the best of our knowledge, no-one has sold double-glazing with an advert modelled on the official poll card.

Why can we not inject a little more colour into our elections? There is information that returning officers must send to electors, but surely they should be allowed to send it in a form that generates some excitement. Moreover, as the major cost of the poll card is in its distribution rather than its production, there is surely an opportunity for sending much more to the elector; for example, an upbeat leaflet on an opportunity to exercise a key right of every citizen, information on what the elected members will be required to do (and therefore why it is important to elect good ones), and a little more user-friendly information on how to vote than is provided through the poll card.

Of those who do decide to vote, too many find their local polling station in the most dingy property around. All successful companies give a lot of attention to how they

receive their clients – perhaps some comfortable chairs, a few pot plants, some attractive prints on the wall and at the very least a cooled water dispenser. When voting is such an important business, why must polling stations be so spartan? What about a rest area where voters can enjoy filter coffee and chocolate-chip cookies while browsing through the election literature?

A visitor from the US arrived in London early in June 2004 wanting to see something of the combined GLA and European elections that month. “But where”, he asked, “is the election campaign?” Walking through London there was little to indicate that important elections were to be held in a few days time. ‘London Elects’, the body responsible for running the elections, had been able to afford a few posters in the underground, but London and Londoners did not seem at all excited at the prospect of electing their mayor and assembly. Perhaps the flags should have been out, the bands playing and a special postage stamp issued by the Royal Mail to mark the advent of what became known as ‘Super Thursday’.

Some have argued that in Britain we work too hard and should have more public holidays. If we are to move in this direction, surely there is a case for not more bank holidays but for election holidays – a day off work giving people time to exercise their democratic rights. But even if some employers are unhappy at shutting shop for an extra day, there should be a right for people to take a little time off to cast their votes, just as they have a right to take much time off for jury service.

If we who are democracy enthusiasts allow elections to become dull and bureaucratic, we cannot be surprised if many electors do not feel stirred into action. If we want more participation, at election times we need to celebrate democracy with a little more imagination.

The stick or the carrot

The questions of compulsory and incentive voting

6

We have looked at ways of increasing turnouts by making voting easier and by doing more to publicise elections and make them more interesting. But what if these approaches do not work? How far can we go in coaxing people into voting, and indeed should we compel them to vote? Compulsory and incentive voting, which we consider in this chapter, are certainly controversial ideas and while some see them as offering the salvation of our democracy, others regard them as a debasement of our democracy and an attack on our civil liberties. We do not subscribe to either of these views: we do not recommend any immediate moves toward the use of either compulsory or incentive voting, but we do recommend that their pros and cons are seriously examined.

Compulsory voting

Even before the extremely low turnout in the 2001 general election there were signs that a debate on compulsory voting was beginning to emerge in Britain. Two trade union researchers who went on to become Labour MPs, Tom Watson and Mark Tami, wrote *Votes for All*, a Fabian paper advocating the idea, in 2000. Since 2001 Labour MP Gareth Thomas has been the most notable proponent, and in 2003 the Electoral Commission began preliminary research on the proposition.

The idea of compulsory voting has attracted criticism as well as support. The most serious objection is that by compelling turnout it targets a symptom rather than the causes of disengagement from the political system. There is an obvious risk that once it has raised turnout, political elites will cease to worry about the lack of connection between themselves and the electorate.

Does it work?

If turnout itself is the problem, then compulsory voting is clearly an efficient means

of solving it. In a sense, it does so automatically unless there is widespread civil disobedience. 90 per cent turnout should be normal under compulsory voting, given registration inaccuracies, dead names and those with valid reasons for not voting.

However, this presupposes that electoral registration is complete. For someone who does not like the idea of voting, evading registration in the first place is the most effective way of getting out of voting. Compulsory voting is usually accompanied by strenuous efforts by the authorities to ensure that registers are as full as possible. Anecdotal evidence of how difficult it is in practice to evade registration in Australia varies.

Academic studies have consistently found that compulsory voting does raise turnout as a share of eligible population by between 3 and 30 percentage points, depending on the pre-compulsion rate of turnout. The lowest figure, in Austria, suggests that even if voluntary turnout exceeds 90 per cent there is still some more that can be achieved by compulsion even where social norms are already strongly in favour. The highest figure was occasioned by the introduction of compulsory voting in Australian House of Representatives election in 1924. Cross-national studies have found a 7 to 17 percentage point advantage in turnout for countries with compulsory voting. It is not a simple matter to determine the effect on turnout, but it is clear that it is significant and positive.

Is it inconsistent with individual rights?

Compulsion is widely recognised as a valid way of ensuring civic participation. Jury service, a comparable obligation in some ways, is compulsory. Electoral registration is compulsory. Participation in the National Insurance and taxation system is compulsory. Issue of a self-assessment tax return imposes a compulsory duty to return it. Compliance with

the decennial census is compulsory. In many democratic countries the obligation to take part in military or social service is imposed by law and is permitted by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Compulsory voting was taken to the European Court of Human Rights under the Convention's Article 9 on the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, in the case of *X v Austria* (Appn. No. 4982/71) in 1971. The Court then ruled that a system of compulsory voting for those of majority age does not violate the right to freedom of conscience, provided that electors are free to hand in a blank or spoiled ballot. The *X v Austria* case demonstrated no conflict between compulsory voting and the ECHR, and therefore the UK's Human Rights Act.

Compulsory voting is a consistent feature of the political system of two relatively large stable democracies, Australia and Belgium. It is also present in smaller countries and less continuously in South American democracies. Compulsory voting does not cast doubt on the democratic nature of these countries; Australia and Belgium are hardly authoritarian states.

Should there be a right not to cast a vote?

On democratic grounds, a vote should be a statement of choice and approval, and a compelled vote for one candidate or another therefore lacks legitimacy. This is a powerful argument against compulsory voting, but it is irrelevant once it is recognised that 'compulsory voting' is, in the interests of brevity, a misnomer. Voters may make a statement of dissent with all the candidates on offer, or the political system as a whole, by returning a blank or spoiled paper, and are protected by ballot secrecy. The secrecy of the ballot means that there is no way of enforcing any requirement to cast a valid vote.

How could it be enforced?

A system of fines for non-voting is the only practicable means of enforcing compulsory

voting in Britain, although other methods have been tried elsewhere in the past. In Australia the fine for failing to vote is \$20, less than £10 on current exchange rates, so it is hardly a system dependent on fear and threat. Some political journalists who feel obliged not to vote simply pay the fine at each election. Non-payment of the initial fine leads to higher fines and court costs. Gareth Thomas, in his Compulsory Voting Bill in 2001, proposed that the fine in Britain should be £50.

Enforcement may well be difficult; it may not be possible in the first compulsory election to lift turnout all the way from 59 per cent to 90 plus, and the mechanics of fining a lot of people may prove a large undertaking. The British have become generally disrespectful of authority. It is highly likely that organised non-compliance to compulsory voting would take place along the lines of the poll tax campaign, metric martyrs and so on. Media prominence for such campaigns would create an atmosphere which would encourage the indifferent not to bother to vote. It is quite possible that enforcement action would have to take place against 5 million or more people. The risk of compulsory voting is that it could inject further poison into the relationship between people and politics.

Is it fair?

There are at least two dimensions to this question. Compulsory voting is a fairer system in that it gives full electoral weight to those who are currently socially excluded and marginalised.

However, this would have partisan consequences in the current circumstances, as any estimate of the consequences of compulsory voting in 1997 and 2001 would show a considerable increase in the Labour majority. It would be difficult for a party in this position to command the requisite degree of consensus for the reform, given that the two principal opposition parties are hostile. To see

compulsory voting introduced in a way that smacked of partisan gerrymandering would undermine its legitimacy. But while it magnifies flaws in the current electoral system, if a proportional electoral system were to be introduced concurrently it would be neither a quick fix nor gerrymandering.

What is a vote?

The act of voting has both individual and collective elements. The secret ballot means that an individual is not held accountable to others for his or her vote and may cast it or spoil a paper for whatever reasonable or unreasonable motive he or she may have in mind. But as well as being an act of self-expression voting also has a collective dimension, in that it is a public act of civic responsibility and participation.

