

A Citizen's Duty

Voter inequality and the case for compulsory turnout

Emily Keaney and Ben Rogers

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30-32 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7RA
Tel: 020 7470 6100 Fax: 020 7470 6111 www.ippr.org
Registered Charity No. 800065

Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Executive summary	5
Introduction	9
Chapter 1 Who turns out: the evidence	10
General elections	10
Local elections	13
Registration	14
Democracy deserts	14
Chapter 2 The causes of inequality and decline	16
Party identification	16
Interest in politics	17
Political efficacy	18
The duty to vote	18
Decline in civic organisations and local political campaigning	19
Explaining turnout decline: rational choice and norm-based models	19
Chapter 3 Tackling the problem	21
The role of non-partisan advocates	21
Electoral reform	21
Frequency of elections	22
Ease of voting	23
Registration	23
Incentives to vote	24
Summary	25
Chapter 4 Compulsory turnout	26
Compulsory turnout, not compulsory voting	26
Countries with compulsory turnout	26
The impact of compulsory turnout	27
Compulsory turnout and election campaigns	29
The history of compulsory turnout	29
Objections to compulsory voting	29
Implementing compulsory turnout	31
Public attitudes	31
Building support for compulsory turnout	31
Compulsory registration	32
Ensuring compliance	33
Case study: compulsory voting in Australia	34
Conclusions and recommendations	35
References	36

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‘Time and again we find younger groups and those groups categorized as socially excluded to be the least politically engaged.’

Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society *Audit of Political Engagement 3*, 2006

Executive summary

Turnout and turnout inequality

Turnout in both national and local elections has fallen dramatically in the last decade – the 2001 and 2005 elections recorded the lowest turnout (59 and 61 per cent respectively) since the advent of universal suffrage in 1918.

As turnout has fallen, so the difference between the rates at which different groups vote has increased. Men and women vote at approximately the same rates, but older people and richer or better educated people tend to vote in much higher numbers than young and poor or less qualified people. Some groups are now much more influential at the ballot box than others.

- The gap between the rates at which the youngest and older age groups vote has grown consistently since the 1970s. While in 1970 there was an 18 point difference between the 18-24 age group turnout rate and the 65-74 age group rate, by 2005 the gap was 40 points.
- 75 per cent of people aged 65 and up voted in the last election compared to only 37 per cent of young people. In other words, for every two older people who voted in the last general election, only one younger person voted.
- Although there has been some decline in turnout among all income categories since 1964, the decline is most rapid for those in lower income groups. Moreover, whereas turnout increased in 2005 among better-off groups, it continued to fall among low earners. Whereas in the 1960s there was around a seven-point difference in turnout between top quartile earners and bottom quartile earners, this figure had increased to around 13 points in 2005.
- Turnout at local elections has fallen by around a tenth since the 1980s, with the result that little more than a third of registered electors turnout to vote in most local elections. If anything, 'turnout inequality' is greater at local than national elections.
- Many racial or minority ethnic groups vote at lower rates than their white counterparts, but race and ethnicity are not generally as important in shaping turnout behaviour as age or income/educational attainment.

Turnout tends to be lowest in poor inner city areas where there is a high proportion of young people.

- Typically only about 80 per cent of the population are registered to vote in these areas, and even in national elections only around 40-50 per cent of those registered turn out to vote.
- Taking Peckham and Camberwell, a typical inner London constituency, as an example, we estimate that roughly 40,000 people who could have voted at the last general election in that constituency did not vote – 58.4 per cent of all citizens. This is significantly higher than the official non-voting rate of 48 per cent.

Factors behind low turnout and increased turnout inequality

A range of factors seem to have combined to drive down turnout and increase turnout inequality. The relatively 'low-stakes' character of recent elections is perhaps the most important of these: the main political parties fought on quite similar platforms and in each case one party (Labour) was identified as a clear front runner. At the same time we have seen:

- Declining identification with political parties, especially among low turnout groups. In 1964 17 out of 20 people had at least a fairly strong identification with a political party. By 2005 the figure had fallen to less than 10 out of 20.
- While interest in politics has remained steady overall, it has declined among young people and those from lower socio-economic groups. In 1994 there was a 10 point difference between young people and old people's interest in politics but this had risen to a 25 point difference by 2003.
- There has been a decline in a sense of political efficacy among low turnout groups. Young poor people are particularly likely to feel powerless. Whereas only four per cent of young people from the wealthiest households (above £50,000 earnings per year) believe 'it's not really worth voting', 15 per

cent of young people from the poorest households (below £15,000 earnings per year) believe this (Park *et al* 2004).

- There has been a gradual decline in the belief in the duty to vote since World War II. This decline has been particularly pronounced among young people in the last decade. In 1998 36 per cent of young people thought it was their duty to vote. By 2003 the figure had fallen to 31 per cent.
- People are much more likely to vote if they are canvassed. But the decline in local political party and trade union activity, and the tendency for the parties to focus their campaigning on a small number of marginal seats, mean people are much less likely now to be canvassed than they were.
- People are much more likely to vote if they live in a place where other people vote and expect them to vote – where there is an established norm of voting. There is good reason to think that this norm has declined in some areas – especially relatively deprived areas with high turnover and low social capital.

Tackling low turnout

A comprehensive strategy to tackle declining voter turnout and increasing voter inequality will need to work at many different levels at once. National and local government, schools, colleges, public services, voluntary groups and private businesses all have a role to play. Such a strategy will need to find ways of:

- Further reducing poverty and exclusion
- Improving the standing of political parties
- Reinvigorating local political parties (perhaps through state funding for local political activity)
- Encouraging civil participation and political deliberation
- Better supporting people who do get involved.

These, however, are ambitious and long-term measures. At the same time, relatively practical, easy-to-achieve reforms to the ways elections are conducted (including enforcing compulsory turnout) can make a substantial difference to turnout levels.

The following measures in particular can help boost turnout:

- Weekend voting
- Encouraging and enabling electoral officers to take a more active role in promoting registration and turnout
- Making polling stations more accessible, by moving them to places like supermarkets
- allowing people to register after an election has been announced.

A move to a more proportional voting system for Westminster and local elections is likely to have only a marginal influence on turnout levels.

Compulsory turnout

The most effective measure to increase turnout would be the introduction of compulsory turnout. Compulsory turnout is much more common than is generally recognised. Over 30 countries oblige their citizens to turn out for either national, regional or local elections, including Australia, Belgium, Greece and Switzerland.

Countries with compulsory turnout have much higher voting rates than those without it:

- On average countries with compulsory turnout have 15 per cent higher turnout than countries where voting is voluntary.
- Turnout in Australia has averaged 94.5 per cent in the 24 elections since 1946. In Belgium turnout has averaged 92.7 per cent in 19 elections since 1946.
- Turnout inequality increased significantly when the Netherlands abolished compulsory turnout laws in 1970.

Though compulsory turnout is often known as ‘compulsory voting’, this is a misnomer. Countries with this measure do not oblige people to vote for a party or candidate, merely to turn up at a polling station or fill in a postal ballot form. Some countries give voters the opportunity to abstain formally, by including a ‘none of the above’ option on the ballot.

