

Why did turnout
decline substantially
between the british
general elections of
19...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

British election turnout since 1945 had not dropped below 71.2% until the Labour Party victory in 2001, where turnout was the lowest since 1918 at 59.3%. Turnout slowly increased in the 2005 election with 61.4% and then up again to 65.1% in 2010. Reasons for the steep decline in 2001 and the continuing relatively low turnout are numerous and include a reduction in campaign spending, a shift to centre ground politics and the feeling of a foregone conclusion, especially with regards to 2001.

Some may say that low turnouts are now a 'permanent phenomenon' (Worcester, Mortimer, & Baines, 2005, p. 268) and this essay intends to show why turnout has followed this path and expanding on issues such as youth apathy and disengagement. Using polls and the findings of academic research, this essay will chronologically address the general elections of 2001, 2005 and 2010 in an attempt to explain the apparent voter indifference. The concluding paragraphs will summarise the findings of the essay and pose further thoughts on the topic of election turnouts. The 2001 General Election

The election of 2001 shocked Britain with extremely low turnout and one of the main reasons offered for this is the perception of an inevitable labour win. The public were aware that 'every published poll gave Labour a lead by from 11 to 28 percent' (Butler & Kavanagh, 2002, p. 258) and this is backed up by Geddes and Tonge (2002, p. 257) who state the reason for low turnout was the belief that labour was the 'only viable electoral choice'. This view is disputed in Britain Votes 2001 (Whitely et al, 2001) where it is claimed that other factors such as the economy and party leaders were more influential factors.

<https://assignbuster.com/why-did-turnout-decline-substantially-between-the-british-general-elections-of-1997-and-2001-essay-sample/>

In an election which is considered to be a forgone conclusion it can easily be asserted that voters would believe their vote worthless and therefore not attend the polling booth. Voter efficacy is also a key factor, Worcester remarks that there was an 'unusually low concern about the outcome' (Worcester, Mortimer, & Baines, 2005, p. 267) and this is confirmed by MORI who found that people were 9% likely in 2001 to think the result of the election was unimportant than in 1997 (MORI, 2010).

If less people think that the result of the election is important then we would assume that voter turnout be lower. This is combined the political dealignment experienced in these years. Political dealignment is described as the 'erosion or decline of an established party system' (LeDuc, 1985) and is simply the shift of loyalty from a party politics. From 1970 we see that 'the party system has been far from stable and electoral change has been swift and extensive' (Denver, 2007, p. 66), in fact 5% less people felt less attached to their party in 2001 compared with 1997 (Butler & Kavanagh, 2002, p. 58).

This could be due to the labourite shift to the center as New Labour under Tony Blair, with some supporters feeling he did not deliver on his promises and some voters longing for him to move to the left. In addition to this, core conservative support 'never amounted to more than 9% of the electorate' (Denver, 2007, p. 92) compared with the 40% average of the previous decades. An educated observer would note that if a voter has lost his/her loyalty to a party then he/she is less likely to vote for them, therefore leading to a reduction in voter turnout.

The campaigns of 2001 could be said to have been less active than previous years also. A MORI poll of May, 2001 (Butler & Kavanagh, 2002, p. 214, Table 11. 1) shows that substantially less partisan paraphernalia was distributed to the electorate and that the parties also spent 'less nationally in 2001 than in 1997' (Butler & Kavanagh, 2002, p. 259). In the 2001 election there 'were just 30 published national voting intention polls over the four week campaign, compared to 47 in 1997' and only 69% of people received a leaflet through their door in 2001 in comparison to 89% in the previous election (Worcester & Mortimer, 2001).

If political parties and activists are not engaging the electorate, then it is logical that the election turnout be lower. Another reason which affected voters in 2001 was a sense of political 'disengagement' (Worcester, Mortimer, & Baines, 2005, p. 269). In short, politicians were neither liked nor trusted, Worcester remarks that 'The sad truth is that politicians, parties and the whole political process have allowed themselves to fall into disrepute' (Worcester & Mortimer, 2001). This attitude was fuelled by scandals such as the double resignation of Peter Mandelson in 1998 and 2001.