Compulsory voting is a statement about rights and duties, and on a wider level expresses an aspiration for an equal society in which power resides with the electors as a united whole. It is the equivalent of an oath of allegiance to a democratic society. Oaths – usually to the monarchical nature of British society – are not uncommon in other public business or in assuming a position of responsibility for the functioning of the state (such as joining the police or the magistracy). The citizenship oath introduced in February 2004 requires new Britons to promise:

I will give my loyalty to the United Kingdom and respect its rights and freedoms. I will uphold its democratic values. I will observe its laws faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a British citizen.

In Australia, a diverse nation built on immigration, compulsory voting is a symbol of the integration of new arrivals into the Australian way of doing things. According to Australian academic Lisa Hill it 'automatically admits the newly arrived into a body politic

from which they might otherwise have felt excluded by the myriad barriers of language, culture and unfamiliarity.¹ The same consideration applies in modern Britain; that the rights and duties of a democratic society apply to all, and there is no group for which elections and democracy are 'not for us'. Compulsory voting is one means of expressing these values.

Compulsory voting and voter engagement

In low turnout voluntary systems it is in the parties' interests to give a higher priority to the wishes of identifiable social groups that are inclined to exercise their right to vote. The relevant social groups are older people, those living in stable communities, the educated and high earners. Conversely, the voices of young people, the poor, the socially excluded, new arrivals, those who move frequently, are heard less in the political process.

Once a social group has become identified as prone to abstention in a voluntary system, a vicious circle can set in which is extremely difficult to break. Norms and expectations within the group, once abstentionism has passed a critical point, will become progressively more hostile to participation. Politicians, whose rational self-interest will always be to appeal to those groups who do turn out and vote, will increasingly neglect the claims of non-voting groups, who can then legitimately claim that the political system is ignoring their interests. Those members of low-turnout groups who have kept voting will become disillusioned and stop voting because politics is not relevant to their interests.

An objection sometimes made to compulsion is that it brings people with no knowledge or interest in politics to the polls. Perhaps, but party activity and the pressures of social conformity did precisely this in the heyday of high turnout and party membership in the 1950s. The CREST study of trust and turnout

1. Lisa Hill 'A great leveller: compulsory voting' p129-141 in Marian Sawer (ed) *Elections: Full, free and fair* Sydney: The Federation Press, 2001.

2. Catherine Bromley, John Curtice and Ben Seyd 'Is there a crisis of democracy?' CREST research paper May 2004.

showed that the drop in turnout in 1997-2001, which worries most observers, was to a considerable degree the result of those who had little interest in politics no longer feeling obliged to go to the polls.² In addition, compulsory voting can make political information and education more relevant, because people know that they will have to make a decision. People's reactions to jury service are an interesting parallel. While few people positively want to do it, and some jurors fail to engage with the process, many jurors do follow the facts and the law of their case because they are making a responsible decision. The same may be true to a lesser extent about politics. 'If I have to do it, I might as well do it properly,' is a not unreasonable response to a compulsion situation.

A sophisticated argument for compulsory voting recognises that it is a starting point rather than the end of the process of re-engagement. Compulsory voting would be a clean break in the cycle. If politicians respond rationally to the change, they could no longer afford to neglect the interests of those currently excluded from politics. It is surely not accidental that the United States has the lowest turnout and some of the most squalid electioneering tactics used in an advanced democracy. In low turnout voluntary systems, political dialogue is stunted and exclusive, focused on manipulating ever-smaller groups of key voters. Such strategies would be rendered much less effective under compulsory voting.

The case for compulsory voting is a controversial one. While it is certainly an intellectually respectable argument, many people find it unattractive and feel that it is not right for governments to legislate for virtue in this respect if people do not really want to come out to vote. Another idea which has emerged in recent years is to avoid the rather punitive relationship between state and voter that some people detect in compulsion and

finer, and instead offer people an incentive to encourage them to participate.

Incentive voting

An alternative to punishing non-voters is to reward voters. A financial incentive is basically another way of looking at a fine – whichever way, voters are advantaged relative to non-voters. E-voting and other experiments are essentially about reducing the costs (in time, opportunity, inconvenience, travel etc) of casting a vote, and offering incentives may just be seen as another means of doing this. Incentive voting occupies a middle ground between the ameliorative reforms beloved of the government at present and the more radical step of making voting compulsory.

Incentive voting does away with some of the enforcement problems of compulsory voting. There is no need to identify, locate and take action against non-voters, and no danger of the system being disrupted by organised opposition. Nor does it involve imposing an official stigma on non-voters; if they miss out on the incentive payment, that's too bad for them, but not a matter for public comment in the same way that even a summary court case can be. While on the face of it, it may seem an expensive proposition, it need not cost any more than a properly administered compulsory system.

Arguments for incentive voting can be made according to democratic principles. To exercise the right to vote involves 'costs' to some degree or other for the voter. At the minimum there is the opportunity cost of the time that voting takes which could be used on other activities. To some people voting may be an intrinsically pleasant activity, but to most people it is not rewarding in itself and substitutes for activities that are. The act of voting involves some of what economists call shoe-leather

costs – perhaps in terms of driving to the polling station. Then there are the costs of time spent preparing to vote, the form-filling for a postal vote or for the conscientious floating voter in evaluating the candidates. The latter cost rises under preferential voting systems and is extended even to party loyalists. The principle that casting a vote involves a cost is a familiar one from the rational choice theorists' 'paradox of voting'. Looked at according to a rational assessment of costs and benefits, it is hard to see why anyone votes at all.

Implicit in many of the current e-voting and postal pilots is a theory that reducing the costs (broadly defined) of voting will increase turnout. Posting a ballot is less burdensome on the voter's time than voting at a polling station, and does not involve going out in potentially unpleasant weather. All-postal ballots reduce the cost to each voter even further by minimising form-filling. But there will always be some element, however slight, of costs imposed in the act of voting. It is not a revolutionary step to propose that these costs be compensated for by the public authority and replaced with a small but not negligible reward for being a good citizen.

However, it may be felt that civic duty backed up by the force of law is a more appropriate spur to voting than the prospect of individual personal gain. This argument is worthy of consideration, though it should be noted that in choosing how to cast a vote this sort of calculation is rarely entirely absent. In the days of high-turnout elections in Britain, in the 1950s in particular, voting could be little more than an expression of tribal loyalty, which is not much more worthy a motivation than personal gain. Society now lacks many of the disciplines that informally enforced voting. It is legitimate to seek a new solution to the turnout problem that fits the way we live now. The case for incentive voting lacks some of the high-minded dignity of the case for compulsory voting, but it

does go with the grain of contemporary social attitudes and has a more market-oriented, libertarian flavour to it.

Incentive voting is odd, in the sense of unfamiliar in public elections, but it is surely not odd in principle. Casting votes and recording opinions are often rewarded financially on websites and in responding to questionnaires and opinion polls. Public authorities use various incentive schemes to encourage people to perform other civic duties in particular ways. Although few have taken up this power, local authorities are allowed to offer incentive payments to encourage people to pay council tax in convenient ways, i.e. in a lump sum at the beginning of the year or via direct debit. The Inland Revenue have given incentives for online filing. Gareth Thomas MP asked in 2001 'What evidence is there to show that such a move would seriously drive up turnout?' There is no evidence from public elections available to show the effect of paying people to vote, but one can draw some conclusions from the use that is made by polling organisations and market researchers, who frequently reward participation by a small payment or participation in a prize draw. If respondents are being asked to devote a lot of time or attention to the survey, for instance in focus group research, payments are generally regarded as necessary. Companies do this because it is an effective way of increasing the response rate and making the sample more representative – it is not just people with strong views or an axe to grind whose opinions are recorded.

Which is the most appropriate form of incentivising voters?

Several possible methods of distributing the reward exist in principle. The most attractive are probably:

- A flat rate payment, on the scale of perhaps £5 or £10, to every voter.

- A constituency-based lottery, in which one voter in each constituency wins a prize of something of the order of £250,000, calculated perhaps at the rate of £5 per voter in that constituency.