Compulsory turnout not only increases turnout, it also cuts down the cost of political campaigning and encourages the political parties to engage with those groups least interested in politics or most dissatisfied with the political system. Where turnout is voluntary, most political parties focus on motivating their supporters to vote, rather than winning the support of undecided voters. Where turnout is compulsory, however, parties can generally rely on their supporters turning out. This can reduce the cost of electioneering and/or encourage parties to concentrate on winning over people who do not support any political party – people who often feel alienated from the political system.

Compulsory turnout does not violate any important liberties. Compared to some of the obligations the state imposes on its citizens, the obligation to turn out every couple of years is a very light one.

If compulsory turnout increases voting rates, it is not merely through threatening to punish those who do not vote, but through establishing that there is a duty to vote and upholding ‘voting norms’.

Sanctions for failing to turn out vary. Some countries with compulsory turnout laws do not provide any sanctions against not turning out. Others impose modest fines. In Australia the fine for failing to turn out or offer a valid reason for not turning out is AU\$20 – about £8.

Winning the argument for compulsory turnout

The little polling that has been done on the public’s attitude to compulsory turnout suggests that people are divided on the measure, with about half the population inclined to support it and the other half opposing it. The public, however, has had little opportunity to hear the arguments for and against compulsory turnout and their views are unformed. At the same time, politicians and the media could easily make political capital out of compulsory turnout, creating a caricature of those who support it as authoritarian or nannying.

The following could help test public support for compulsory turnout, win the public over to it, and help counter criticisms of authoritarianism:

- Do further research on public attitudes to compulsory turnout – into how people think about and weigh the arguments for and against it. This will make it much easier to develop proposals in keeping with public values and attitudes, and, once developed, to win support for them.
- Pilot compulsory turnout in a small number of local elections.
- Create a citizens assembly – a public inquiry conducted by ordinary citizens appointed at random – to explore the case for and against compulsory turnout and put forward recommendations in relation to it.
- Undertake not to introduce compulsory turnout unless it is backed by a clear majority in a referendum.

Were compulsory voting to be introduced, government would have to monitor its development very closely, ensuring that sanctions for non-voting did not heavily discriminate against the very groups the measure is meant to support – those that currently turn out in very low numbers.

Compulsory turnout: our conclusions and recommendations

Over recent years turnout has fallen and the difference in the rate at which different groups turn out has grown dramatically. Some groups – mainly older and richer groups – now exercise much more influence through the ballot box than younger and poorer groups.

Compulsory turnout is the most effective way of addressing low turnout and high turnout inequality. A comparatively simple reform, it does not violate any important liberties and it could probably alone reverse the trends of recent years and return turnout to post-war levels or higher.

Compulsory turnout is popular in countries that have it. The British public appears to have mixed views about it, with about half in favour of it and half against it.

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Compulsory turnout can reduce the cost of political campaigning and/or encourage political parties to focus on winning the support of undecided and alienated voters.

For the above reasons, we believe the time has come for a serious debate on compulsory turnout.

We favour a system that would make turnout compulsory, while giving voters the right to endorse a 'none of the above' option on the ballot paper.

We believe that compulsory turnout should only be introduced if the public support it in a referendum.

We favour a system that would impose very modest fines on people who do not vote in national, regional or local elections and do not present a valid reason for not voting. Valid reasons for not voting would include being unwell, being out of the country, having to look after someone who was unwell, and having unavoidable work or family commitments.

Introduction

This report focuses on a very significant but relatively neglected challenge to our democracy: inequality in voter turnout.

Many people are aware that turnout has declined dramatically in recent elections – indeed turnout in the last two elections was lower than in any peace time elections in modern times. And this of course has provoked a great deal of public debate and some soul searching among the political class.

Yet much of the discussion assumes that what we have witnessed is an overall decline in turnout across social groups. Politicians, commentators and policymakers, outside the small world of electoral specialists, have yet to appreciate what we argue is the really significant aspect of this development: that while voting has held up relatively well across some (mainly better off) groups, it has fallen steeply among other (largely worse off or more vulnerable) groups. We have seen, in other words, not just a fall in voter turnout, but a rise in turnout inequality.

An across-the-board fall in electoral turnout would have been a troubling phenomenon even without this added dimension. If nothing else, democratically elected governments depend for their legitimacy on voters turning out to vote for them. Low turnout is likely to undermine public support for the political system and governmental effectiveness. But a rise in turnout inequality is arguably much more troubling. It suggests that, for whatever reason, certain parts of the electorate do not feel that they have a stake in their democracy – a good indication that society is not treating those groups fairly. Worse still, it threatens to give those who do vote unfair influence over the political system.

In contrast to most forms of political engagement, voting requires very little by way of money or education. For this reason it should give those without financial or other resources a chance to exercise some sway over political decisions. As the eminent historian and social scientist Barrington Moore has remarked, democracy has historically been a weapon of ‘the poor and the many against the rich and the few’ (Shapiro 1999: 30). Yet where the powerful vote and powerless stay away, there is a real danger that elections, instead of serving as a check on the interests of the powerful, will merely offer another route for their advancement.¹

Against this background, this paper aims to explore recent developments in voter turnout, and the dimensions of voter inequality, before examining measures that could address these. As we argue, any comprehensive strategy to tackle voting decline requires action on a number of fronts, including reducing social exclusion, improving registration, further cleaning up of the political system, doing more to engage young people in politics and increasing local political campaigning.

We also argue, however, that one relatively modest and easily achievable reform – the introduction of compulsory turnout – could provide a highly effective means of increasing voting levels, especially among groups who currently participate least. We recognise that this is a controversial suggestion – many people are instinctively opposed to making voting compulsory – and we stress that the reform should only be introduced if the public can be won over to it. Voters must be allowed to decide the issue for themselves – ultimately through a referendum.

Yet, as we suggest, obliging people to enter a polling station or fill out a postal voting form every couple of years hardly represents a major infringement of freedom. Compulsory turnout has wide support in the many countries that have it. And the benefits to British democracy are potentially profound.

1. Some social scientists have questioned whether voting really has much effect on anything, giving scholarly support to the old saying ‘If voting changed anything they would abolish it’. But reviewing academic debate on this, Arend Lijphart concluded: ‘the overall weight of the evidence strongly supports the view that who votes and how people vote matter a great deal’ (Lijphart 1997: 5.). Hill (2002a) provides further evidence that politicians are considerably more attentive to the demands of voting groups like senior citizens and the middle classes than to the needs of those who abstain.

