

Patterns of political engagement and disengagement



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Introduction

A significant proportion of the British electorate has become disengaged from both politics and the political process (Flinders, 2015; Norris, 2011). Evidence of this is reflected in the low turnout in the 2015 General Election whereby only two-thirds of the electorate used their democratic right to vote (NatCen, 2014). Concerns about this withdrawal of British citizens from political participation has been mounting across the last twenty-five years (Flinders, 2015). Myriad reasons underpin this growth in collective apathy. Negative attitudes and opinions underpin how election candidates are out of touch; do not listen to the people; are self-interested and do not keep their promises (Flinders, 2015; NatCen, 2014). In sociological terms, the reasons for non-participation has been linked to ideas of ‘habitus’ and the ‘charismatic leader’ (Weber, 1968: 212; Bourdieu, 1977: 90). These debates will be evaluated to illustrate how and why democracy is under threat. The conclusion will find that the absence of political motivation is most acute within the young adult population particularly where age intersects with class, a lack of political knowledge and social capital (Phelps, 2006)..

Participation

Political participation comprises numerous activities from engaging with the local MP to canvassing for a party and taking part in opinion polls to debating politics in the pub (NatCen, 2014). Similarly, signing a petition, lobbying for a cause and marching in protest against a government policy is also political participation [See (Appendix A.) (Scottish Executive, 2005)]. However, those who participate in this way, do so in addition to, and not instead of voting in General Elections (Marsh et al., 2007). Voting remains the most commonly

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used form of political participation within the EU15 (Sloam, 2015).

Participation is crucial because ‘ citizen involvement in the political process is essential for democracy to be viable and meaningful’ (Dalton, 1988: 35). However, some argue that if voter turnout drops below 50% then whoever gains power cannot claim legitimacy within a democratic system as the results would not reflect the choice of the majority of the electorate (Marsh et al., 2007). The British government is concerned that this is generational and that the subsequent generations will mobilise a greater democratic deficit to the point whereby the legitimacy of the incoming government is called into question; or where democracy ceases to exist (Marsh et al., 2007).

Numerous theories exist as to why voters are disengaged (Kolovos and Harris, 2005). For example, voting is a rational choice which is made following the evaluation of the benefits against the costs of voting (Kolovos and Harris, 2005). Crewe et al., (1992) dismiss this model as too weak but, given the politically illiterate young adult coupled with a sense of apathy and/or alienation; the party they elect could contain policies that are detrimental to them (O’Toole, 2015).

Habitus

The sociological model identifies issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity and age starting with middle age onwards (Kolovos and Harris, 2005). The middle class electorate possess the ‘ habitus’; a ‘ lasting disposition’ that informs a lifestyle which is enabled by their cultural, social, symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu, 2015: 15). Habitus is described as the ‘ permanent internalisation of the social order in the human body’ and as such, it cannot

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be learned; it emerges through socialisation (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 190; Bourdieu 1990; Costa and Murphy, 2015: 4). Habitus provides the means to decipher the cultural codes to which less privileged voters are oblivious (Gerwitz et al., 1995). This elite group is more likely to stand for election or lobby parliament for policy shifts that reinforce middle class values (Bourdieu, 1977). Such policies are out-of-touch with working class lives thereby discursively excluding poor, black and minority ethnic groups (Bourdieu, 1977; Kolovos and Harris, 2005).

Political efficacy, by contrast, draws a distinction between political apathy and political alienation (Kolovos and Harris, 2005). Political apathy is rooted in political passivity and indifference (Kolovos and Harris, 2005). Apathetic citizens do not feel obligated to vote whereas, political alienation involves a conscious decision not to participate in voting because it views such participation as negative (Kolovos and Harris, 2005). Russell Brand is politically alienated as marked by tweet to his two million followers that they should not vote in the 2015 General Election if they could not distinguish the differences between the parties (Brand, 2015; Dunt, 2015).

O'Toole (2015) focused on the crisis of political participation in young adults as they are the least participatory group local and global. One exception to this rule could be found in the 86% turnout for the Scottish Independence Referendum which allowed sixteen and seventeen year-olds to vote; this propelled Scottish youths to participate with a hitherto unseen enthusiasm (Electoral Commission, 2014). However the referendum was driven by issues of identity and not leadership. In contrast however, 66% of Americans under 30 voted for Obama in 2008 revealing a racial, gendered and generational

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shift towards a 'new class of interested citizens' (Ting and Rundle, 2012). It was charisma that overwhelmed the hitherto inconceivable notion that an African American could govern America.