Among the criteria to consider in examining the methods are:

- **Effectiveness at inducing higher turnout.** This is an issue that can only be finally resolved empirically, although it seems plausible that a constituency-based lottery offers an optimal combination: the odds against winning are not astronomical and the amount to be won is sufficient to make a major change in the life of the winner. A constituency lottery would also aid publicity and public identification with the winner – it would show that ‘people like me’ can win.
- **Cost in additional public spending.** This depends on the levels at which the incentive payments are set, but a flat rate system could be quite expensive. The problem is the ‘deadweight cost’ of paying the incentive in respect of people who would have voted anyway. A £10 flat rate on a turnout of 80 per cent would cost around £360m. One possible advantage of a lottery is that it could be cheaper – an incentive of £2 per person might be inefficient to administer and too small to encourage turnout, while a lottery jackpot of £100,000 per constituency might be attractive and cost only £66m in payouts, and the marginal cost of the extra voters would be a lot lower.
- **Individual conscience.** Some voters, on religious grounds or from other principles, may object to lotteries. While it is not gambling, as there is no stake, it is still a ‘game of chance’. If a

lottery system was introduced, it would necessitate the ability to ‘opt out’ at the time of registration and/ or voting (a box on the registration form would seem the most effective method),

- **Equity.** A flat rate system would significantly increase incentives for the poorest, among whom non-voting is particularly prevalent, but this may not be a unique advantage of the flat rate system as lotteries are also relatively attractive to the disadvantaged.
- **Administrative convenience.** Checked-off electoral registers exist and are semi-public documents, so there is no extra information to compile. A constituency lottery would be significantly easier administratively than a national lottery. Martin Linton MP has suggested payment of a flat rate reward through a council tax rebate, and this has its administrative attractions. However, council tax payers and electors are not the same, and such a system would generate some interesting conversations around the breakfast table.

Many of the detailed arrangements are a suitable matter for further research and enquiry. The question of the amount of the incentive is of course very important and will require both experimental research into what the effect of different amounts is, and a judgement as to what the optimal combination of costs and benefits might be. If a £250,000 lottery does not increase turnout all that much more than a £100,000 lottery, it is obviously questionable as to whether the extra cost is worth it.

Conclusion

Compulsory voting may not solve all the problems of voter engagement in one go, but few of its advocates are naïve enough to

suggest that it might. There are formidable implementation issues in the UK context, particularly in the absence of any consensus. Introduced as a stand-alone measure it certainly has the potential to further poison the relationship between state and people. If the system has lost the trust and goodwill of the electorate, to start fining people for not co-operating is likely to result in a further hostile reaction to politics. But introduced as part of a package of constitutional and electoral changes, its advocates see the potential to break the cycle of neglect and negativity and make it possible to rebuild political dialogue on a more equal and more inclusive basis. It is an option that deserves further debate and inquiry rather than reflex condemnation. We welcome the Electoral Commission's decision to begin a programme of research into the question.

Giving a financial incentive for voting is an idea which has so far not attracted much discussion, but perhaps its time has come. It would be a lot easier to introduce than compulsory voting, and is more suited to the piloting process that has been used so far on voting innovations in Britain. It is an unfamiliar system, which despite its theoretical and practical strengths leaves many people feeling slightly uneasy, but it too is worthy of consideration. The 'nuclear option' of compulsory voting and the unfamiliar innovation of incentives are not at the forefront of the debate, but they are questions no study of the issue of voter disengagement can afford to ignore. However, unless and until there is broad support for the case for such measures, the Government would be very unwise to move in this direction.

7

The Distorting Mirror (and Mail, and Express, and...)

Politics, the media and cynicism

1. Guardian 3 February 2004.

2. http://www.yougov.com/yougov_website/asp_besPollArchives/pdf/OMI040101040.pdf

3. <http://www.mori.com/polls/2002/refugee.shtml>

'Blame the media' is a frequent response to any problem of public image or perception, and it is certainly an element in discussing the present state of political engagement in Britain. Relations between the media and politics, as institutions, have become increasingly poisonous in recent years, although it is important not to present too rosy a picture of how things used to be. Perhaps at one point between the servility of the 1950s and the cynicism of today there was an ideal situation, but it was a brief and unstable state of affairs. The purpose of this chapter is not to discuss the entirety of the relationship, but to make one or two points about how it affects the voters in general.

The discourse used in talking about politics is often baffling if not offensive to many voters. It focuses on the aspect of politics which most voters, with good reason, care least about – who has won this or that argument in the Cabinet, whose career is on the up, who is expected to do well or badly in this or that election. Media coverage stresses the issues that matter to insiders, while often talking to the public in a mock-sophisticated tone of voice that purports to reveal the truth behind what the politicians say. Media presentation of politics and politicians is based to a large degree on a one-dimensional version of what motivates politicians and what they do. Yes, they do want power. Yes, they do use techniques to present things in the way most favourable to themselves. We know this. But they also represent different strands of public opinion, they have ideas and policies that may be good or bad for the country as a whole or for any given subsection of it. This is what often seems to be lost in political coverage.

Coverage of elections themselves reflects this bias towards conflict and narrative. They are seen through metaphors of battles, with an ever increasing tendency to focus on insider issues of party strategy or the simple horse-race aspect

of who is ahead. But banning publication of opinion polls in the run-up to an election is no answer. It is an illiberal and indeed elitist position that deprives the public of knowledge about the state of affairs, while enabling insiders to continue to commission and use polls in secret. One cannot object to giving voters information about how things stand locally and nationally, but an obsessive focus on this alone denudes the process of meaning.

A step further than the understandable focus on the personal conflicts and ambitions inherent in politics is a deeply corrosive cynicism. This is, as Martin Kettle complained in February 2004, 'something bordering on journalistic fascism, in which all elected politicians are contemptible, all judges are disreputable and only journalists are capable of telling the truth, even though what passes for truth is sometimes little more than prejudice unsupported by facts.'¹

There are large proportions of the electorate who believe things which are demonstrably, factually untrue, or for which evidence is lacking. A June 2004 YouGov poll for the *Sunday Times* illustrated the hold that myths about Europe have. 58% believed that under the proposed European constitution 'Britain will no longer be able to have its own independent policy on asylum seekers' (in fact, an opt-out clause relating to precisely this matter had been agreed, but only 17% believed that Britain would continue to have its own asylum policy). 51% believed that Europe would control tax rates, and 47% thought that the proposed constitution would 'force' Britain to join the Euro.² In a 2002 MORI survey, the average person believed that 23% of the world's refugees were seeking asylum in Britain; the real figure was a little under 2%.³ False beliefs of this nature do not emerge from thin air. The media, mostly but not exclusively the press, propound them, sometimes directly but often by suggestion.

Scepticism is a healthy instinct – the desire of the individual to engage in critical examination of propositions put to him or her; to compare them with experience, prior beliefs and knowledge about how the world works. It would be folly to argue for a return to a situation where politicians were uncritically believed, and not called sometimes rudely to account. That is not practical, and not desirable.

However, cynicism is different from scepticism. While scepticism requires a certain amount of intellectual effort, cynicism trades merely in generalisations: 'they're all as bad as each other', 'voting never makes a difference', 'it's all corrupt'. Cynicism, despite its veneer of worldly wisdom, is a profoundly lazy approach to life and politics that renders one ultimately unable to make intelligent choices or even distinguish between good and evil, truth and falsehood. It is no accident that the paper that does most to foster cynicism about politics also feeds its readers a diet of quack medicines and faddish diets, and pseudo-mystical nonsense about astrology and hidden codes in the Bible. G.K. Chesterton said that 'once people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing – they believe in anything.' The same is true about politics.

The CREST study conducted in 2004⁴ does demonstrate that the link between the media and the fall in trust and turnout is not reducible to a single, general dimension of tabloid readership. The study showed that tabloid readers may be less inclined than broadsheet readers or people who read no newspapers to say they trust the government 'just about always' or 'most of the time'. However, this does not prove a causal influence one way or another, as people who are less trusting anyway may decide to read tabloids, and trust fell less between 1997 and 2001 among tabloid readers than broadsheet readers. However, the measure of trust is a stiff one – in today's climate to express this level of

trust in the government is to invite being labelled naïve and it is surprising that as many as 28% do so. Perhaps the broadsheets and society in general have increasingly adopted tabloid attitudes, and the CREST findings illustrate this catching-up process. Perhaps it also reflects the relatively easy ride the press gave the Blair government in 1997-2001 and future findings will be more striking.

There is a lot of good political journalism as well as bad journalism out there. Intelligent commentators like the BBC's Andrew Marr and Peter Riddell of the *Times* do talk, in an accessible way, about ideas, and attempt to tie current political debates to the underlying issues and the public policy options that are available. The public service broadcasting ethic, which goes well beyond the BBC, is a strong one. Many journalists, particularly among the broadcasters, are almost painfully earnest about encouraging people to participate. Most newspapers attempt at general election times to offer a bit of detail about the proposals each party is making on the main issues of the day, for readers to compare and contrast. Nearly all print rather pious editorials on election morning, urging people to do their sacred duty of voting. One cannot hope to accomplish much by advocating more of the same.