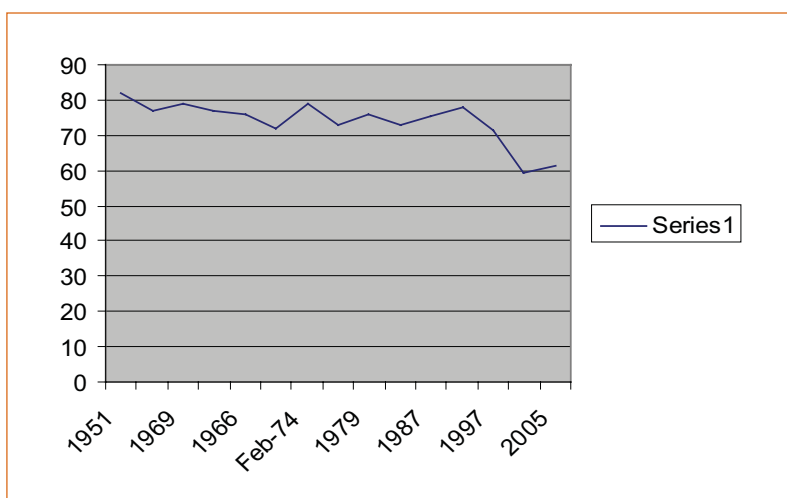
Chapter 1 Who turns out: the evidence

General elections

As stated in the introduction, much of the debate around voting has focused on concern about falling turnout. Unlike the international trends, where the decline began in the 1980s (IDEA 2004), the turnout in the UK remained relatively stable until the 1992 election. But then the fall was dramatic – from 77 per cent in 1992, to 71 per cent in 1997, to a dismal 59 per cent in 2001. 2005 saw a very marginal two point increase to 61 per cent, but this was against a background of a more closely fought election and a series of drives and innovations – most notably postal voting – aimed at boosting turnout.

To put it into (stark) international perspective, the UK decline of 18 per cent across the three consecutive elections of 1992, 1997 and 2001 was ‘far greater than the largest declines across three consecutive elections experienced in other established liberal democracies in Europe, North America, or the Commonwealth since 1945’ (Dunleavy *et al* 2003: 2).

Figure 1.1: Percentage turnout of registered voters in British General Elections, 1951- 2005



Source: data from Political Science Resources, Keele University, www.psr.keele.ac.uk

These figures, however, mask considerable variation in voting behaviour. Further analysis reveals that the real story is not just that turnout is falling, but that it is falling at different rates for different groups.

International evidence shows that turnout and inequality are closely linked, and that as turnout falls so it becomes more unequal. In the United States, for instance, the class inequality in participation was greatest in the low turnout elections of the 1980s and lowest in the high turnout elections of the 1960s (Lijphart 1997).

It is no surprise, then, that as turnout in the UK has declined in recent years, so voter inequality has increased. Nevertheless, the degree of inequality that has emerged is very marked. Using data from the British Election Study (BES), we used regression analysis to look at the relationship between turnout habits, and key social, economic and demographic attributes, including age, sex, race/ethnicity, income and educational attainment.

Results for the 2001 and 2005 general elections are summarised in Figure 1.2 below. A plus sign denotes an explanatory variable that was associated with individuals being more likely to vote on average; a minus sign denotes factors which were associated with being less likely to vote. A double star (**) indicates a significant correlation at the five per cent level (this is normally taken as a result which is strong enough to be statically reliable), whereas a single star indicates a correlation at the 10 per cent level, which is somewhat weaker².

2. The BES data comprises around 2,000 individuals for the 2001 election, and around 4,000 for the 2005 election.

Table 1.1 shows that after controlling for other factors, income, educational attainment and age were all significant predictors of voting behaviour. There is a strong age gradient, with younger people being less likely to vote. People with lower incomes are also less likely to vote. And the fewer educational qualifications a person has, the less likely he or she is to vote.

The effects of other factors were less clear-cut. Although gender, for instance, was not a factor in 2001, men were more likely to vote than women in 2005. The impact of ethnicity was also not consistent across elections. While those who defined themselves as ‘other’ were less likely to vote in both 2001 and 2005, being Asian had a negative impact on likelihood of voting in 2001 but was not a significant factor in 2005, while the reverse was true for being black. However, this may be due to the fact that the sample sizes for the different ethnic groups were too small to provide an accurate picture.³

Table 1.1: BES predictors of voting in the 2001 and 2005 general elections

	2001		2005	
	Pos/ Neg	Sig	Pos/ Neg	Sig
Family income (£000s)	+	**	+	**
Ethnicity (base category: white)				
Asian	-	**	-	
Black	-		-	**
Other	-	*	-	**
Male	-		+	**
Age	+	**	+	**
Education (base category: degree or equivalent)				
A level or equivalent	-	**	-	**
GCSE or equivalent	-	**	-	**
No qualifications	-	**	-	**

Notes: Results from logistic model of voter turnout.

A plus sign denotes a positive correlation, for instance an increase in income will be associated with an increase in likelihood of voting. A minus sign denotes a negative correlation, for instance men are less likely to vote in comparison with women.

* Indicates that the finding is significant at the 0.1 level, ** indicates that the findings are significant at the 0.05 level. If there is no star the findings are not significant.

Source: Data provided by David Hugh-Jones, British Election Survey, University of Essex. Detailed results are available from the author on request.

Below we look further at what these figures suggest are the two crucial dimensions of voter inequality: age and socio-economic status.

Age

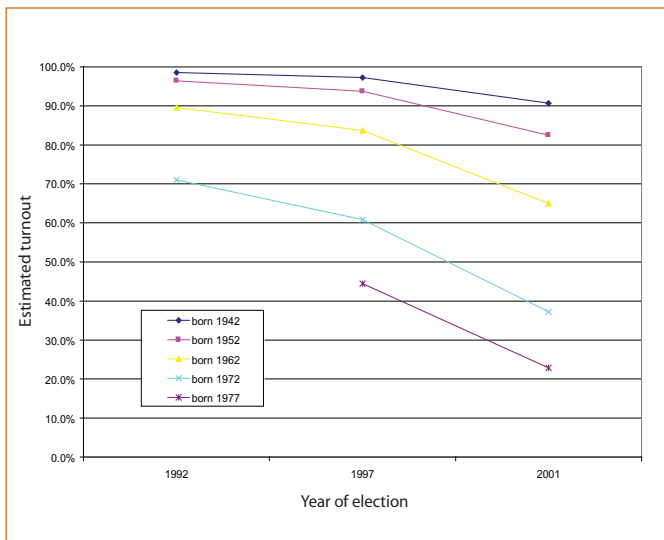
As already seen, age has become a very significant factor in determining whether an individual will vote or not. Indeed, it is the single most significant of socio-demographic factors – more significant even than socio-economic status. MORI estimates from the 2001 election suggest that only 39 per cent of people aged between 18 and 25 voted, compared to 70 per cent of those over 65. This gap, moreover, widened further in the 2005 election with only 37 per cent of young people voting, compared to 75 per cent of those aged 65 and up. Putting it another way, *in the last election young people were half as likely to vote as older age groups.*

All the evidence clearly suggests, the gap between the rates at which the different age groups vote has grown consistently since the 1970s. To take just one example, while in 1970, there was an 18 point difference between the 18-24 age group turnout rate (72 per cent) and the 65-74 age group rate (90 per cent), by 2005 the gap was 40 points (Sanders *et al* 2005). At the same time, it seems equally clear that declining to vote is not just a ‘phase’ that young people pass through – it is a habit set to last. This can be seen in BES figures,

