

How democratic is the uk political system?



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The decline in political participation in the UK over recent years, particularly the continuous decrease in forms of partisan aligned involvement in formal processes and initiations of democracy, such as general elections, has prompted a range of new proposals aimed at tackling political disengagement. The effectiveness of these various methods by which participation and democracy in the UK can be strengthened will be evaluated and examined in this essay.

One method proposed in response to political disengagement is to increase the frequency of available polling stations, thereby increasing the proximity between the polling stations and people's homes, as well as the variety of locations, including places such as shopping centres, which are frequently visited by the public on a daily basis. By doing this, it would provide more people with the opportunity to go and cast their votes, by making available a more practical and easy option, particularly for those on a tight and busy schedule.

Furthermore, since people have long hours during the working week, or have long commutes that disincentivise going to a polling station, recommendations such as weekend voting could also increase the number of potential voters, by offering them more time to vote, and at a time when they would likely be less tired and more amenable to the idea of going to their local voting booth. Another option is to allow votes to be taken anywhere, if all polling stations have an online connection to a central register.

The advantage of this, aside from increasing the practicality of voting, is that, with the vote being recorded on a computerised register, multiple votes from the same elector can be prevented. However, by increasing the availability of polling stations, the cost of administration also needs to be taken into account, especially if doing this will not have a profound effect, in which case it may not be worth the money and effort, which would be used elsewhere. Also, the difficulty in estimating the security of a system of voting with a central computerised register is another thing that must be considered.

Furthermore, other suggestions to combat a lack of political participation include ways of making voting appear more appealing to the public. One way would be to designate Election Day to a special public holiday, thereby making the nature of the event seem more exciting, as well as garnering interest in politics and perhaps less apathy. However, those against such an idea, argue that a public holiday precisely for elections would cause a halt in the economy and day-to-day business, since many would not be working and instead by engaging in more leisurely activities.

It therefore may not be worth holding a public holiday for elections given the inconveniences incurred, particularly since it may not necessarily guarantee a surge in the numbers voting. The other way by which voting could be made more attractive is by including a 'none of the above' option on ballot papers, since one more option and thereby another viewpoint is also considered in such a formal political process. Those who, whatever reason, do not politically align themselves with any particular party are also given a chance to express their opinions.

Although, even though this may generate an increase in the number of people turning up at polling booths, one would not be wrong to query whether many would actually bother in making the journey and waiting in line just to express their disapproval of all that was on offer. Furthermore, the inclusion of such an option, despite possibly raising turnout figures, actually encourages political abstention, since their vote carries no relevance to the aim of the process, which is to use public votes to determine which constituent holds majority consent.

Also recommended as a way of increasing participation in democratic processes in the UK, is the introduction of compulsory voting. This aims to increase the election turnout with obligatory ballot casting, so to say that failure to appear at a polling station on Election Day would be made legally punishable, such as through a small fine, like the current Australian system. Proponents argue that an increased turnout with this method would make the majority party or coalition that forms the government appear more legitimate and therefore have a positive domino effect on society.

It would also lead to an increase in political awareness and education because, once people are compelled, it is logical that they would make a greater effort to cast an informed vote. Moreover, an increase in politically aware citizens with a wealth of knowledge could imply an increase in levels of active participation in other forms of political life. Furthermore, it ensures that public responsibility is not shirked, as well as creating an enhanced sense of community.

In addition, compulsory voting can be said to reduce the role of money in campaigns, as well as counteracting negative campaigning by some political parties, since there is little to be gained from sly tactics aimed purely and persuading opposition voters to stay at home. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that this method also has significant drawbacks, namely the limit on freedom, which is widely seen as a constitutional right.

The right to vote can also contain the right not to vote and be apolitical and opponents of this method argue that, just because one does not vote for a particular political party, does not mean they are apathetic or lack political knowledge and insight, but are merely unconvinced with the political candidates or discouraged from voting due to a lack of trust in politicians, only heightened by the recent string of expenses scandals.