The problem is as much with the consumers as with the producers of media output. How many, even among the politically literate, skim over the dissections of public policy issues in their broadsheet, or change channels when a serious broadcaster devotes attention to explaining the issues in depth? Voters complain about not being informed about issues, but it is easy to consult quality journalism or read the parties' positions for themselves on websites. The media need no longer be a barrier to information, but few people actively seek out the information they feel they want. The problems obviously run deeper than the failure of the media to inform.

4. Catherine Bromley, John Curtice and Ben Seyd 'Is there a crisis of democracy?' CREST research paper May 2004.

5. *Guardian* 7 May 2004.

What can be done about the media? The answer, unfortunately, is very little. Geoff Mulgan asked in May 2004:

Are there any solutions? There is no question of the state having any role in this. But it is entirely plausible that civil society - perhaps with universities - could play a more active role in assuring standards, investigating errors, and holding to account journalists and media outlets against an ethic of truth and accuracy, just as they should hold governments to account too.⁵

The main contribution of any such voluntary body would probably be to correct the occasional lapse by people who generally do a good job and care about truth and accuracy. It could do little to help in the most serious cases. An example of this would be the Goldsmith's College study into coverage of 'loony left' councils in the 1980s, which found virtually all incidents of alleged bans on black bin liners or the like were fabrications. It was much too late to do anything to correct the record. But as Jim Callaghan said, 'a lie can be half way around the world before the truth has got its boots on,' and lies can be more durable than truth in some cases. With the possible exception of the *Daily Mail*, no major media producer is engaged in a deliberate project of destroying the relationship between people and politics, but nobody in the media sees it as their job to maintain it. No doubt any body that emerged from civil society to do the job Mulgan suggests might be quickly labelled a quango of stooges and enveloped in the same general cynicism.

Nevertheless, the idea is worth pursuing. An independent complaints body prepared to name and shame editors and journalists who fail to report accurately and objectively might not have much effect on those with little interest in factual reporting, but it might cause

some to think before they print and it could warn the public when 'news' is nothing more than promotion of prejudicial views. Just as the medical profession has its Hippocratic oath, such a body might also consider preparing a code of good practice to which journalists might be invited to subscribe.

The media's greatest interest is in novelty; the first thing every trainee is taught is that 'dog bites man' is not news, but 'man bites dog' is news. Long-running habits of thought and ways of seeing stories bore viewers and readers, and eventually journalists themselves. After a little over ten years of 'Conservative Party divided and ineffective' the tide finally turned, to the benefit of Michael Howard rather than his luckless predecessor. Perhaps there is also a case for looking again at 'politics and elections boring'. Many commentators were a little surprised to note in the 2001 Ipswich by-election that more people voted than went to see Ipswich Town play their European football match. The relentless fall in local election turnout was in fact halted in 2002 and reversed (perhaps temporarily) in 2004. Controversy following the Iraq war in 2003 has repoliticised the atmosphere after a rather settled few years. Recent local and European elections have seen an unprecedented growth in minor and locally based parties.

During 2004 the Hansard Society has sponsored a commission, chaired by Lord Puttnam, called 'Parliament in the Public Eye' whose brief is to examine the role of the media in communicating parliamentary democracy. Its evidence and recommendations should be invaluable in the continuing discussion of the media and politics. In time, fashion may change and stories may be written which are newsworthy, interesting and yet do not further the process of disengagement. One can do little except hope that this day comes before too much damage has been done.

Carriages at midnight

The end of the parties?



Political parties have a bad image. According to popular 'wisdom' they are populated by ambitious hacks who surrender all judgement to the wishes of the party machine, funded by unaccountable donations from dubious sources. Few people find the idea of attending a local party meeting at all attractive, and if any image is conjured up it is of a dingy room with a few dull people in it talking nonsense. As Matthew Taylor said, parties are often perceived as 'irrelevant or divisive', part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Yet traditionally parties are one of the mainsprings of the political system in Britain as elsewhere. They have been the main providers, or at least agencies, of political ideas, both at the level of broad ideological visions and also detailed policies. They train and provide candidates for public office. They are brand names, which enable electors to come to rapid, perhaps rough, conclusions about what values and ideas underlie people putting themselves forward for office. They are a means for people who wish to see their ideas put into practice, or who just wish to get involved in community activities. They are channels of communication for political ideas, upwards from members to representatives to leaders, and from leaders to public as well.

The parties have undergone a decline which is probably irreversible. It is impossible to imagine them restored to their peak strength of the 1940s and 1950s when individual membership of the Conservative Party was well over 2 million, and the Labour Party topped 1 million. While this peak owed a lot to the particular social and political circumstances of that period, that a decline has taken place is undeniable. Membership is now about 208,000 for Labour and 225,000 for the Conservatives, with perhaps 140,000 for all the rest combined. The situation may be worse than the raw figures indicate, as the proportion of members who are active in any fashion has

been falling too. Many of the new members attracted to Labour in the mid 1990s were not integrated into local party structures, and saw their membership as a passive affiliation, similar to joining the National Trust or the RSPB. Although an inevitable and efficient system, the centralisation of membership lists has removed a role for the local party organisation as a link with members and sympathisers among the public at large. Many of the new members left once the project of getting rid of the Conservative government was achieved.

Although statistics are very sketchy, perhaps 30% rather than 50% of party members ever do anything. Party organisation has succumbed to terminal decay in some areas, with only a shadow left in some 'hopeless' seats and a surprisingly thin membership list for Labour in particular in safe seats. Months roll by without branch meetings being quorate, and a dwindling band of activists find themselves doing more and more voluntary work for the parties. Activists and members, particularly in the Conservative Party, are drawn disproportionately from the top of the age range – there was a stir in the 1990s when an academic study revealed that the average Conservative member was 62. It may well be a little higher now.

The decline in membership and other political trends have set up cycles of disillusionment within the parties. Fewer members and activists have meant that the parties have increasingly turned to electioneering strategies that cut them out of the equation, such as employing paid canvassers and deliverers and conducting canvassing primarily from centralised phone banks. Both main parties now employ these techniques to some extent, which diminish the sense of party activity being tied to a particular locality even if they are still carried out by 'activists' as we traditionally understand the term. Increasing technical sophistication has meant a narrowing of focus onto the key voters in the constituencies that

make the difference, while the electorate in safe seats is often left relatively undisturbed. Particularly in the case of the Labour Party, contact from party workers has been an important means, which has not been replaced, of informing and energising less politicised sections of the electorate.

Inherent in New Labour was the idea that the Labour Party and its activists could not be trusted, and that there was virtue in distancing oneself from the party's own traditions as well as the opposing parties. Party activists can feel little sense of ownership in this project, and it is not surprising that many become unwilling to perform unappreciated voluntary work without having much of a say in the results. With the inevitable disappointments of a spell in government, party membership and morale have evaporated.

In the electorate as a whole, the proportion of people identifying strongly with one party or another has fallen precipitously. Since 1964 the British Election Study has tracked the proportion of people who claim to identify with one or other political party, and how strongly they feel about this. The results show an exceptionally clear trend:

	1964	1983	1997	2001
Strongly with any party	44	23	16	13
Fairly strongly with any party	38	41	42	76
Not very strongly with any party	8	36	35	
Not at all	10	36	7	11

Source: *British Election Studies 1964, 1983, 1997, 2001*.

While people may feel vaguely affiliated to one party or another, and the proportion of people claiming no feelings at all has hardly changed, the proportion feeling strongly about a party has

plunged from approaching a majority to being a rather small minority. These are deep trends, first apparent in the 1970s when Ivor Crewe dubbed it the 'decade of dealignment' but dealignment has only continued since then. The bulk of the electorate regard party affiliation more as an opinion, to be changed relatively lightly, than as a deeply held attachment to a value system or a tribe. This has in turn changed the way people relate to politics as a whole. Turnout plunged furthest in 2001 among those with a weak party attachment and little interest in politics. Party identification had been an aspect of what bound people into the political system as voters, and its decline has weakened the fabric of the entire system.

