

A crisis of political participation in Britain politics essay



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Poor electoral turnout results have, for a while now, been considered to highlight a crisis of political participation in Britain. It is certainly true that the turnout of recent general elections is considerably lower than the turnout of the elections in the early post war period. Turnout was at an all time high in the 1951 general election but has subsequently reached an all time low in the 2001 election and has not significantly recovered since. The reasons for this fall are not fully known, though as stated, many perceive the low turnouts to be endemic of a crisis of participation in British politics. On closer inspection however, this diagnosis seems a little premature. After all, whilst high election turnouts are certainly desirable, there are a plethora of other forms of political activity through which members of the British public can participate politically. In the hope of painting a somewhat rosier picture of the health of political participation in Britain this essay shall consider both electoral turnout as well as other more unorthodox forms of political participation, such as protests and pressure groups when analysing whether there is indeed a crisis of political participation in Britain.

It seems logical though to start with an analysis of electoral turnout. Of all the forms of political participation, general election turnout is the one most readily identified with the issue, and if indeed the state of British political participation was based solely on this factor then the claims of a crisis may not seem exaggerated. The decline in turnout has been most evident from 1997 onwards, as all elections since (and including) that year have had lower turnout than any before it. Even before the nineties though election turnout was erratic and not particularly high, averaging around the 75% mark which was still a considerable way short of the highs achieved during the 1950s

when turnout registered closer to 85% of the electorate. At least though the 1997 General Election still achieved a turnout of above 70% of the electorate as the 2001 election recorded the lowest in living memory with turnout of below 60%[1]. Since 2001 turnout has increased slightly, first in the 2005 election and then again in the 2010 election, though both turnouts still failed to mobilise more than 65% of the electorate. The reasons for this striking decline in turnout are not fully known and nor is it likely they ever will be for certain but the reasons behind the decline must be explored in order to help ascertain the health of participation in British politics. The main reason for the decline in electoral turnout is undoubtedly the failure of politics to engage the electorate, but there are several possible ways this disillusionment could have come about. There have been arguments for the blame to be laid on both sides, the electorate and the parties themselves. Some claim it is the fault of the electorate for failing to engage with the parties, not trusting politicians and lacking an interest in politics whilst others have said in return that the political parties are converging to such an extent that there is no real choice for the electorate, sleazy politicians have bred mistrust and in such circumstances there is little reason to be interested in elections[2]. When one considers that it has been the politicians that have changed, not the electorate. Whatever the cause though, such disillusionment has led to a decrease in partisan attachment and to a political party[3] which has been declining alongside voting turnout since the 1950s. In 1995 the average age of a member of the Conservative party for example was 62[4], highlighting a staggering lack of involvement with the party by younger voters (the group least likely to vote). As voters are less likely to vote for a particular party out of a sense of duty or instinct, they are

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now more likely to consider the costs and benefits not only of voting for individual parties but also of voting at all. If the major parties are increasingly ideologically similar, which they appear to be becoming, a voter may feel that the cost of voting (driving to the polling station for example), as small as that is, is not worth the benefits. Ideological convergence of the main parties was certainly increasingly prevalent in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the Labour Party for example, under the banner of New Labour, moving further right in terms of policy than the Liberal Democrats[5].

Similarly rational voters may decide whether to vote or not based on how significant they feel their vote will be. This can be seen through the increased levels of turnout at elections in marginal seats. These rational choice theories align themselves readily with the 1997 and 2001 elections[6]. In both these elections the two main parties were ideologically very close with few major issues of divergence. At the same time, Labour were predicted to win both elections comfortably with little serious challenge from the Conservatives or any other party. As a result it seems increasing numbers of voters saw little point in voting and so decided to stay at home. This seems to be the most logical theory attempting to explain the decline in the number of voters in the elections of the past few decades. A good example to further back up this theory is the 1992 election, in which the press falsely forecast a close contest, instigating a spike in the number of voters as they felt it was more important they cast their vote[7]. Further proof of the more frequent occurrence of voters weighing up the costs and benefits of voting lies in the fact that studies have frequently shown that making the process of voting easier (being able to vote by post or by

changing elections to a weekend day for example) leads to a fairly significant increase in turnout. It is also worth noting that different social groups stand a much higher chance of voting than others. The elderly for example are the most likely to vote with young adults the least likely. White and middle and upper class members of the electorate are also more likely to vote than their peers[8].