3. For more on electoral participation among black and minority ethnic groups see Electoral Commission 2005a.

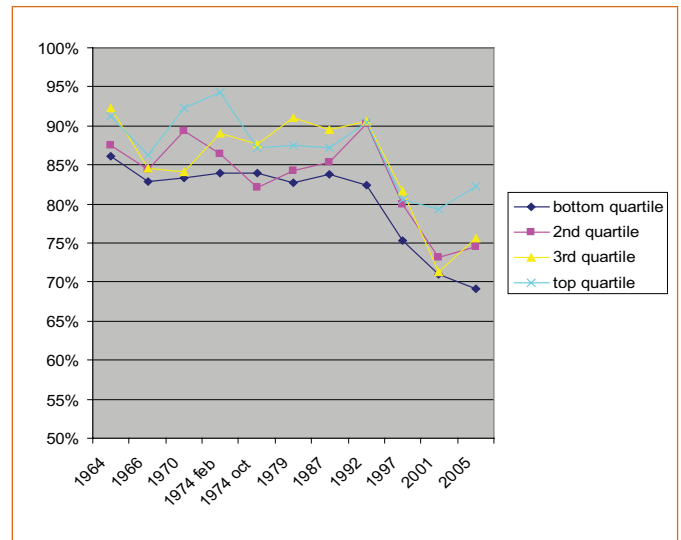
which show a pronounced ‘cohort effect’, with the first low turnout generation, the one that came to age in the early 1990s, voting at ever lower rates through subsequent elections, albeit with the cohorts behind it voting at even lower rates (Sanders *et al* 2005). ippr analysis of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), depicted in Figure 1.2, shows the same picture, with each generation turning out at a lower rate than the one before as it comes of age, and then turning out at still lower rates as it gets older. Moreover, falls for younger cohorts are larger than falls for older cohorts – for example, the turnout rate fell by over 30 per cent over nine years for the cohort born in 1972, compared with a drop of less than 10 per cent for the cohort born in 1942. If the trends continue into the future, as they seem likely to do, then we can expect turnout to continue to fall.

Figure 1.2: Estimated turnout in the UK elections by age and cohort: results from the BHPS model



Source: ippr analysis of BHPS

Figure 1.3: Self-reported voting by estimated income quartile, 1964-2005



Source: Data provided by David Hugh-Jones, British Election Survey, University of Essex

Socio-economic status

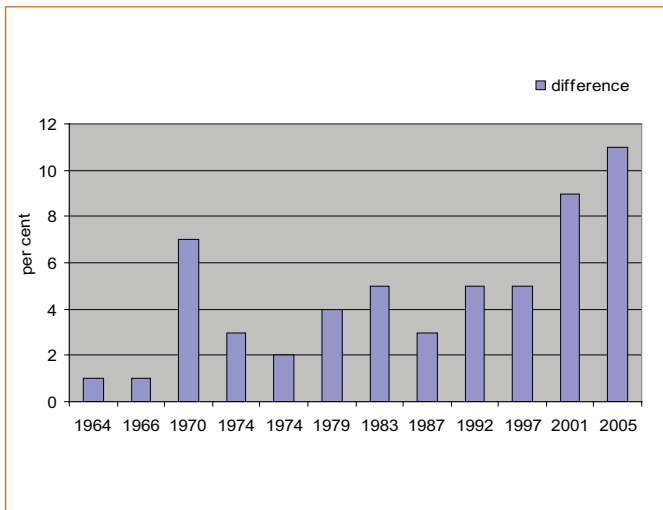
While socio-economic status – whether measured by income, class or education – is not as significant a factor as age in determining whether a person will vote or not, it has nevertheless become an increasingly significant factor – at least in the case of the UK. Figure 1.3, based on data from the BES, demonstrates that although there has been some decline in turnout among all income categories since 1964, the decline is most rapid for those with the lowest income. Also, unlike the top three quartiles, turnout among this group did not begin to rise again in 2005. Whereas in 1964 there was a seven point difference in turnout between earners in the top quartile and those in the bottom, this had increased to around 13 points in 2005.

A similar pattern emerges when we examine the relationship between voting and class. Figure 1.4 illustrates that rates of non-voting by manual workers have increased at a much faster rate than non-voting by non-manual workers. This is not an ideal proxy for class, particularly as it does not take into account the changes in labour patterns over the period. Nevertheless, the trend is very pronounced, adding weight to the argument that working class participation has fallen much more quickly than middle class participation.

MORI polling data for the last two elections similarly shows a 15-16 percentage point difference between the rates at which the top class (ABs) and the bottom class (DEs) turned out. MORI estimates that 70 per cent of ABs voted in the 2005 election, compared to 54 per cent of DEs (Electoral Commission 2005a).

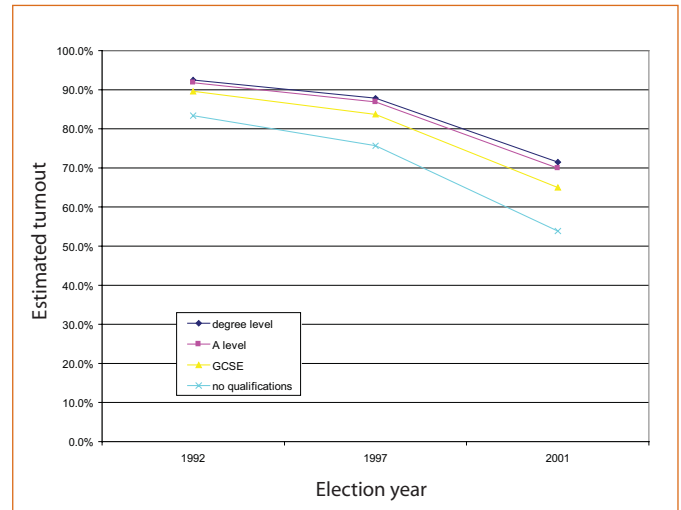
Finally, ippr analysis of the BHPS shows a clear relation between educational attainment and voting. As Figure 1.5 shows, there was very little difference in turnout between people with high-level degrees and people who only have the equivalent of A levels in the 1992, 1997 or 2001 elections. People who only had the equivalent of GCSEs turned out at a significantly lower rate, but the greatest difference was between this group and the group with no qualifications at all. Furthermore, the differences in turnout between all three main groups (those with A levels or more, those with GCSEs and those without qualifications), appears to be widening.

Figure 1.4: Percentage difference between manual and non-manual non-voters in British General Elections, 1964-2005



Source: Data provided by David Sanders, British Election Survey, University of Essex

Figure 1.5: Estimated turnout in UK election groups by education group: results from BHPS



Source: ippr analysis of BHPS

Class and age interaction

If both youth and low socio-economic status are heavily associated with not turning out, the evidence suggests that where these attributes come together, they tend to compound each other. BES data shows, for instance, that while poverty significantly decreases the likelihood of voting among all groups, the effect is more marked in those groups that already have a greater propensity not to vote, including young people. In other words, if an individual is both young and poor he or she is significantly less likely to vote than if he or she is only young or only poor.⁴

Research for the DFES has shown that young people's level of political engagement varies dramatically according to social background. While the young people surveyed had not yet had a chance to vote, their attitudes to elections were revealing. Asked whether they thought 'it's not really worth voting', 15 per cent of young people in households with an annual income of less than £15,000 affirmed that it was not, compared to just four per cent in households with an income of over £50,000 (Park *et al* 2004).