The vote for the main parties has fallen steeply too, from over 85% in every election from 1931 to 1970 inclusive, to 72.4% in 2001. The big shift came in February 1974 and recent changes have so far been less dramatic in general elections, although the unprecedented fall in the two-party share to just under 50% in the 2004 European Parliament elections suggests that another downward lurch is now possible. Another indicator of the weakening of the parties is in local elections, where independents, minor and local parties have enjoyed successes. In major cities such as Leeds and Birmingham the largest single party polled less than 30% in the 2004 local elections. Local politics is, to the tidy-minded party loyalist, becoming a zoo, as demonstrated by the triumph of a monkey in the Hartlepool mayoral election and the victories of the Idle Toad party in the Preston suburbs.

Strategies for re-engagement

The principal questions about the parties and political engagement are:

- What should the parties themselves do if they wish to restore their strength?

- To what extent should there be public policy intervention to sustain the existence of parties?
- Should the parties actually be allowed to wither away and be replaced by other forms of political engagement?

For the parties

Candidate selection

Last year's report of the Commission on Candidate Selection¹ made a number of recommendations to the parties about how they might improve the process of candidate selection. The Commission's aims were to seek ways of widening the range of candidates at all levels, reflecting the diversity of society and recognising that the skills required to do a good job of representation and governing may not be the same ones that increase one's chances of being selected.

The commission recommended that selection committees should look beyond the traditional factors of already established local links and a record of party activity, and recruit as candidates people who share the party's values and have demonstrated leadership qualities. It also found favour in the idea of requiring parties to find room on their short lists for people from under-represented groups, although there was no consensus on the extent to which affirmative action like all-women short lists was desirable. This is not the place to rehash the commission's report, but it offers a number of ways forward which are worth consideration and in line with a lot of what the parties themselves have been trying to do. In the recent rounds of selections the parties, particularly the Conservatives, have been innovating, and have actively sought people as candidates rather than waiting to see who puts their name forward.

The report noted that the Conservatives were allowing constituency associations to select

candidates through primary elections, even broadening out the right to any elector in the constituency. The first experiments in this direction, in Warrington South and elsewhere, have been reasonably successful. Primaries of party members or the whole electorate is certainly one means of giving people a real stake in the activities of local parties.

Party funding

The perception of party funding has been particularly bad in recent years, with well-publicised arguments over large donations from John Latsis and Bernie Ecclestone among others. However, the system is probably immeasurably cleaner than it was before the new rules introduced after the Neill Commission and now policed by the Electoral Commission. It is now more transparent and accountable than ever before, which puts the onus on the media and the public to maintain a sense of perspective about it. However, both main parties have increasingly pursued high value donors, which even if entirely honestly done does give the impression that politics is funded by plutocrats and that the parties rather despise the efforts of activists and supporters to raise smaller sums. It would be futile to expect the parties to abandon high value donors, but it is also incumbent on them to broaden their sources of finance.

Restructuring

It is easy to overplay the view that people spend all day working and nobody knows their neighbour, but there has certainly been significant social change towards a longer hours culture, less participation in voluntary institutions and communities defined more in terms of shared values or interests than geography. The main parties have already begun to experiment with moving beyond the constituency-ward structure, as with the Labour Party in places such as Enfield Southgate and the Conservatives increasingly through organisations such as Conservative

¹ Peter Riddell *Candidate Selection: The report of the commission on candidate selection* ERS: 2003.

Future. New technology may offer new opportunities for political organisation, through communication techniques as well as the open conversations that can take place through the 'blog', a sort of electronic stream-of-consciousness journalism that comments on events and other writing and encourages feedback. In the United States political blogs have helped shape communities of the like-minded and offered a powerful way of channelling small donations. In Britain MPs and candidates from all parties, including Tom Watson, Richard Allan and Iain Dale, have started to use this technique. There is certainly no harm in attempting to adapt party organisation, centrally, locally or in the sort of individual enterprise shown by the bloggers, to the way people live now. It is a way of engaging a section of the electorate who may not find traditional party politics attractive.

Whatever methods parties use for communicating with their members, people will have little incentive to join and get involved in party activities unless they feel by doing so their voices will be heard in policy development. Shifts in the major parties towards more centrally-controlled structures has left many members feeling left in the cold: they joined their parties through a commitment to their values but find themselves treated as little more than occasional leafleters and small-scale fundraisers. Political disengagement is not just a problem for the electoral at large but a real issue for the relationship between parties and their members. Unless parties can get their own internal democracy in order they are unlikely to be effective agents for the wider democracy they espouse.

New membership initiatives

The achievement of the Labour Party in the first flush of Blairite enthusiasm in 1994-98 in raising membership was remarkable – from 266,000 to 405,000 in four years, a rise in

percentage terms of over 50 per cent. This remarkable instance of running up a down escalator took place in an unusually propitious environment, with a major political realignment occurring and a co-ordinated attempt on the part of the party to reach out electorally and ideologically to previously untouched areas. These sorts of opportunities do not recur very often. But Labour also seized that opportunity. John Prescott as deputy leader emphasised the importance of mass membership. Not only was joining made even easier and membership opportunities advertised widely, but social networks were harnessed through the 'Prescott challenge' for each existing member to recruit a new member. The success may have been relatively short lived, and membership back below 1994 levels by 2002, but it still has some lessons. The Conservative Party's efforts to climb back have not been aided by such favourable conditions and it remains stuck well short of William Hague's target of a million members.

Non-political politics

The Liberals (and Liberal Democrats) have been using the community politics approach for nearly 40 years. There is nothing new about parties engaging with the most local and – to some – trivial issues, and it has brought electoral success because that is what voters often care most about. Community politics also shortens the chain of consequence between the individual voting or getting involved – campaigns for things such as a new zebra crossing can succeed quickly and give people a sense that the political system can produce results.

Individuals as well as parties can be promoted by unconventional means. Some MPs are adept at appearing to be, say, Mr. Romford or Mr. Reading and generating a sense that, beyond the party label, people can know and like their representative. The best candidates are doing things like voluntary work, or even sponsored

diets. Paddy Ashdown tried to do this years ago and seemed to get little credit for it; perhaps he was a bit ahead of his time.

For the government

Several fairly modest reforms are available that would shore up the political parties. The most obvious is an increase in public funding to cover the activities of parties outside their role as providers of parliamentary opposition. The Commission on Candidate Selection recommended making funds available to pay for the recruitment, retention and training of candidates. In performing these functions the parties are providing a public good, and it is equitable that they receive some measure of compensation for this. Pragmatically, the parties tend to choose to devote their relatively scarce funds to campaigning rather than longer term candidate and policy development. There is a strong case for ring-fenced funds to assist the parties in these respects, through project funds relating to candidate selection and conceivably in bodies analogous to the Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung and its equivalents in Germany. These party foundations serve as think tanks and builders of links with sister parties.

However, there are risks in increasing public funding. It is an easy populist attack to complain about snouts in the taxpayer's trough and compare the amount of money going to a party with some much needed local school improvement or the like. Party funding would find it difficult to win in any assessment of budget priorities. But limited expansion, for defined purposes, is defensible. A capped, tax-deductible system of small donations may assist the parties' efforts to raise funds without falling headlong into the arms of the wealthy.

Much beyond this, it is probably not appropriate for the state to get involved. The parties are voluntary social institutions, and while assistance for their public functions is one thing, ever-increasing subsidies are a bad

idea for parties just as much as for any clapped-out steelworks. The parties need to survive in a market-place of ideas, and if one or more is obsolete it must be allowed to fail. Whether the entire structure will fail is another question.

For the future

Perhaps, some iconoclasts even within the parties are beginning to suggest, the parties should be allowed to die. If there is no market for what they provide, they should go to the wall.

It is unlikely ever to come to that, but perhaps the future lies in loosening the bonds, in a gradual change from a centrally-managed provider to a kind of franchise operation. Perhaps a more edifying metaphor would be tolerant church with authority coming from the members, not from on high, or a vision of the party as a community group with national connections. Diversity, choice and devolution seem to be the watchwords of our time, so why not within the political parties? If individualistic promotion of candidates is to develop as one of the principal forms of campaigning, the logical extension is for their stands on issues (and their votes) to become increasingly distinctive and for the cohesion of the parties as disciplined armies to dissolve. This has already happened among the electorate, so why should it not spread to the parties?

Civic political activity is not so much declining, as changing. In 2000 38% of people had been involved in some sort of voluntary organisation such as a faith group, enterprise partnership or amenity group.² There is a lot of energy in civic life that no longer flows through the parties. In London, for instance, a clamorous political world of competing organisations, interests and ethnic groups has been developing, with which the formal structure of parties has relatively little in common; its politics is increasingly coming to resemble New York's in this respect.