Low turnout extends to other forms of election too, not purely general elections. Mayoral, local council and European elections all regularly receive even lower turnout than general elections. Turnout for the 1999 European parliament election for example was an astonishingly low 23.1%, the lowest of any of the 15 EU member states taking part[9]. Part of the reason for the low turnout in that particular election could be due to Britain's longstanding lukewarm attitude towards European involvement but regardless of this it is still an astonishingly low turnout. Once again the most logical explanation for this difficult to explain phenomenon is the rationality of the electorate. They most likely, subconsciously or otherwise, perceive a hierarchy of electoral importance. General elections they consider to be the most important and so draw the largest turnout. Mayoral, Local Council and European elections on the other hand are far less significant and consequently voting benefits seem important to the electorate, who feel that the benefits received from voting in such elections are negligible. To top it off, they often know very little about these minor elections (these kinds of election have significantly lower levels of press coverage than national elections for example).

It is clear then that electoral turnout is lower than would be hoped for in an established, liberal democracy such as the United Kingdom's. General
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election turnout from about 1997 onwards has been between ten to twenty percent lower than it was previously. Other forms of smaller election meanwhile have failed dramatically to capture the electorate's interest resulting in turnouts with on occasion lower than one in four possible voters voting. Now that the reasons for the general trend of a decline in turnout have been established as, at least for the majority of voters, a growing disillusionment with the electoral system (albeit for differing reasons) the issue of whether or not this constitutes a crisis of participation in British politics may be addressed. It is clear to see how the statistics of falling turnouts have been used to prophecies a crisis of participation. Ultimately it is impossible to deny that an electorate actively engaged in elections is desirable, after all elections are the showpiece of every democracy. The disenchantment it seems though stems from the way politics has changed over the years rather than the electorate. A political climate in which opposed ideologies, well respected politicians and close contest between parties exists is bound to encourage participation to a greater extent than the stale, sleazy and centrally converged current state of affairs. The current state of affairs then, could be said to be producing a crisis of participation in British elections, however, as stated earlier in this essay political participation is not restricted to elections alone, far from it, and there is evidence to suggest the electorate has moved from the traditional forms of participation as they have become increasingly disillusioned with them to more unorthodox forms of participation. This would suggest a change in the nature of participation, rather than something as drastic as a crisis.

One such form of unorthodox political participation that shows divergence of participation rather than crisis has been an increase in interest group memberships. As parties' ideologies have become increasingly centralised and the parties have created policies that they hope will offend the fewest voters, interest group memberships have grown as they are an effective alternative way through which people attempt to influence the government[10]. Many of these groups now have far greater memberships than political parties themselves. The National Trust for example, is a group with a membership of over 3, 500, 000 people. In the example of the National Trust, as a result of the large membership size and expertise of the organisation in the conservation of Britain's countryside and sites of historical importance the group has far more influence over the government than any of its individual members could on their own. The National Trust then is able to lobby and consult with the government on policies that its members share a similar view on[11]. Admittedly it has been argued that such groups are not always the most democratic or the most participatory. Once the members have paid their joining fee there is not necessarily an incentive to attempt any further kind of participation, instead the political processes are left to those further up the group's hierarchy. Similarly those further up the hierarchy often have more of an influence on policy direction than the 'cheque book' members as they are known (those that simply pay the annual fee). Nonetheless, members are not required to continue paying the fee and would stop doing so if the interests of the group began differing too greatly from the member's own. Furthermore, whilst 'cheque book' members may not be particularly actively involved with the group they sign up to, they will still most likely receive newsletters and updates and other