Charismatic Leader

While this was However, Obama epitomises what Weber defined as the 'charismatic leader' (1920[1968]: 212). The charismatic leader denotes an individual who possesses unique qualities that are beyond the scope of ordinary individuals (Weber, 1920[1968]: 241). Charismatic authority is one of three classifications of authority or 'legitimate domination' (Weber, 1920[1968]: 212). However, unlike 'rational-legal' and 'traditional' authority, 'charismatic' domination does not rely on the structural norms to achieve success (1920 [1968]: 212). Rather, charismatic authority is non-coercive; it rests on a 'devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him', (Weber, 1920[1968]: 213). In a pre-modern context, the charismatic leader was perceived as 'superhuman', 'divine' or 'supernatural' (Weber, 1920[1968]: 241).

Charismatic leaders also demarcate the highest and lowest turnout to UK General Elections (See Appendix B.). The first was Winston Churchill who led Britain through WWII against the NAZI regime (Dubrin et al., 1998). In this context his leadership style was 'charismatic' insofar as he was trusted and adored by the nation which felt assured by his speeches via the radio (Dubrin et al., 1998: 55). While, the Beveridgean vision of the welfare state overpowered the electorate in 1945, Churchill regained power in 1951 by an 82% turnout (UK Political Info, 2015).

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In stark contrast, the lowest turnout was 59.4 per cent in the 2001 re-election of New Labour's Tony Blair (UK Political Info, 2015). Blair perceived as a 'new kind of politician with enormous charisma' (Gov UK: 2015: [Online]). Riddle asserts that 'Mr Cameron ... has long aspired to capture some of the Blair charisma' (2015: [Online]). Since then there has been a gradual rise in voter turnout; 66.1 per cent of the electorate voted in the 2015 General Election (UK Political Info, 2015).

Elements of the charismatic leader can be found from a poststructural perspective. Numerous sociologists have adopted the Foucauldian approach to explain how the bio-power of governments produce passive and docile subjects who are easy to control without coercion (Foucault, 1977; Galston, 2001;). Docile societies are self-regulating and see only the positive power of the government; as such, docile subjects trust their politicians and the institutions from which governmental power emanates and circulates (Foucault, 1977). As such, bio-power underpinned the reason why 46,425,386 people chose to vote in the 2015 General Election (Foucault, 1977). However, wherever possible, docile subjects tend to elect the most charismatic leader (Galston, 2001).

UK 2015 General Election

The Labour manifesto was carved on to twenty foot high stone slab costing £30,000 (BBC News, 2015b: [Online]). Cameron just wanted to be 'pumped up' and then pulled the 'right to buy' out of the bag at the eleventh hour (BBC News, 2015a: [Online]). Neither possess charismatic authority and only 17% of the nation trusted them (NatCen, 2014). Few people felt any allegiance to a particular party and just 57% felt obliged to vote including <https://assignbuster.com/patterns-of-political-engagement-and-disengagement/>

academics and those located in London and the South East (NatCen, 2014). 76 % felt an obligation to vote in 1986 compared with 57% in 2015 (NatCen, 2014). Other variables impact the results in terms of a duty to vote such as the This appears supports the notion of habitus which middle class can decipher the cultural codes of the party's manifesto and policies (Bourdieu, 1977). Interest in politics remains unchanged (29%) as does the belief that democracy works in the UK (57%) (NatCen, 2014).

Election Results and Non-Voters

Despite a slight rise in voting, it is argued that if all the non-voters in the 2015 General Election formed the ' Apathy Party', the Apathy Party would have won the majority vote (Doré, 2015: [Online]). This is based upon the number of non-voters outweighing the number of votes received by the winning party within each constituency (Doré, 2015: [Online]). While the election results in terms of seats and percentages looked like Figure 1 if the non-voters formed the Apathy Party it would have won the majority vote winning 345 seats (Doré, 2015: [Online]). Clearly, there has to be a shift in British attitudes to engage the electorate in politics.

Youth Participation

One of the reasons for the apathy of young adults however is linked to another charismatic personality informing his 2 million-strong Twitter followers or ' disciples' not to vote (Weber, 1920[1968]; 241). Russell Brand was actually stating that they should not vote if they were unable to distinguish between the parties (Dunt, 2015;, Sloam, 2015). Nevertheless, it was harmful insofar as the media and young adults misinterpreted this as do not vote at all; the youth vote generally goes to Labour thus the outcome

could have been different (Dunt, 2015). However, Brand (2015) retracted this assertion having realised that Labour must win to oust the Conservatives.

Diverse Political Participation

Contrary to popular belief, almost two-thirds of young adults take interest in political issues generally (Mycock and Tonge, 2014). However, 75 per cent of young adults felt they did not have the power to influence political decision-making and just over half were politically illiterate (Mycock and Tonge, 2014). Political activism manifests in numerous ways ranging from signing a petition to embarking on active protest against policies (Rusbridger and Rees, 2012). The student protests and the UK riots in 2011 are key responses to the Coalition government's spending cuts as part of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 which blocked routes to further education and social mobility for many working class youths (Rusbridger and Rees, 2012). In addition, it should also be noted that Russell Brand is not the sole reason for the lack of voting by youths (O'Toole, 2015).