2. Home Office Citizens' Audit, 2001.

The decay of the parties offers at least two possible futures. One is the nightmare American scenario of domination of politics by money and special interests, a Congress made deliberately baffling to voters, and dishonest, personalised electioneering. This way lies low turnouts and ultimately failure. The other possibility is more optimistic, perhaps only a dream but worth some thought. Parliament would become increasingly important and exercise a check on executive power. Voters would exercise a free (and thanks to technology more informed) choice between candidates, perhaps even candidates wearing the same party label. People with something to offer would be attracted into the political system.

If the parties are to wither away, or become looser, the rest of the architecture of the system needs to take this development into account. The media will need to take a more mature and responsible attitude to internal dissent in the parties, and to the rights of candidates and MPs to personal respect and privacy. Electors will probably have to work a bit harder. But perhaps the most significant change might be the electoral system. The system has to allow voters to make these choices, and for a plurality of views to exist within parties even in the same election. First-past-the-post is clearly failing, and systems based on lists force an artificial unity; STV is capable of sustaining this kind of politics. We return to the issue of the electoral system in chapter 9.

Perhaps there is a median between propping up the parties and glorying in their destruction. The parties may deserve support for continuing to provide us with candidates and ideas, while still being outmoded as a means of social organisation and structuring politics. Engaging with the electorate without the parties playing a predominant role may be difficult and expensive, but it might well be the future whatever anyone in authority decides.

How first-past-the-post disengages electors

Surveys have shown that one reason why some people do not vote is because they don't think their votes will make a difference. Many of them are probably right.

With our present electoral system, many votes "don't count". A feature of 'first-past-the-post' is that the outcome of an election in most constituencies is a foregone conclusion – most seats are 'safe' for one party or another – and the result of the election is decided on what happens in a small minority of marginal seats. In the 2001 general election, only 26¹ seats (3.9% of the total) changed hands.

Let us examine two constituencies, Liverpool Riverside and Winchester.

The 1997 and 2001 general election results in Liverpool Riverside were as follows:

	1997	2001
Conservative	3,635	2,142
Labour	26,858	18,201
Liberal Democrat	5,059	4,251
Other	2,583	909
Total	38,135	25,503
Turnout	51.6%	34.1%

Liverpool Riverside is one of Labour's safest seats. Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters in Liverpool Riverside might feel it worth voting as a demonstration of their opposition but, unless they are hopelessly unrealistic optimists, they must know that they have no chance of affecting the outcome. Labour supporters, however, also have a problem: they know their candidate is almost certain to win and consequently their votes will only contribute to a massive majority which will not affect the balance of seats at Westminster. As with

Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters, the chances of their votes influencing the results are miniscule. As a consequence, people had little incentive to vote in Liverpool Riverside and in the 2001 general election the turnout was only 34% – the lowest in the country.

Winchester by contrast was in 2001 the constituency with the highest turnout – 72%. In the previous election Winchester was the scene of dramatic events – after several recounts, the Liberal Democrat candidate was declared the winner by a margin of only 2 votes (converted into a majority of 21,556 when the election was re-run after a challenge by the losing candidate). The 1997 experience demonstrated that Winchester is a constituency which could produce a very close result and in which every vote might count. In Winchester there was an incentive to vote.

When it comes to general elections there are far more Liverpool Riversides than Winchesters. The great majority of candidates tour their constituencies asking people for their votes, knowing full well that whether people vote for them or not (or even vote for their opponents) will not make a whit of difference.

In the 2001 general election, only 30% of votes were used in securing victories for the winning candidates. Nearly half of the votes – 49% – were cast for losing candidates, and of the 51% cast for winners, only 30% were really needed while the other 21% merely contributed to surplus majorities which did not affect the results.

And the problem is not confined to general elections. Throughout local government there are many wards which are always won by the same party, and many councils which rarely change hands: 24 of the 32 London boroughs have had periods of single-party rule of 20 years or more, and 4 of them have been continuously run by the same party since they

1. Ignoring changes arising from a change in Speaker.

2. Chris Game, 'Should the winner take all, or even quite so much?' in Alan Pike (ed) 'The Missing Modernisation', Make Votes Count and the Electoral Reform Society, 2004.

were created in 1964.² In only 5 out of the 32 did a party poll a majority of the votes in 2002. Outside London we find a similar picture – 9 out of 36 metropolitan boroughs have been controlled by the same party since their creation in 1973.

It is therefore not surprising that electors often feel that their votes will not count and that voting is simply not worth the effort. Indeed, in many constituencies what is surprising is not that so many do not vote, but that so many do.

In the 2001 general election, the 100 constituencies which were most marginal in 1997 had turnouts on average 10% higher than the 100 constituencies which were safest in 1997. Where electors sense their votes might count, not only have they more incentive to vote, but parties have more incentive to campaign.

This leads us to another negative feature of first-past-the-post. Parties know that general elections will be decided by what happens in marginal constituencies, and these are usually less than 10% of the total. Moreover, they know that in these constituencies some will vote for them, some will vote for their opponents and some will never vote. It is the remaining 'swing voters' in these constituencies – generally less than 10% – who will determine who wins. The election battle is therefore over less than 10% of the votes in less than 10% of the constituencies – less than 1% of the entire electorate. For Labour, for example, it is much more important to win another 100 votes in a marginal seat than another 1000 in a seat such as Liverpool Riverside.

Through their own survey and focus group work, the major parties know what issues are likely to influence these swing voters in the marginals. Their political messages are therefore likely to be tuned to the concerns of this tiny minority and it is therefore

hardly surprising if the election messages, and therefore policies, of the major parties appear to converge on many issues. Activists in Labour's heartlands have often complained that their party ignores their concerns and panders to 'middle England' or the 'pebble-dash family', but the reality under first-past-the-post is that parties need to win that small centre ground if they are going to win the election. Labour, for example, might increase its total vote by adopting a more radical taxation policy, but such a policy is unlike to be a winning strategy in the constituencies that count. As a result, first-past-the-post restricts the political debate leading to the oft-heard complaint that "all parties are much the same", again reducing electors incentive to vote.

The case for electoral reform

If we want elections in which parties present real choices, in which all parties have reason to campaign vigorously everywhere and in which all electors can expect their votes to count, we need to change the electoral system. But how should the system be changed?

A first requirement is proportional representation. With a proportional system, the Conservative elector in a Labour heartland and the Labour supporter in a Conservative-dominated area both have an incentive to vote. They might be in a minority, but their votes will nevertheless contribute to a wider total which might help their party to win seats. Supporters of smaller parties, such as the Greens, would have more reason for voting, knowing that winning a seat was a real possibility.

Proportional representation would also remove the need for tactical voting which has become a major feature of our general elections. To make effective use of their votes at present, electors may need to guess who the main contenders are likely to be and then

to vote for one of them, rather than for the candidate they really want. Instead of voting for their favourite candidate, they may vote the person with the best chance of defeating the candidate they least like. While there is no evidence that tactical voting reduces turnouts, that electors might feel compelled to vote negatively rather than positively can hardly be good for democracy.

However, proportionality on its own is not enough. In 1999 Britain introduced a proportional system for the European Parliament elections but turnouts reached a record low. That system, the closed list system, was perhaps the worst proportional system that could have been chosen: it denied electors the chance to vote for the candidates they wanted and instead restricted their choices to party lists. Many candidates at the top of lists were almost assured of success while those at the bottom had no realistic chance of election. Those who became MEPs and those who did not were largely determined by the parties themselves. While the electoral system was far from the only reason for low turnouts in European elections, it is clear that voters want to choose their own representatives and denying them this choice will not help turnouts.

That is why the case for the Single Transferable Vote is a strong one. STV provides broad proportionality, but it also allows electors to vote for individual candidates. Moreover, voters are not just confined to the choice of one candidate, but can indicate their favourite candidate, their second and third preferences and so on, and the counting system will take account of these preferences in producing the most broadly acceptable result. In a first-past-the-post election if an elector does not like the candidate fielded by their party, they must either gulp and nevertheless vote for that candidate or be disloyal to their party and vote for another: with STV voters are likely to have

a choice of candidates of their party from which to choose. Thus even in areas where support for a party is strong, there is no such thing as a safe seat as candidates of that party will need to compete for support as individuals.

Because votes are transferable in STV, electors can vote for candidates without fear of their votes being wasted: if their preferred candidate does not have sufficient votes to be elected, or has more votes than needed, then their vote will transfer to the next candidate on their list of preferences who can make use of it. Tactical voting therefore becomes unnecessary and voters can show their true views in ranking candidates knowing that the system will make the best possible use of their votes.