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such privileges at regular intervals as a result of being a member. This form of participation could be said to be greater than that required for general elections, which on average only occupy a couple of months of the electorate's interest once every four or five years[12]. The success of groups in encouraging participation can be seen through the fact that only around 2% of people were members of political parties in 2004 whilst almost a third were estimated to be involved with a group in that same year[13]. The groups are an effective platform from which to lobby the government once they are large enough in membership size and even before they are large enough they are able to arouse media and public support for their campaigns. As a result of this they play an important role in setting the political agenda and ensuring governments live up to their promises[14]. Increased membership of groups then it seems, has been a positive force on political participation in Britain. Indeed some have even envisaged them as the successors to political parties due to their role between the government and the public.

Political protest is another form of unorthodox involvement in politics that has been on the rise in Britain over the last few decades. There are several different types of activity that may be classed as protest, ranging from boycotts and petitions to blockades and illegal violence. Protests have been occurring for an increasing range of issues that traditionally may not have lead to protest, and as result the diversity of the demographic of those attending protests has changed[15]. Recently for example, there have been anti-war and anti-spending cut protests that have attracted the traditional left of centre and liberal members of the electorate whilst also recently there

have been protests under the organisation of the Countryside Alliance, whereby the majority of protesters are right wing and conservative[16]. In the case of the countryside alliance protests, part of the reason for the change in the usual demographic of protesters is perhaps due to the protester's perceived feeling of failure by the government of appealing to rural population's interests in favour of those from urban areas. If this is the case then it would show eagerness to continue being involved in politics by those protesting despite. There has also on occasion been a transnational approach to protest, especially those backed by environmental groups with border-spanning simultaneous boycotts for example[17]. It is important to note the limited successes of protest action though. After all, the anti Iraq war protest is estimated to have attracted more than a million people to the streets but failed to influence the government's decision. Nonetheless there have been some successes over the years, most recently the government's U-turn on plans to privatise Britain's forests. Regardless of the success of protests the increase in number and scale of protests, in which people taking part get actively involved shows once again the desire of the electorate to participate politically. Young people are also often particularly drawn to protests, perhaps due to their more radical nature and the greater feeling of direct action in comparison to other forms of participation. The evidence would suggest then that political protests are yet another route that members of the public are taking to participate in politics. Perhaps this is because they see it as more successful than voting or perhaps an increase in the scale and number of protests simply highlights the growing level of disillusionment of the electorate yet desire to continue participating with politics.

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Finally worth a mention is the rise in the level of cyber activism. With access to the internet now available to virtually everyone through some form (public libraries for example) political participation is becoming easier. It is now possible for example to send an email directly to your MP, respond to an online poll by your local council or sign a petition online from the comfort of your own home and all in matter of minutes. The increase in the ease of participating politically provided by the internet holds great potential.

Another feature of the internet that has been used to help increase participation is the ability to organise political events, be they small meeting groups or mass rallies at short notice[18]. This form of participation is also seen as particularly important in appealing to younger members of society, those who are the least involved with the traditional forms of political participation[19]. A growing familiarity amongst the electorate with the capabilities of the internet should continue to make participation easier and is likely to further attract those who are disillusioned with traditional forms of participation such as voting.

It seems obvious from the points covered in this essay that the claims of a crisis of political participation in Britain are misleading. It is true that election turnout is significantly lower in recent general elections in comparison to those of the early post war years but in order to claim a crisis of participation solely from electoral turnout statistics one is neglecting a vast array of other platforms through which citizens can become involved in politics. And whilst high electoral turnout would on the surface suggest a healthy degree of participation, in the past in it has in fact been due to strong partisan attachments which did not necessarily encourage the best form of

participation. These days the electorate are just as keen as ever to participate but are aware of the limitations of participating through voting. The political parties are too ideologically similar, offering no real alternative to each other and as a result the electorate are forced to express their wishes and demands through different channels such as through joining pressure groups and through activities such as protesting. Participation it seems is still present, just in different forms. The crisis, if there is one, is in the levels of electoral turnout but not, it seems, in the level of participation.