Table 1 illustrates that the political participation of young adults has continued to fall steadily since 1992 and that the percentage of their participation is far lower than the total turnout up until 2010 when it rose slightly. Labour captured the majority of 18-34 year-olds voters who were classified as social class DE which encompasses: the 'semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations'; the unemployed and 'lowest grade occupations'; 'private and social tenants' and; 'Black and minority ethnic groups' (Nardelli, 2015: [Online]). These labour supporters would have felt the full force of the Coalition government's Welfare Reform Act 2012 which

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supports the sociological model of voting by Kolovos and Harris (2005). The most loyal group with the highest turnout to vote for the Conservatives was the 65's and over (Nardelli, 2015). This is due to the fact that this age group has been spared from the welfare reforms and are exempt from sharing the burden of the deficit to maintain and secure the 'grey vote' (Livesey and Price, 2013: 21).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident following the debates above that the decrease in the turnout of voters in the British General Elections is contingent upon numerous shifting variables in accordance with the political, social and economic landscape; these are then impacted in terms of social divisions such as gender, class, disability race and minority ethnic groups all of whom experience governments and policies differently. These groups have yet to witness any evidence of the positive social change that sends the elderly to the booth in droves to vote. What does not work includes young working class adults who are politically illiterate illustrates a need to teach politics at school is one solution. The middle class habitus that informs future policies by lobbying banishes the less privileged into oblivion. Cross-Class lobbying is required to counter this issue because as long as middle class values are being imposed, the working class will remain disaffected. The elderly turnout illustrates that voting turnouts will rise if the policies are appropriate. Leaders must have charismatic authority to promote inclusion; traditional top-down power, promotes political disengagement and alienation, which will fester as long as habitus informs policies. Disengagement from politics also explains the political alienation of non-political revolutionaries such as

Russell Brand who could his influence his followers by charisma alone.

Similarly, charisma informed Obama's presidency in a racist nation.

Furthermore, the highest and lowest ever turnouts for Churchill and Blair's leaderships were both determined by charisma based upon trust.

Word Count: 2, 195

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Appendix A

Participation by citizens over the last 12 months: Europe and UK compared

Table 2. Participation by citizens over the last 12 months: Europe and UK compared

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Country	UK	Europe	High	Low
<u>Signed petition</u>	<u>35.</u> <u>54%</u>	<u>24.</u> <u>5%</u>	<u>Iceland 48.</u> <u>76%</u>	<u>Greece 2. 95%</u>
<u>Boycotted certain products</u>	<u>20.</u> <u>58%</u>	<u>16.</u> <u>2%</u>	<u>Sweden 34.</u> <u>75%</u>	<u>Ukraine 1. 79%</u>
<u>Contacted politician or official</u>	<u>14.</u> <u>94%</u>	<u>12.</u> <u>5%</u>	<u>Iceland 30.</u> <u>30%</u>	<u>Portugal 5. 46%</u>
<u>Worked in another association</u>	<u>7. 98%</u>	<u>13.</u> <u>1%</u>	<u>Iceland 49.</u> <u>47%</u>	<u>Slovenia 1. 68%</u>
<u>Worn campaign badge/sticker</u>	<u>7. 5%</u>	<u>8. 1%</u>	<u>Iceland 34.</u> <u>4%</u>	<u>Hungary 1. 34%</u>
<u>Taken part in a lawful demonstration</u>	<u>3. 75%</u>	<u>10.</u> <u>8%</u>	<u>Ukraine 21.</u> <u>69%</u>	<u>Hungary Slovenia, 1.</u> <u>61%</u>
<u>Worked in political party/action group</u>	<u>2. 22%</u>	<u>4. 0%</u>	<u>Iceland 14.</u> <u>24%</u>	<u>0. 94% Hungary</u>

Source: Scottish Executive - FCSD - Analytical Services using European Social Survey 2004/2005

Appendix B

Table 1. Prime Ministers by Turnout and Party

since 1945

Year	Turnout %	Prime Minister	Party
1945	72.80	-- Atlee	Labour
1951	82.60	↑ Churchill	Cons (Highest Turnout)
1955	76.80	↓ Eden	Cons
1959	78.90	↑ MacMillan	Cons
1964	77.10	↓ Wilson	Labour
1966	75.80	↓ Wilson	Labour
1970	72	↓ Heath	Cons
1974	78.80	↑ Wilson	Labour

1979	76	↓	Thatcher	Cons
1983	72.70	↓	Thatcher	Cons
1987	75.30	↑	Thatcher	Cons
1992	77.70	↑	Major	Cons
1997	71.40	↓	Blair	Labour
2001	59.40	↓	Blair	Labour (Lowest Turnout)
2005	61.40	↑	Blair	Labour
2010	65.10	↑	Cameron	Cons
2011	66.1	↑	Cameron	Cons

Source: Modified from data collated by UK Political Info, 2015: [Online]