STV is therefore a much more sophisticated system than first-past-the-post, but for voters an easy one to use. By making all elections competitive and by offering wider choices, it has the potential to increase turnouts. When Great Britain saw turnout in the 1999 European election fall to only 23%, in Northern Ireland where STV was used the turnout was 57%. While there are other factors in Northern Ireland which might have contributed to this difference, it nevertheless provides food for thought.

The electoral system and our political culture

In chapter 3 we looked at the nature of our political system and at how it discourages political engagement. Here we have argued that our first-past-the-post system has played a part in creating many of the undesirable features of our politics. It has a direct impact on elections, making them uninteresting by being predictable and putting many electors in a position in which their votes have little chance of influencing the outcome. But it also shapes our political culture by forcing parties to compete for the swing voters in marginal

3. Steve Munby, 'Reconnecting local politics', in Alan Pike (ed) 'The Missing Modernisation', Make Votes Count and the Electoral Reform Society, 2004.

4. Another possibility is of course minority government. But the same arguments apply: parties are likely to be more measured in the criticisms of others whose support they may need to enact legislation.

5. Disraeli in speech to Commons, 16th December 1852.

constituencies rather than widespread support, by marginalising the role of local candidates, by dumbing down our political debate and giving our politics an artificially adversarial nature. As Steve Munby has noted:

"Competition between candidates and political parties is unavoidable. Conflict is as important to politics as consensus. But first-past-the-post creates particular forms of competition and conflict which undermine confidence in politics and encourage political disengagement. Under first-past-the-post the only thing that matters is getting more votes than your main opponent. You don't need to get a high vote. You don't need to get a majority of the votes. The priority is to do your best to ensure your opponents get as few votes as possible and to get more of your supporters out to vote than they do. There is one simple way to do this: negative campaigning – concentrating your campaign on attacking your opponent."³

We have argued that a change to a proportional system would make elections more competitive and therefore more interesting, but perhaps the main benefit of an appropriate proportional system would be in changing the very nature of our politics.

Electoral reform could change parties' approaches to campaigning and consequently their political messages. By making all votes important, the political battleground would become the whole country. Parties would need to seek to maximise their support across the whole electorate rather than focusing on what is needed to win a small middle ground (and a middle ground defined only by the drawing of constituency boundaries). We have noted how the concerns of places like Liverpool Riverside can be safely ignored under first-past-the-post, but with a

proportional system a Labour voter in Liverpool Riverside would be just as important as a Labour voter in a marginal. Proportionality could encourage parties to 'be themselves' and by doing so could encourage more differentiation between the parties, widening the choices presented to electors.

Secondly, proportionality could change the nature of political debate. The more proportional the voting system, the more difficult it would be for a single party to win an outright majority, thereby increasing the likelihood of coalition government,⁴ and it would no longer be possible for parties to win 'landslide' victories on a minority of the votes. Some opponents of reform argue that coalitions lead to weak and ineffective government – as Disraeli maintained, "England does not love coalitions"⁵. We will not digress here into refuting these arguments, but we can note that experience from other countries, as well as from Scotland where the Scottish Parliament is elected using a broadly proportional system, shows us that there is no reason why coalitions need be weak, indecisive or lacking in radicalism. Indeed, in times of crises, such as in 1914 and 1940 and in the economic crisis of 1929, when strong leadership was required, Britain opted for coalition government.

Parties which might need to find coalition partners after an election are less likely during an election campaign to unnecessarily slag off opponents whose support they might need in forming a government. With coalition government more of a possibility, parties will still want to present their distinctive policies and to argue why they are better than others, but in doing so they are likely to be more measured in their approach (as was seen to some extent in the Labour and Liberal Democrat campaigns in the run up to the 1997 general election, and in the 2003 Scottish Parliament election campaign).

Moreover, a coalition in Parliament (or in a council chambers) would require politicians of different parties to work constructively together. Although co-operation might be confined to members of the coalition partners, it would encourage a more open style of politics in which positions need to be debated, rather than the present situation in which the executive gets its way irrespective of who wins the argument.

A change not just to proportionality but to STV⁶ would have further advantages. Parties which do best under STV are those which not only get the votes of their own supporters but benefit from transfers from those who have given their first preferences to candidates of other parties. In campaigning parties therefore have an incentive to make their appeal as wide as possible. As Steve Munby has noted, winner-takes-all elections under first-past-the-post encourage candidates to attack all others, producing an unnecessary and artificial degree of confrontation rather than serious, adult debate of the issues. For most voters, the yaboo of present party politics is a turn-off: polling has shown that one thing voters really want is for politicians to “stop their bickering” and start working together in tackling problems. The proportionality of STV means that parties know they might work with others in coalition and unwarranted aggression therefore becomes unhelpful, but the need to attract transferred votes in STV also means that negative campaigning and the slagging off of all opponents is not likely to be a winning strategy.

Elections under STV would differ in another respect, not just from first-past-the-post, but from elections using other forms of proportional representation. With STV voters must choose candidates, not just parties. With first-past-the-post voters vote for candidates but, with only one candidate for each party, if an elector votes according to party preference (which is the case for the great majority of

voters) then there is no additional opportunity to express a view on the candidates – as Graham Allen has pointed out (see chapter 3), the candidates are relegated to being proxies for party leaders. In an STV election, however, parties – or at least the main contending parties – will field more than one candidate in a multi-member constituency, thereby allowing a Labour voter, for example, not just to choose Labour but to indicate preferences between the Labour candidates.

This has a number of implications. There would no longer be ‘safe’ seats. Even in an area of strong, say, Labour support, a Labour candidate could not be certain of victory because the voters might prefer other Labour candidates over him or her. Candidates would no longer be merely those who carry their parties’ banners but would need to compete on the basis of what they personally could offer to the voters. Candidates would therefore regain some importance in their own right and those who are successful would have the added legitimacy of knowing that voters supported them, not just their parties.

It does not follow, as some opponents of STV have suggested, that this would lead to damaging contests between candidates of the same party because all members of a party’s team of candidates would have a mutual interest in maximising support for the team. Nevertheless, even if the additional element of competition introduced by STV were to add to the anxieties of candidates, that would not necessarily be a bad thing for democracy – elections should be about voters choosing their representatives and not parties making the choices for them.

STV could therefore benefit politicians by giving them added legitimacy, but it also benefits voters. The transferability of votes allows a voter to vote ‘naturally’, i.e. without needing to worry about whether their vote

⁶ Readers requiring further information on the Single Transferable Vote should consult the Electoral Reform Society’s website: www.electoral-reform.org.uk

will be effective, because if their first preference is a candidate with little chance of election, the vote will be transferred until it finds a candidate that can benefit from it. By allowing voters to rank all candidates in order of preference, STV gives voters the opportunity to say much more about the representation they want and this can only make voting more interesting and relevant, and that can only be good for electoral participation.

But there is another way in which a proportional system like STV can help connect electors with their political representatives. Under first-past-the-post one candidate is elected in each constituency. All politicians so elected claim to 'represent' all of their constituents and they are no doubt justified in making this claim in that they accept case work from constituents irrespective of their political views. However, on issues of policy there is no way in which a Conservative politician represents Labour voters or vice versa. Consequently many electors do not feel 'represented' and many will be reluctant to approach politicians whose views are diametrically opposed to their own. A sense of political disconnection is not therefore surprising. With a multi-member STV constituency, however, most voters will find they have at least one politician of their preferred party representing their views and with whom they feel comfortable raising casework issues. Clearly an elector is much more likely to 'connect' with a politician they have helped to elect and who is more likely to be sympathetic to their viewpoint. While first-past-the-post is likely to discourage political engagement, STV is likely to do the opposite.

To summarise, our present first-past-the-post system is not one which encourages voting in many parts of the country. It also distorts our political debate and does not lead to representative outcomes. Unless we change it

and make voting meaningful for all electors, we are unlikely to overcome the problems of low turnouts, whatever innovations we introduce to make voting easier. By providing proportionality and voter choice, STV can give more power and influence to electors with obvious implications for turnout.

But it can also help change our political culture, encouraging the positive promotion of policy and real debate rather than unnecessary confrontation, thereby making politics more meaningful for the ordinary citizen. It can enhance the role of politicians by making them people who, on their own merits, have won the support of voters and it can strengthen the links between electors and their representatives.