Furthermore, some people believe that if a voter's will is to stay at home, then the turnout must reflect this and such a system would hide rather than solve the problem, allowing the government to ignore important implementing measures to actually tackle the root causes of voter disengagement.

Additionally, besides from an increased probability in ' donkey voting', whereby people would hastily cast an uninformed vote, with a bias in favour of the top candidate on the ballot, many have argued that such a system would not guarantee absolute co-operation and would only serve to cause complications, increased anger at the government and give rise to other problems. Another way which has been proposed as a means of reducing

political disengagement is incentive voting, where people will be given an 'incentive' to vote.

The three main ways of rewarding people for voting are: a flat rate payment, perhaps ? 5 to ? 10 for each voter; a national lottery with a very exclusive number of large prizes, generally cash; a constituency-based lottery, in which one particular voter from each constituency wins a substantial prize, probably in relation to the size of the electorate. Proponents of incentive voting argue that these methods of rewarding are good because, giving people money for getting involved as opposed to demanding participation provides a generally more pleasant and positive aura around the whole voting process.

Furthermore, such a tactic would not stigmatise non-voters, instead working on the premise that if one chooses not to vote, it is their own personal loss. On the other hand, many believe that casting a ballot for pure personal gain, which is essentially what incentive voting can be seen to promote, is arguably worse than complete non-involvement. Also, incentive voting could lead to an increase in ill-considered votes, especially for those at the top of the ballot paper, as one is more likely to turn up and hastily cast their vote, if they know that they will possibly gain cash prize.

Furthermore, since no such concept of shoe leather cost, as there would be under a fines system, people have no reason to cast an informed and proper vote. Another argument against this system is that it is disproportionately attractive to the poor, who would value the incentive offer more than their richer counterparts. In addition, such a system would not work on all citizens

who at present are generally politically disengaged, because many of the rich would not feel it necessary to turn up and neither would those who find the prospect of gambling unattractive.

Therefore, many feel that the success of such a method is questionable in actually attracting a considerable number of voters, whatever their background, as well as the great levels of cost involved and difficulty of organisation. Additionally, some have pushed for postal voting to become more typical, alongside the option of visiting polling booths. By enabling people to cast a vote via the post makes voting easier and more practical, thereby increasing voter engagement and making it more widespread, particularly since it provides greater opportunities for elderly or disabled people, who cannot easily access a polling station, to vote.

Also, the popularity of postal voting is apparent in statistics taken from a recent poll conducted after the all-postal pilots in the 2003 elections, with 67% agreeing that this is an improvement and only 5% who expressed discontent with the system. Furthermore, at the 2005 general election, 12.1% of the UK electorate voted by post, three times greater than that in 2001. This growing trend in postal voting shows public support and consensus of the system, illustrating that it really could be a viable option in tackling political disengagement. While there are benefits to postal voting, the negatives to the system are also significant.

Firstly, there is also a reliance on the postal service to make sure the votes do not get lost; if they were to be misplaced before they could be counted it could have a significant effect on the outcome of the election and render the

process ineffective in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, postal voting does not act as a solution to all factors of non-voting; it will not make the electorate any more informed or likely to participate in voting, or reconnect the politically disengaged, only the idle and lazy who are unwilling to make the journey to the polling booths.

Also, many have argued that it is difficult to be certain that the person casting the vote is actually the person the vote is registered to and impossible to guarantee that the vote was cast secretly and not under duress. Therefore, given the widespread evidence of fraud and inherent risks of security and secrecy that cannot realistically be overcome, at least not anytime soon, many are firmly against postal voting becoming more widely used. Furthermore, with the UK being at the forefront of technological advancement, E-voting is widely seen as the potential next step in the modernisation of political participation through voting.

This system of voting incorporates modern technology through text, the internet, as well as via digital television. Even at polling stations, touch screen voting machines and electronic scanners could be used to speed up the process. This would greatly encourage participation amongst the young, which at present are the group least likely to vote, and technologically savvy, as well as appealing to the general public because of the diminished shoe-leather costs compared to going to a polling station.