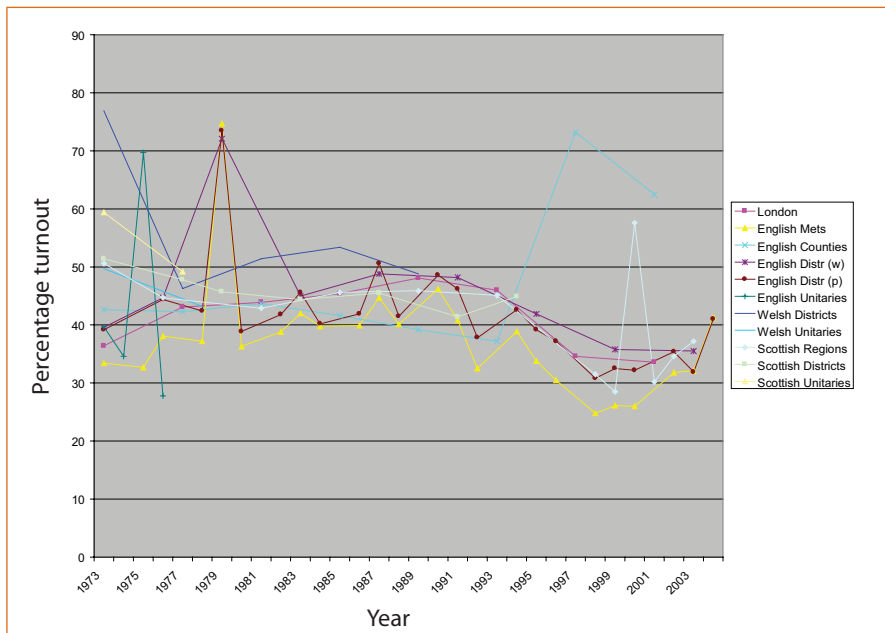
Local elections

So far our analysis has focused on turnout at general elections. The picture becomes more complicated when we turn to local elections. As Figure 6 demonstrates, local election turnout is more variable, with much higher turnouts when local elections are held alongside general elections. Overall, the trend is downwards. Between 1990 and 1999 the average number of voters turning out to vote at each election represented 36 per cent of the registered electorate. Between 1973 and 1978 the figure was 43 per cent (ODPM 2002). However, turnout for some types of local elections has improved in the last few years.

Despite this recent upturn, however, participation in local elections in the UK rarely exceeds 40 per cent, and while individual level data on the socio-economic characteristics of non-voters in local elections is rare, all the indications are that the patterns are similar to general elections. Analysis by Rallings and Thrasher (1994), for instance, found that affluent neighbourhoods were more likely to register high turnouts than deprived ones. Research commissioned by the ODPM (2002) found that while high numbers of the self-employed, professionals, owner-occupiers and pensioners in a ward are associated with higher levels of participation in local elections, there is a high negative correlation between voter turnout and the proportions of young people aged between 16 and 29, of council tenants and of the unemployed.

4. These results are not shown in Table 1.1 but are available from the author on request.

Figure 1.6: Percentage turnout of registered voters in British Local Elections, 1973-2005



Source: Data from LGC Elections Centre, University of Plymouth⁵

New forms of political participation for old?

Some commentators have suggested that we should not be especially troubled by the decline in voting: it can be explained by the replacement of traditional forms of political participation, like voting, by newer types, like boycotting goods, signing petitions and going on demonstrations, which are more in tune with the increasingly individualistic and consumerist nature of society. All the evidence suggests, however, that it is those who continue to vote, rather than those who do not vote, who also engage in the newer forms of political activity (Bromley *et al* 2004). Recent BES data, for instance, shows conclusively that voters are more active in all forms of political activity, including boycotting goods and taking part in demonstrations, than are non-voters (Sanders *et al* 2005). Far from providing new opportunities for those who do not vote to participate in other ways, the rise of new forms of participation risks consolidating political influence in the hands of those who are already politically engaged.

Registration

Britain has long had one of the highest rates of electoral registration of any western democracy. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that registration has begun to fall in recent years – and that the fall has been particularly pronounced among low-turnout groups (the evidence is conflicting, see Electoral Commission 2005b). Fall or no fall, registration is certainly much lower among low turnout than high turnout groups – this of course is part of the reason for their low turnout.

It is estimated, for instance, that, whereas only two per cent of those over 65 are not registered, 16 per cent of 18-24 year olds are not on the electoral roll. Similarly, Electoral Commission research suggests that where four per cent of people with higher degrees are not registered, the figure doubles to eight per cent for those reporting no qualification (Electoral Commission 2005b). Finally, it is estimated that where only two per cent of owner occupiers are not on the electoral register, the figure increases to a stunning 38 per cent of those living in unfurnished rental accommodation – including council housing (Harman 2005).

Democracy deserts

We have been reviewing evidence for the way turnout and registration varies across social groups. Given the way social groups are distributed geographically, it is perhaps no surprise to find that turnout also

5. Data can be found at www.research.plymouth.ac.uk/elections/elections/turnouts.htm.

varies profoundly from place to place. Interestingly, there was very little difference in turnout in the 2005 general election between Scotland, Wales and England (Sanders *et al* 2005). But turnout is consistently lower in areas with high concentrations of poverty or with a high proportion of young people – or both.⁶

The official turnout figures for the 2001 and 2005 general elections tell some of the story. The seats with low turnout are overwhelming poor inner city (and Labour voting) constituencies; those at the top are leafy and affluent. To move from one to the other – from constituencies that turn out in the high 30 per cents or low 40 per cents to ones that turn out in the mid 70 per cents – is to move from the world of Dickens and Mrs Gaskell (Manchester Central, Salford and Poplar) to that of Jane Austen and Trollope (Dorset West, Winchester and Richmond Park). It is all too telling that the most deprived area in England as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation contains the constituency – Liverpool Riverside – with the lowest turnout in both the 2001 and 2005 elections (34 per cent and 41 per cent), or that the second poorest area also contains the constituency – Manchester Central – with the second lowest turnout in 2001 (39 per cent) and the third lowest in 2005 (43 per cent) (Electoral Commission 2005a).

Yet the official turnout figures severely underestimate the turnout problem in most inner city areas – they represent the percentage of registered voters rather than the percentage of those eligible to vote. The Electoral Commission estimates, for instance, that around 18 per cent of people living in inner London are unregistered, compared to about six per cent of those living in metropolitan areas. In some particularly poor neighbourhoods the figure is probably above 30 per cent.

Perhaps the best way of capturing true levels of turnout in poor inner city areas is to look at one of them in more detail. Harriet Harman MP, who coined the term ‘democracy deserts’ to describe these areas, has estimated that around 20 per cent of those eligible to vote in her inner London constituency of Camberwell and Peckham are not on the electoral register. Given that there were around 55,800 registered voters in her constituency at the time of the last election, it follows that there were around 13,938 unregistered voters. On top of this, a further 26,760 (48 per cent) who were registered to vote did not vote. In total then, only 28,991 out of a total voting age population of 69,690 voted – 41.6 per cent. Or to put it another way, around 42,929 who could have voted in this constituency in the 2005 general election did not vote – 58.4 per cent of all citizens. This is significantly higher than the official non-voting rate of 48 per cent.