We do not argue that the introduction of STV would solve all the problems of our politics. Initiatives to encourage greater participation in elections, whether by making voting easier or by promoting elections through better publicity, as well as changes to the ways in which political parties and the institutions of government work are all needed, but without electoral reform we are unlikely to achieve the more far-reaching changes our politics requires.

Making voting easier

The Government should continue to experiment with ways of making voting easier but in doing so must ensure that any alternative methods of voting which are used do not, or do not significantly, make the electoral system more vulnerable to malpractice.

Postal voting

Before there is any further large-scale use of postal voting the risks must be minimised by:

- introducing individual registration of electors and requiring electors, when registering, to give a signature and/or some form of personal identifier (e.g. date of birth);
- using a declaration of identity which does not need to be witnessed, but which allows a meaningful check that the voter is the person to whom the vote was issued;
- requiring returning officers to check the validity of at least, say, 10% of all declarations of identity;
- giving electoral registration offices more resources to enable to carry out more checks on the accuracy of registers;
- introduce stiff penalties for watching an elector in the act of voting, or for voters allowing another person to see how they have voted;
- ensuring that the rules and the penalties for breaking them are prominently displayed on all official election materials, including on the ballot paper itself;
- making it an offence for people other than authorised election staff to handle ballot papers, other than their own, which have not been completed and sealed in official ballot envelopes, and to restricting the right of people to handle ballot papers even after they have been sealed in their reply envelopes;

In elections involving postal voting, electors should have the option of voting in the traditional manner.

In elections for the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament and the Assemblies in Northern Ireland, London and Wales, where turnouts of around 50% should be achievable, the additional risks in any further extension of postal voting would not be justified by the likely increase in turnout. In these elections voting in polling stations should be promoted over postal ballots.

E-voting

There should be further small-scale trials of e-voting (telephone, text message, internet voting and voting by digital television) before their wider use: these trials should look at how secure the systems are technically, their transparency and their ability to increase participation in elections.

In any elections which offer the use of e-voting, voters should also be able to vote at a polling station or by post as an alternative.

The development of internet voting and voting by digital television should be done in such a way as to give voters access to information on candidates and their policies on-line at the time of voting.

The Government should abandon its target of an e-enabled general election after 2006 until a clear case has been made for e-voting.

Choice of polling station

Local authorities should be encouraged to develop on-line registers which would make it possible for voters to vote on election day at any polling station in the local authority area;

With the development of such on-line registers, local authorities should experiment with the use of polling stations in shopping

centres, bus and rail stations, etc. as well as in the existing polling districts.

Until on-line registers have been developed, local authorities should be allowed to continue experimenting with polling stations in shopping centres etc, during the week prior to an election.

Weekend voting

Although there is little case for weekend voting in a single constituency or local authority area if the rest of the country is going to the polls on a different day, experimentation should be allowed for by-elections.

The case for holding European Parliament elections (and other elections with which they might be combined) at a weekend should be considered.

Encouraging participation

Informing the electorate

More needs to be done to make electors aware of elections and the importance of voting. Mobilising voters cannot be left to candidates and their dwindling bands of supporters.

The Electoral Commission should be given a much greater budget for publicising elections and their importance.

Local authorities and returning officers should have a responsibility for measures to improve turnouts in their areas; steps should be taken to build on the innovative work which many local authorities have already done.

All official election literature, including polling cards and any other materials sent to electors, should be more attractively designed and more informative.

Turning out or turning off

An analysis of political disengagement and what can be done about it

Candidates in all elections should be given free-post facilities.

Citizenship education and engaging young voters

Greater efforts should be made to encourage young people to participate in politics. In particular:

- citizenship education needs to be given a higher priority in the school curriculum and should be better resourced, with more training programmes to overcome the shortage of citizenship teachers;
- the voting age should be reduced to 16 so that all young people have an opportunity to vote while they can be encouraged to do so through the educational system.

Reaching minorities

Local authorities and political parties, as well as central government and the Electoral Commission, need to make additional efforts to involve minority communities in the political process. In many areas there are special needs for:

- projects to encourage members of all ethnic communities to register to vote.
- projects with and for members of ethnic communities aimed at raising people's awareness of their rights as electors, the process of voting, the responsibilities of elected members, etc., using materials in relevant languages and whatever other channels of communication are appropriate.

Celebrating democracy

Publicity for elections must be more imaginative and more colourful. It should proclaim the importance of elections in a democratic society and present voting as a hard-won right.

The experience of voting should be made more satisfying – the polling station environment should be made more welcoming.

A right to take time off work to vote should be considered, as should making election days public holidays.

Compulsory and incentive voting

More debate is needed on compulsory and incentive voting – the democratic arguments in their favour, as well as deeply held concerns over the principles involved, must be recognised. Neither should be introduced before public consultation on their use. There should be no moves to introduce compulsory voting unless it can be shown to have broad support.

The media

The case for creating an independent body to oversee the media's coverage of politics and to adjudicate on complaints of untruthful or misleading political reporting needs to be examined. If established, such a body should also be given the task of preparing a code of good practice for political journalism.

Political parties

Parties must make changes in the way they operate and communicate with electors if they are to retain their relevance within the political system. Changes should include:

- improvements in their methods of candidate recruitment and selection in order to present the electorate with candidates who better reflect the diversity of society.

- structural changes which allow members a stronger voice in political debates and policy development.

Consideration should be given to increased funding of political parties, with funding related to popular support, to stimulate local party activity and to lessen the influence, or perceived influence, of large donors.

The voting system

The first-past-the-post voting system which discourages voters, distorts representation and contributes to an unnecessarily adversarial form of politics must be abandoned.

All elections for all levels of government should be conducted using voting systems which are broadly proportional and which increase voter choice

The Single Transferable Vote system would best achieve these ends and by doing so would promote a more appropriate political culture. STV is already used for local and European elections in Northern Ireland and will be used for future local elections in Scotland. Its use should be extended to all public elections in the UK.

I. Turnout in UK General Elections 1922-2001

	Turnout (%)	Share of vote won by party with Commons majority (%)	Share of electorate won by party with Commons majority (%)
1918	58.9	(47.6)	(23.9)
1922	71.3	38.2	26.0
1923	70.8	*	*
1924	76.6	48.3	37.0
1929	76.1	*	*
1931	76.3	55.2 (67.0)	40.0 (48.5)
1935	71.2	53.7	37.6
1945	72.7	47.8	36.1
1950	84.0	46.1	39.9
1951	82.5	*48.0	*39.6
1955	76.7	49.7	38.1
1959	78.8	49.4	38.8
1964	77.1	44.1	34.0
1966	75.8	47.9	36.3
1970	72.0	46.4	33.4
1974 February	78.7	*	*
1974 October	72.8	39.2	28.6
1979	76.0	43.9	33.3
1983	72.7	42.4	30.8
1987	75.3	43.4	31.9
1992	77.7	42.3	32.6
1997	71.4	43.2	30.9
2001	59.4	40.7	24.2

Source: D. Butler & G. Butler *British Political Facts (1918-97)*; Electoral Commission (2001).

Figures in brackets in the right hand columns indicate the share of vote for the winning coalitions in 1918 and 1931.

* No figure is given for elections that produced no overall majority. In 1951 Labour polled 40.3% of the electorate, more than any other party in any election since 1918, but the Conservatives gained a parliamentary majority. Labour's share of the vote was 48.8%.

2. Turnout in UK European Parliament elections 1979-2004

	Great Britain (%)	Northern Ireland (%)
1979	32.1	55.7
1984	31.8	63.5
1989	35.9	48.4
1994	36.2	48.7
1999	23.1	57.8
2004	38.2	51.7

4. Turnout in elections for devolved bodies 1999-2003

	Scotland (%)	Wales (%)
1999	58.4	46.2
2003	49.8	38.2

3. Turnout (%) in Metropolitan borough council elections 1980-2004

1980	38.8
1982	39.0
1983	41.7
1984	39.1
1986	39.4
1987	43.9
1988	38.9
1990	46.3
1991	40.9
1992	32.5
1994	38.9
1995	33.8
1996	30.5
1998	24.8
1999	26.1
2000	28.5
2002	31.4
2003	31.5
2004	40

Source: *Rallings and Thrasher Local Election Handbook, 1980-2003*; 2004 estimate from Euro election turnout.

Metropolitan boroughs are used because they are comparable year to year, and 1980 is the starting point because the 1979 results were distorted by the General Election taking place on the same day.

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