A poll published in 2007 showed that both Tony Blair and William Hague had negative scores of trustworthiness in 2000 (MORI, 2007). Lack of trust in politicians could be a factor to consider when discussing voter apathy as voters lose faith in politics and the political system. A combination of these factors led to a disastrous turnout in 2001, leaving many voters feeling disdain toward the political system.

One might assume that such a low turnout would inspire the electorate to make an effort in the next election but this would be incorrect, which will be addressed in the next section. 005 General Election Turnout in 2005 showed a mere 2. 1% increase to 61. 2% of the electorate. The negligible deviation in turnout could possibly be that ‘ the political circumstances in which the 2005 election was fought were too similar to that of 2001’ (Curtis, 2005, p. 128). Voters were once again convinced of an obvious victory and this is proved by the higher amount of voters in marginal constituencies.

The turnout was 66. 7% in marginal seats and 57. 4% in safe seats (Butler & Kavanagh, 2005, p. 49), showing that voters turned out in greater numbers when there was a close competition (this is also discussed with regards to the 2010 election later on). Trust in politicians was still low, but nevertheless improving. The MORI poll on trust shows gains for every key politician with the exception of Tony Blair. (MORI, 2007) This could be attributed to the Dr. Kelly scandal coupled with the lead up to military action Iraq which may have added more scepticism to the electorate. The small change in turnout is a disappointment as two developments in politics should have spurred the population to vote.

The first of these is the expansion of the postal vote. The postal vote, although available in 2001, was used more in the 2005 election. However, ‘ the increase in postal voting did little to enhance the level of turnout’ (Butler & Kavanagh, 2005, p. 250). Election statistics have shown little to no correlation between increased postal votes and voter turnout (Curtis, 2005, p. 128). This could be because it does not ‘ address the root cause of falling turnout, a lower determination on the part of electors to participate’
<https://assignbuster.com/why-did-turnout-decline-substantially-between-the-british-general-elections-of-1997-and-2001-essay-sample/>

(Worcester, Mortimer, & Baines, 2005, p. 68), in that it may facilitate voting but does not encourage it (methods of encouragement will be briefly mentioned toward the end of the essay).

Ease of voting therefore cannot account for the turnout statistics. One would also assume that the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq would lead to an increase in voters but alas we do not see this in the statistics, it did however 'reinforce the new valence issue agenda that gives priority to immigration, crime, terrorism and related national security concerns. , which goes a long way in explaining Labour's loss of popularity in 2005 as the Conservatives were rated higher on these issues. (Clark et al, 2005, p. 26) We can see the reasons behind the substantial drop in 2001 were not rectified by 2005, but there is hope in the slight rise which can be assigned to natural fluctuations or the eventfulness of Labours second term.

The most recent election saw a much closer competition and therefore, as we should expect, a higher turnout. 2010 General Election¹ The 2010 election saw an increase in voter turnout of 4 points to 65. %, a promising increase. The main reason attributed to this rise is the uncertainty of the outcome, along with economic worry. The majority of opinion polls 'pointed to a hung parliament' (Kavanagh & Cowley, 2010, p. 409) and as the importance of individual votes increases as the gap between parties decrease we see voters more inclined to vote as they feel that their ballot could make a difference. The televised debates between the 3 main party leaders were arguably the most influential factor in the 2010 election.

As previously discussed, a feeling of political disengagement leads to reduced voter turnout and the televised debates sought to increase political interest. In a small survey of community groups, the BBC found that the great majority thought that the debates were inciting debate and opening politics to the public, (BBC, 2010). A general increase in the use of new media could also be reason for turnout increase, for example 'viral' internet campaigning and the use of facebook as a political engagement tool, specifically targeting youth voters. (BBC, 2010).

This increased political activity can be seen as a reason for the increase in turnout. Once again we note that political scandal and current affairs place highly on the agenda for voters. The continuation of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan lead to an increase in voters wishing for withdrawal and the expenses scandal was important as people went to the ballot box to vote against the more abusive of MPs and we see that politicians involved in the expenses scandal were more likely to have been ousted in the election which shows that the scandal had an effect on voting behaviour.