6. There is good evidence that interest in politics is subject to ‘area effects’. Given that voting is closely correlated with interest in politics it is safe to assume that voting is also subject to area effects – that where people live has an effect on their propensity to vote, independently of anything else about them. It seems safe to assume that people who live in poor areas are less likely to vote than people who are like them in other respects but do not live in poor areas (Electoral Commission 2005d).

Chapter 2 The causes of inequality and decline

We have seen that not only has voter turnout declined very steeply over the last decade, but a widening participation gap has opened up, with younger and worse off people voting at much lower rates than their older and better off compatriots. This clearly invites two questions: what explains these developments and what could be done to reverse them? In this chapter we briefly explore some of the explanations that have been advanced to explain why people – especially young people, and relatively poor or less educated people – are less disposed to vote, before going on in the next two chapters to explore policies that could address turnout decline.

This is an extremely complicated issue, as a quick look at the theoretical literature on what motivates people to vote shows (Niemi and Weisberg 2001). Electoral participation depends on the interaction of a range of beliefs and attitudes:

- whether people believe it their duty to vote
- whether they belong to communities or institutions where there is an established norm of voting – where they are expected to vote
- whether they take an interest in politics
- whether they think the political system is responsive to people like them
- whether they are invited or canvassed to vote
- whether they identify with the candidates or the parties on offer
- whether they think the choice is a high-stakes one, and whether they think an election is close or ‘safe’
- whether they perceive the voting act as easy or inconvenient.

These attitudes and beliefs are in turn shaped by factors like class, educational level, race/ethnicity and age. As a general rule, the better off, better educated and older people are, the more likely they are to vote or participate in other ways (Verba *et al* 1995, Pattie *et al* 2004, Evans 2003).

While there is no agreed account as to why voting has fallen in recent years (Power Inquiry 2005), there seems little doubt that pride of place should be given to changes in the nature of party politics. The last three elections have been fought largely over the centre ground, and in each case, one party – Labour - was considered to have it ‘in the bag’:

‘Overall, the perceived closeness of the election, in conjunction with the perceived [lack of] ideological difference between the parties, seems to offer the most convincing explanation of over-time difference in turnout, not just for the decline in turnout from 1997 to 2001, but throughout the series of post-war elections’ (Evans 2003: 91).⁷

That said, other factors have also played a role in falling turnout – especially among younger and working class voters. Below we offer a few headline findings.

Party identification

The last couple of decades have witnessed a profound decline in people’s identification with a political party, and most researchers are agreed that this process of ‘party de-alignment’ has been a very important factor in driving down voting rates. In 1964 17 out of 20 people had at least a fairly strong identification with a political party. By 2001 only 11 out of 20 did so, and by 2005 the figure had fallen to less than 10 out of 20 (Sanders *et al* 2005). This development has been particularly pronounced among low turnout groups. Startlingly few young people, for instance, now identify even weakly with any political party, or care which one wins any given general election. In 2003 less than one in 10 young people described themselves as supporting a political party, compared to over a third of adults (Park *et al* 2004).

7. The analysis also holds good for the 2005 election (see Sanders *et al* 2005).

The young, the disadvantaged and the young and disadvantaged

It is tempting, in analysing turnout inequality, to treat the two principal low turnout groups – the young and the disadvantaged – together. We are painfully aware, however, that a fuller treatment than the one we have provided – and perhaps a fuller treatment than the one existing research would allow us to provide – would need to make distinctions between these two groups, and within them.

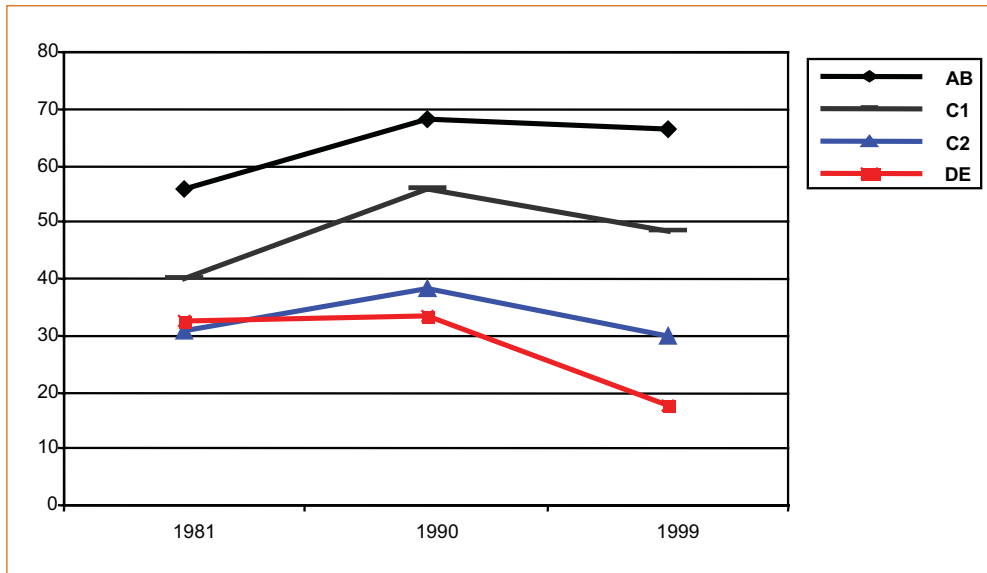
Older working class voters, for instance, tend to continue to believe in the duty to vote while expressing little sense of political efficacy. Younger people from well off families believe in their ability to influence things, but have little interest in party politics and are less likely to believe in the duty to vote. Young people from poor families, while believing in democratic values, report little sense of political efficacy or party identification and do not believe in the duty to vote.

These differences suggest that measures that might encourage one group to vote will not necessarily encourage others. Nevertheless there are some attitudes common to all of them. They all report, for instance, low levels of identification with political parties, and low interest in 'politics'. And some changes and reforms – more local campaigning, initiatives aimed at engaging people in decision making, drives to boost registration and the introduction of compulsory turnout – could help boost voting rates among all of them.

Interest in politics

Surprisingly perhaps, interest in politics has remained remarkably steady since the post-war years (Sanders *et al* 2005). Nevertheless this observation masks significant variation below the water, with younger and poorer people having become less interest in politics over time. As Figure 2.1 makes clear, as interest in politics among ABs increased through the 1980s and then remained steady, interest among DEs remained steady throughout the 1980s and then fell in the 1990s, with the result that there is now a much larger 'interest gap' than previously.

Figure 2.1: Political interest in the UK by social class



Source: data from World Values Survey, all waves, www.worldvaluessurvey.org

A gap also appears to have opened up between young people's and older people's interest in politics. In 1994 38 per cent of young people claimed at least some interest in politics. By 1998 this figure had fallen to 34 per cent and by 2003 to 31 per cent. The gap between the most and least interested generations had also grown from a 10-point difference to a 25-point difference (Park *et al* 2004). The researchers responsible for these findings, however, note that when young people deny an interest in politics, they tend to be thinking of party politics – they shows much higher levels of interest in current affairs and social and political issues more generally (Park *et al* 2004). Interest among young people also varies dramatically according to family background:

'Around a quarter of young people living in homes where the adult British Social Attitudes respondent had a degree (or another higher education qualification) had no interest in politics (and nearly four in ten had at least some interest). By contrast, nearly a half of young people living in households where the adult respondent had no educational qualifications had no interest in politics, while only just over a quarter expressed even some interest.' (Park *et al* 2004)

Political efficacy

People's sense of political efficacy – their sense of the extent to which the political system is responsive to their concerns – has declined (Bromley *et al* 2004) and this is particularly true of low turnout groups. Taking socio-economic status first, the ONS 2002 Household Survey found that while 20 per cent of people from the most deprived areas reported feeling they could influence things in their local area, more than 30 per cent of people from most affluent areas reported the same.