Those who are for E-voting argue that online voting would provide better links about the vote and information on how votes should be based, thereby giving the public more political knowledge, thus leading to informed

decisions. The increase in political awareness from such a system can also be seen as a way of inspiring participation in other fields of politics.

Furthermore, since all votes are logged in electronically, proponents argue that the counting process is more or less instant and thereby quicker and more efficient.

Although, E-voting has a potential to increase the number of voters, there is also a very high potential for fraud. For example, resourceful hackers, and not the registered voters, could possibly determine the outcome, particularly since the act of conducting an election on the internet may be seen as a challenge to some hackers. Furthermore, it is debatable whether the high levels of security demanded have yet been reached and there is also no definite way of ensuring that the vote was cast in secret and without undue pressure.

Those opposed to E-voting have also argued the lack of success in causing a considerable increase to turnout in E-voting pilots. Some people, including political parties such as the Liberal Democrats, argue that political disengagement, particularly amongst younger people, can be addressed by lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. Politicians, such as Nick Clegg, have argued that if at 16 you are legally able to leave home, begin a family, be in full time employment, join the army and therefore die for your country; and make important decisions about your future, then you should be given the right to vote.

Aside from some believing this to be the correct and moral thing to do, giving 16-17 year olds the right to vote means you are providing them with

full citizen rights and in having these rights they will feel more respected and exercise their right to vote. Denying them the vote would give them - and society as a whole - the impression that the government sees their views as invalid and that voting is not the way to express their opinions.

However, some are opposed to this, not only because it is unconventional and questionable that the UK is ready for such a historic change to our political and democratic system, but also because not all youths are equally as passionate about politics and given the vote, would use it. Therefore some argue that this idea would not work to significantly increase general participation. Nevertheless, given that, with citizenship education, youth engagement campaigns, 24-hours news and high-speed interactive media, we in the UK have the most politically aware generation ever, many see lowering the voting age as a worthy enough step to take.

Furthermore, proponents for lowering the voting age argue that the benefits would extend to other forms of political participation. This is because youths will have the opportunity to access a wealth of political knowledge and thereby may be motivated to be politically active in other ways, such as joining both official government and independent organisations. Additionally, some have argued for the government to make direct democracy more prominent, such as by holding referendums on key political issues more frequently than in the past.

The agreed referendum on the voting system for general elections in the UK in April 2011 is an example of the actions that the government is taking to get more of the public politically involved. Proponents of greater

opportunities for direct democracy argue that political engagement is encouraged through public knowledge that they have a direct say in the decision making process and could very well influence the outcome of important decisions. Thus, prompting more to care and increase their political awareness and involvement and be less apathetic.

In conclusion the methods examined can all, to some extent, be described as strengthening participation in the UK. Methods involving an increased availability of voting locations, as well as other enabling other voting, such as E-voting and via post, are all practical solutions to general apathy and laziness when it comes to voting in elections in the UK. Such methods do not however address all sections of society, namely the indefinitely apolitical.

Furthermore, scheme such as compulsory voting and incentive voting, although increasing election turnout figures on paper, cannot be seen as representing a genuine desire to be politically active and again, the additional voters drawn from such schemes are, for the most part, not very likely to engage in other forms of political participation. In addition, although the notion for making Election Day a public holiday may seem an appealing solution, it is debatable such a scheme could work.

And the opportunity cost to the economy will be another factor for politicians to consider. Also apparent when examine the proposed schemes is the prospective monetary cost of implementing them, particularly the incentive voting and E-voting, which includes the high costs of technology. Another issue to be addressed is whether or not it is sensible to lower the voting age

to 16, given that much of the younger tier of voters (18-25) who are able to vote, are the least likely group to do so.

Furthermore, on the topic of referendums increasing involvement in democratic processes is dubious, since turnout in general, has not been particularly strong. Therefore, all the methods vary in their effectiveness of strengthening public participation in political and democratic procedures. Even though every approach does, to some degree, increase engagement, they all have costs, whether in relation to practicality or money, which need to be considered.