The economic crisis was ranked as the most important factor influencing voters with 'the highest level of concern about the economy we have ever recorded' with it being the 'single most important issue' for 53% of the electorate. (MORI, 2010). Considering that the 'three in ten (29%) believe that the Conservative Party has the best policies on managing the economy' (MORI, 2010b) then voters are more inclined to vote as they believe a change in government is necessary. We can therefore see that due to a mixture of 'recession, scandal and war' (Kavanagh & Cowley, 2010, pp. 9-44) with the engaging nature of the televised debates.

<https://assignbuster.com/why-did-turnout-decline-substantially-between-the-british-general-elections-of-1997-and-2001-essay-sample/>

One reason for the generally low turnout of the past thirteen years can be assigned to a lack of youth participation which will be briefly discussed next. Young People and Voting In many democratic countries there is an observable decline in youth participation, engagement and voter turnout. In the UK, the percentage of 18-24 year olds that vote dropped to 39% in 2001 and then further to 37% in 2005, in contrast 70% of people aged 60+ were estimated to have voted in 2001. (The Electoral Commission , 2002, p.).

The reasons why young people do not vote are similar to the reasons explained in the above sections, however, there are many unique issues which affect young people that may explain the extremely low turnout over the past 13 years such as lack of incentive and alienation. Worryingly a ' high proportion of young people who professed to have no interest in politics at all (MORI Phase 1), while in the BBC poll of non-voters in 2001 77% stated that there was no point voting because ' it would not change a thing'. ' (The Electoral Commission , 2002, p. 0) and that ' Young people do not perceive voting as an important component of their life' (Print, 2010).

Alienation from political parties is also a key theme, for example the change in Liberal Democrat policy in 2010 with regards to tuitions fees has caused many young people to lose faith in politics and politicians. We can therefore define apathy, alienation and a lack of civic duty as a key reason for youth abstention at elections. Young people also see politicians as unrepresentative in that' After the 2001 general election, only five of the 659 MPs in the Commons were under 30; while the average age of MPs was 49. (The Electoral Commission , 2002, p. 7).

This leads us to believe that young people see politics as something reserved for the older generations; this would concur with the high turnout of the eldest sections of the population. The Electoral Commission also point to a 'cohort effect' by which politics is not seen as a 'cool' thing to be interested in, this has a snowball effect in that the more widespread this view becomes, the harder it is to reverse it and increase turnout.

From a rational choice perspective, there is very little incentive for young people to vote as they are usually not financially independent or at least less so than their elders who coincidentally are more likely to vote. This point is highlighted by the popularity of the Liberal Democrats amongst young people as they proposed to abolish university top up fees, this in fact shows that politicians are failing to propose policies that will please student voters. The question that still remains is how governments can increase voter turnout.

Conclusion and Further Thoughts It is all too easy to say that voter turnout is based on the perceived result of the election, i. e. closer contests have higher turnouts, but this assumption would mask the other factors at work. A continual betrayal of public trust by politicians through scandal and policy making have led to the alienation of the general public, the expansion of the media has given us access to the lives of our leaders and what it has revealed has tarred the political profession.

This alienation can sometimes encourage voters to the polling station in order to show their disappointment, but it can equally create democratic apathy. This apathy is cultivated in homes and peer groups so that the

younger generations are naturally predisposed to abstain from voting. The government's policies do little to target those who do not vote, especially young people who are underrepresented, once again resulting in a vicious circle.

As previously discussed, political parties sometimes do not make enough effort in campaigning and more often than not voting turnout is influenced by current affairs and valence politics. In closing, there needs to be serious thought into measures to increase turnout. Compulsory voting has increased turnout in Australia and proportional representation can lead to an increase in the value of an individual vote, making the electorate feel like they are making more of a difference. With the growth of the internet and new media innovations such as televised debates, we are left with an unclear view of the political future.