The Electoral Commission's first Audit of Political Engagement similarly showed that over half of ABC1s (56 per cent) reported feeling that they knew at least a fair amount about politics, compared to less than a third (29 per cent) of C2Des. Again, more than three quarters (77 per cent) of ABC1s said they wanted to have a say in how the country is run, compared with only a little more than a half (56 per cent) of C2Des (Electoral Commission 2005a). Furthermore, unlike people with degrees, people from lower social classes apparently find politics increasingly hard to understand: in 1986 about 24 per cent said this was the case, and by 1993 the figure was 33 per cent.

Similar patterns are found in relation to age. According to the ONS 2002 Household Survey, less than 20 per cent of young people believe that they can personally influence decisions in their area, compared to more than 30 per cent of those aged 40-49.⁸ But the group with the lowest sense of political empowerment is made up of those who are poor and young. More recent research found that whereas only four per cent of young people from the wealthiest households (earning above £50,000) believe 'it's not really worth voting', 15 per cent of young people from the poorest households (earning below £15,000) believe this (Park *et al* 2004).

The public's trust in political parties and party politicians has also declined significantly over the last decade and a half. Most of the decline occurred in the 1990s, against the background of the Major government and accusations of 'sleaze'. But while trust increased after Blair was elected in 1997, it has since fallen slightly below 1990s measures. That said, there do not appear to be any strong associations between poverty and youth and mistrust (Bromley *et al* 2004). Given the fall trust in politicians, it is not surprising that satisfaction with the way the country is governed has also fallen since the 1970s. Poor people are much less satisfied than rich people with the way things are run: 38 per cent of ABs are satisfied but only 23 per cent of C2s and 30 per cent of DEs. But reversing the usual trend, younger people are more satisfied than older (Electoral Commission 2006).

The duty to vote

Belief in the duty to vote has been in steady decline since the post-war years, with each generation less supportive of the proposition that there is a duty to vote than the one before. Nine out of 10 people under Atlee believed that a person was seriously neglecting their duty if they did not vote, but that figure has fallen to less than five out of ten today. Again, the fall has been pronounced among young people. To take just one example, in 1998 36 per cent of young people thought there was a duty to vote, by 2003 this figure had fallen to 31 per cent (Park *et al* 2004). The belief is also income-/class-sensitive – this seems especially so among young people. Forty-four per cent of young people living in the wealthiest household income quartile (above £50,000) believe there is a duty to vote, compared to just 21 per cent living in the poorest quartile (below £15,000).

Too much can be made of these findings. As Park *et al* have argued, if young people are sceptical about the duty to vote, this is as much because of their scepticism about the language of duty as it is about their scepticism about voting. Most of them still believe that it is important to have 'their say' and 'influence decisions' (Park *et al* 2004). There has not been a decline in democratic values among young people, so

8. Interestingly, the figures are much higher and closer, when it comes to the belief that people locally can effect decisions in their area (both are around 65 per cent). Young people appear to take the arguably realistic view that while they cannot influence the political process in their areas, older citizens can.

much as a change in them, alongside growing detachment from the formal political system. Nevertheless the decline in the belief in our obligation to vote has played a significant part in the decline in voter turnout (Sanders *et al* 2005).

Decline in civic organisations and local political campaigning

One final factor influencing turnout rates has been the relative decline in civic organisations that used to recruit people into politics, and mobilise them at election time. This is most obviously true of political parties and trade unions, whose membership has fallen dramatically since the 1970s. But it is also true of women's groups, trade organisations, veterans' organisations and the like, all of whom used to play a much under-appreciated role in sustaining Britain's civic culture (Rogers 2004). True, as some of these organisations have withered, others, particularly environmental ones, have taken their place – the RSPB alone now has more members than all the political parties put together. But whatever their other virtues, these newer mass membership organisations do not tend to encourage local party political engagement, or mobilise their supporters to turnout at election time.

At the same time, as political campaigning has become more 'sophisticated', political parties have come to focus most of their electioneering on a small number of marginal constituencies. The result is that many safe seat voters are scarcely canvassed at all. Yet there is firm evidence that telephone or even better, face-to-face canvassing encourages people to vote. It has been estimated, for instance that, net of all other effects, someone who was personally contacted by any political party during the 2005 election campaign was roughly seven per cent more likely to vote than a similar person who was not contacted personally (Sanders *et al* 2005).

Explaining turnout decline: rational choice and norm-based models

Political theorists have long tried to make sense of what motivates people to vote or to abstain from voting. One approach, popular with economists and hard-headed social scientists has been to try to develop rational choice theories of voting.

Some rational choice theorists have argued that turnout is falling because the electorate is increasingly concluding that voting is not a rational act. Although at an individual level education increases the likelihood of voting, this argument contends that rising educational attainment at a national level has led to a more questioning and informed citizenry who are less inclined to vote out of a sense of duty and more likely to weigh up the costs and benefits that voting incurs. As the chances of an individual vote affecting an election are negligible, the benefits of voting do not outweigh the costs involved and many people choose not to participate.

The problem with rational choice as an explanation is that it does not satisfactorily explain the motivation of the still large number of the electorate who continue to vote. As we mentioned above, the likelihood of an individual vote affecting the outcome of an election is tiny. Voting also brings the wider public good of upholding parliamentary democracy. However, as long as the majority of the electorate continues to vote this benefit will continue to accrue whether the individual concerned votes or not. Therefore the rational conclusion would seem to be that the costs – the need to register, to attend a polling booth or apply for and return a postal vote, and possibly the need to educate oneself about the choices available – outweigh the benefits. The real question rational choice theorists need to address, then, is not why do not people vote, but why do so many people still turn out to vote?

The rational choice explanation would also seem to be undermined by the fact that non-voting is more prevalent, and has increased more rapidly, among those who are not well educated. Followed to its logical conclusion rational choice theory suggests that having less education should make one less rather than more likely to make a complex analysis of costs and benefits. Rational choice does not, therefore, provide us with much insight into why turnout inequality is increasing.

An alternative approach is provided by a norm-based account. Some social scientists argue that we are not voting any more because the social norm of voting is collapsing. A social norm is something we do because everyone else does it too, society expects that we will comply and it is generally held to advance certain valuable goals.

Research into attitudes to voting provides some support for the social norm theory of voting behaviour. Analysis of survey data in the United States found that a 'yes' response to the question 'Do you have any friends, neighbours or relatives who'd be disappointed or angry with you if they knew you hadn't voted in this year's election?' was a powerful predictor of voting, second only to a belief that voting is a civic duty, suggesting that social expectation was playing an important role in governing voting behaviour. It also found that while only one per cent of voters intentionally or otherwise misrepresented their voting behaviour this rose to 25 per cent of non-voters, suggesting that the social norm retains a degree of power even among those who have already broken it (Hasen 1996). UK surveys also show that people who believe that voting is a duty are much more likely to vote and that people tend to claim they have voted even when they have not (Electoral Commission 2005e).

