

# Analysing the effects of voting apathy in democracy politics essay



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What is apathy and does it threaten our democracy? During the course of this investigation, I argue that one's understanding of apathy is dependent entirely upon one's interpretation of the term democracy. Beginning with an explanation of the ways in which apathy is apparent within politics, I then attempt to address its causes, concluding that feelings of disconnection and disenchantment with political parties, along with social status and education, are the main determinants of political participation. After doing this, I examine elitist and participatory attitudes towards democracy, finding the concept of apathy within both schools of thought to be radically different.

The phenomenon of apathy within politics is usually seen to be expressed through a lack of participation during elections, a failure to engage in discussion and failure to contribute to matters of local significance. It is often measured by examining electoral turnout. Since the middle of the twentieth century many established liberal democracies have experienced declining electoral participation. Indeed, during the 2001 general election, the UK experienced its lowest level of turnout since the introduction of universal suffrage[1]. This situation has also been experienced throughout much of the Western world. As Hay (2007) suggests, democratic systems of government clearly require some form of participation in order to appear legitimate, with turnout rates having now fallen " low enough to give considerable cause for concern"[2]. Figure 1 (p. 11) represents the average turnout during European and American elections since 1945, whilst figure 2 (p. 12) displays the maximum and minimum levels of turnout over a similar period. As the figures show, to experience turnout of below 50% in any election raises many questions about the health of a democracy and the legitimacy of

electoral results. How can a government which claims to represent the people be seen as legitimate if more than half of those eligible to vote did not do so? Political apathy as represented through non-voting would seem to have created a crisis of legitimacy. However, to concentrate on electoral participation as the only measure of a healthy democracy is to ignore the many other measurements which characterise a democratic state, such as access to free elections, freedom of speech, or the independence of the judiciary. The way in which one views the significance of participation depends entirely upon which democratic theory is found more convincing, and is an issue which is addressed in greater detail later.

So why have participation rates declined so dramatically over recent decades? The Power Inquiry, a 2006 study into political disengagement within the UK, found the most significant factors to be a sentiment amongst voters that their views are simply ignored by politicians and that their opinions " are not taken sufficiently into account by the process of political decision-making"[3], along with the widely held belief that the main political parties are too similar in character and lacking firm beliefs. Further to this, it was discovered that a lack of understanding or knowledge of political debate and the workings of democracy also increased non-participation[4].

A growing distrust of politicians and of politics in general within Western populations has also fostered apathetic sentiment. Within Britain especially, this " corrosive cynicism"[5]has been fuelled by decades of sex and political scandals, corrupt practices and abuse of the parliamentary system. Indeed, the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey found severe distrust of politicians had risen from only 11% in 1987 to 40% today[6]. It is perhaps no <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-the-effects-of-voting-apathy-in-democracy-politics-essay/>

coincidence that declining participation has occurred during a period where distrust of politicians has risen.

Social status and education also play significant roles in determining political participation. Lower class identifiers have historically felt less inclined to participate, either electorally, through conversation with peers, or through membership of an organisation. The link is confirmed by Beeghley (1986), who provides data suggesting a positive correlation between income and participation[7]. However, Hillygus (2005) finds that it is education which plays the decisive role as a determinant of future political participation[8]. She suggests that in the majority of analyses, education remains the strongest determinant of participation even when measured against other socio-economic factors such as class, gender or race[9]. Figure 3 (p. 13) demonstrates the relationship between verbal SAT scores (US) and expected future levels of political participation, whilst figure 4 (p. 14) shows the pattern repeated, but concerning voting only.

We have outlined some possible causes of apathy, finding that non-participation has increased dramatically over recent decades. But is this phenomenon harmful to democracy? As touched upon earlier, the answer to this question depends entirely upon how one understands the meaning of the term 'democracy'.

The elitist theory of democracy, centred on a faith in the merits of representative democracy, is rooted in the belief that an 'enlightened' few should control public policy- elitist theorists believing that 'the masses' are too uneducated or uninterested to exercise judgement. Indeed, Bachrach

(1980) states that " the elite is enlightened, thus its policy is bound to be the public interest"[10]. Rather than concentrating upon participatory opportunities to assess the health of a democracy, elitists view access to elections and the responsiveness of those elected as the key measure of a democracy[11]. All that is required to validate an electoral result is at least some degree of participation (voting). A degree of apathy is to be welcomed, as it is assumed that those who do vote are those with enough knowledge to do so. Elitist theorists such as Schumpeter argue against the classical conception of mass participation, believing that "[m]any decisions of fateful importance are of a nature that makes it impossible for the public to experiment with them"[12]. Matters of national importance, then, are better resolved by elites. Direct participation is not necessary, or desirable, from the public. A central argument of the elitist school is the belief that some measure of apathy within a society actually helps strengthen democracy by stabilising the system of elitist rule. Bachrach (1980) provides a succinct critique of elitist thinking regarding apathy;

"... the ordinary man still plays a role in the system since he has the freedom to vote, to bring pressure upon political elites, and to attempt himself to rise to an elite position. But by and large he does, and is expected to, remain relatively passive - in fact the health of the system depends upon it. For if he becomes too active...political equilibrium is thrown out of balance"[13].

Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee (1954) add to this by suggesting that low participation rates help established political parties (elites), by preventing the fragmentation of votes towards smaller parties, which would otherwise gain popularity as a result of greater participation. Additionally, " low interest  
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provides manoeuvring room for political shifts necessary for a complex society in a period of rapid change"[14]. Underpinning this is the belief that all societies will inevitably come to be dominated by small minorities, even those which have experienced proletarian revolution (such as the post-revolutionary Soviet Union). As Michels would have it, " society cannot exist without a 'dominant' or 'political' class"[15]. Further to this, Dye & Zeigler (2009) believe that a strong democracy does not depend upon mass participation, stating that 'the masses' tend to hold antidemocratic beliefs. They contend that an increase in participation would undermine democracy[16], claiming it to be "...the irony of democracy that democratic ideals survive because the masses are generally apathetic and inactive...all that is necessary is that they fail to commit themselves actively to antidemocratic movements"[17]. Elitists, then, see apathy as essential as a means of shoring up their dominant position over the masses - they certainly do not see it as a threat to our democracy.

Contrary to the position of the elitists, participatory democrats champion the concept of direct democracy as opposed to the representative system present in liberal democracies today. They see existing institutional structures as being designed to discourage mass participation, wishing instead to foster a situation whereby citizens actively attend meetings, deliberate, discuss and "...participate' in the executive arm of government and the workplace". For participatory democrats, " The process of taking part becomes integral to democracy...the decisive test of a democracy is its capacity to encourage its population to play an active role in its government"[18]. This is clearly in stark contrast to the elitist understanding

of democracy, which views any form of direct involvement by citizens, with the exception of voting, as unnecessary and potentially dangerous.

Pateman (1970) believes that it is a lack of participatory institutions which prevents political engagement in a representative system. Citing empirical studies, she argues that political 'efficacy' and an increased willingness to participate are best fostered through direct participation at a local or workplace level, arguing that "...the experience of participation in some way leaves the individual better psychologically equipped to undertake further participation in the future"[19]. Bowler & Donovan (2002) confirm this link, by suggesting that American states which make use of direct citizen 'initiatives' help to increase the efficacy of their populations[20].

Barber (1984) and Pitkin & Shumer (1982) see the main component of a 'strong democracy' as active participation by citizens rather than through a reliance on representatives[21]22. Barber argues that citizens should be free to make political decisions " not necessarily at every level and in every instance"[23], but often enough and in areas where significant issues which may affect them are to be considered. He advocates the creation of institutions designed to facilitate a 'civic participation', with the aim of fostering discussion, deliberation and eventually the formation of legislation - the process of which he refers to as " common work". He goes on to suggest that under the present form of liberal democracy, voters do not 'participate' in the governing of a country at all - the act of voting simply serving as a method by which to select various elites. It is only once masses " start deliberating, acting, sharing, and contributing, they cease to become masses and become citizens. Only then do they 'participate'"[24]. It is evident that <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-the-effects-of-voting-apaty-in-democracy-politics-essay/>

apathy is certainly not a desirable feature within the participatory democratic interpretation of democracy. Any amount of apathy within a polity would create a situation whereby those who did actively participate would find themselves becoming a form of 'elite'- those unwilling to contribute simply pass their responsibility to another, trusting them to make the right decisions. Evidently, this is not much better than the representative status quo. Apathy, then, is a symptom of a 'weak' democracy, as the role of participation is paramount to its success.

But should participation be defined as active involvement by the public, as participatory democrats argue, or is the simple act of voting enough? If participation is taken as meaning direct citizen involvement, then apathy is certainly a threat to legitimacy. If democracy is 'government by the people', how can a result hope to be considered legitimate in a situation where less than fifty percent of a population express an opinion? If however the elitist approach is followed and participation is limited to voting only, then to a degree the public does indeed take part in the democratic process via the choosing of the elites which are to lead them. It is through the act of voting during elections that a government can claim legitimacy. As long as there is some degree of participation, this is all that matters. As such, apathy should not be seen as a threat to the legitimacy of a result. Clearly, the gulf between elitists and participatory democrats is vast. They hold diametrically opposed ideas as to the consequence of apathy within a democratic society.

As we have seen, the phenomenon of apathy within democracies is a highly contentious subject - perhaps "essentially contested"[25]. We have found that apathy presents itself within democratic societies most significantly in <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-the-effects-of-voting-apaty-in-democracy-politics-essay/>



the form of non-participation, noting that turnout rates have declined dramatically since their peak in the middle of the twentieth century. We've looked at the causes of apathy, discovering that social status and education along with a cynicism and distrust of politicians and the sense of remoteness and disconnection from the legislative process also strongly contribute to apathetic sentiment within a population.

In regards to whether or not apathy 'threatens' democracy, it is possible to conclude both ways by differentiating between both representative and participatory democracy. Representative democracy is strengthened by the existence of apathy and relies upon it to maintain political stability. Conversely, direct or participatory democracy is threatened by apathy, as it requires widespread interaction from the public. Because elitist theorists are describing the present state of liberal democracies, it is hard to conclude that apathy can be seen as a threat to the legitimacy of government - a party still wins, regardless of turnout. It is only once democracy is viewed in terms of public participation that the issue of apathy becomes a threat, undermining the very meaning of the word. In short, apathy threatens the concept of direct democracy, but it doesn't threaten the existing system of representative democracy, it merely strengthens it. The answer to this question depends solely upon which theory of democracy one finds more convincing.