However, while many citizens continue to adhere to the social norm of voting there is reason to think that social structures underpinning it have declined – especially among some groups. Individuals are living increasingly individualised lives and communities are becoming weaker and neighbourhood more anonymous. This is particularly true of the most deprived communities, which tend to lack the networks of trust, mutuality and reciprocity – or the willingness to sanction deviation from social norms – that characterise social capital (Halpern 2005). Members of these communities are also less likely to participate in other forms of associational and civic life than those from more affluent communities (Delaney and Keaney 2006). This means that there are fewer opportunities to discuss political issues and so create and maintain an interest in politics. It also means that social sanctions (for instance community disapproval of those who do not vote) become more difficult to impose. Voting as a social norm is therefore particularly difficult to maintain in deprived communities.

Finally a norm based understanding of voting has implications for how we should think about compulsory turnout. For where a rational choice theory suggests that all that motivates people to vote in systems where voting is obligatory is the threat of sanctions that will result from not voting, a norm based account recognises that compulsory turnout laws might also work to reinforce the norm of voting, and it is this, as well as the threat of sanctions, that accounts for higher turnout where compulsory turnout laws exist. Compulsory turnout, in other words, does not just work through threats: rather, it helps sustain a belief that voting is a duty.

Chapter 3 Tackling the problem

We suggested in the previous chapter that a range of factors have probably played a role in driving down voter turnout and driving up voter inequality. These include overall decline in perceptions of political efficacy among poorer people and young people, a decline in identification with political parties, a rise in distrust in politicians, a decline in the size and influence of trade unions, political parties, and other groups that once mobilised younger people and in particular working class people and encouraged them to vote, the erosion, particularly in poor areas, of voting related norms, and the perception in the last three elections that nothing much was at stake – the main parties agreed on most core issues, and anyway Labour was the clear front runner in each.

It follows that a comprehensive strategy to tackle voter inequality needs to work on many fronts at once. It is important, for instance, to continue efforts to reduce inequality and abolish poverty and social exclusion, improve the standing of politicians, encourage political and civic participation and, especially, carry out face-to-face canvassing. Building on the introduction of citizenship into the national curriculum, schools and colleges need to make sure that they are doing everything possible to stimulate interest in politics, instil voting norms and habits, and encourage young people to vote. Local authorities, public services, the voluntary and private sectors need to do more to invite people into civic activity and to listen to them and support them when they get involved (Rogers 2004, Lowndes *et al* 2006).

Most of these changes are ambitious, and, as important as they are, will be costly and slow to take effect. For that reason, we focus in particular on relatively easily achieved changes to the electoral system and its administration – changes that might alone have quite a substantial impact. These include increasing the frequency of elections, making voting easier by introducing postal or electronic voting, or easier access to polling stations, introducing proportional representation or incentives to vote, changing the registration process and implementing compulsory turnout. This chapter and the next look at each of these in turn, assessing their potential contribution.

The role of non-partisan advocates

As we have seen, it is well established that people are much more likely to vote where they have been asked to do so – and in particular where they have been asked face to face. Given this, government needs, as suggested above, to look at ways of boosting local party membership and activity – especially canvassing activity. There is also arguably a case for exploring the potential of employing non-partisan advocates at election time. Their role should be to persuade people of the importance of voting in general rather than voting for a specific political party.

Some Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) already incorporate door-knocking campaigns to encourage the return of electoral registration forms. This role could be expanded. The link between registering to vote and the importance of using one's vote should be emphasised as part of the annual canvass. EROs could also take on the role of non-partisan campaigners in the run-up to elections. They could provide information about election dates, and explain voting and registration procedures, how votes are translated into seats, which parties are standing, and where to find out more.

Some confusion already exists among EROs about whether registration campaigns that target particular groups are compatible with the need to remain impartial (Electoral Commission 2003). This expansion of the role of EROs would, therefore, need to be accompanied by guidelines, making clear that EROs should remain impartial advocates but that their role should include targeted campaigns to register and encourage voting among under-represented groups where necessary. As the aim is to encourage universal participation, this is not incompatible with the need for impartiality. The extended role for EROs would also require the allocation of additional funds by central government.

Electoral reform

Does Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system work to deter people from voting, as is sometimes argued? Would the relative complexity of voting under a system based more on proportional representation in fact deter people from voting?

Advocates of proportional representation (PR) point out that under first-past-the-post systems, voters often have little incentive to vote. In more proportional systems, every vote counts towards a decision, but under

first-past-the-post systems, a large proportion – often the majority of voters – find themselves in safe seats where there is little chance of a vote being decisive (Farrell 2001).

There is evidence that PR can make a difference to turnout. Arend Lijphart, the social scientist who has done more than anyone to draw attention to the issue of unequal voter turnout, reports that that turnout in countries with proportional electoral systems is between three and 12 per cent higher than in majoritarian systems (Lijphart 1997). However, the impact is highest for the most salient national elections, while PR tends to have less effect in second-order elections. Furthermore, in the UK, aggregate research on recent general elections has demonstrated a positive association between constituency marginality and turnout. In 2001, for instance, turnout was 10 per cent higher in marginal constituencies than in safe seats (Evans 2003).

It seems unlikely, however, that the lack of proportionality in the UK's first-past-the-post system is the cause of the recent decline in turnout. After all, voting has declined in recent years in countries with PR as well as those without. And Britain's first-past-the-post system is not a recent introduction, so cannot in itself explain why voting has declined so steeply since 1997.

Studies that have looked at the factors that influence the voting behaviour of an individual rather than whole constituencies have found little link between marginality and propensity to vote (Pattie and Johnston 2001). Our own analysis of the BES confirms this picture, finding no significant effect of marginality on an individual's attitudes to voting. Nor does PR feature strongly in the Electoral Commission's investigation into turnout at the 2005 General Election (Election Commission 2005a). This found that neither a desire for proportional representation nor a belief that voting would have no impact on the outcome of the election featured high on the list of reasons given by non-voters for their abstention.⁹

Against this, it is also important to say that there is little evidence that the greater complexity of more proportional voting systems would deter voters from turning out. Many elections in the UK – including those to the EU, Scottish, Welsh and London parliaments or assemblies – are now held under more proportional systems, and while turnout has often been similar or lower than turnout for similar elections held under first-past-the-post systems, research does not suggest that complexity was a feature in prompting people to stay away.

Reviewing recent evidence, John Curtice wisely concludes that despite the passion with which both sides in the PR controversy argue their case, 'the impact of electoral systems on the level and quality of electoral participation is not sufficiently strong or certain for it to be decisive in determining which system should be used in any particular election' (Curtice 2003: 108).

This, of course, is not to say there is no case for moving towards a more proportional electoral system. It just suggests that arguments for electoral reform should not be based on the latter's ability to narrow voter inequality.

Frequency of elections

Where possible, the frequency of elections in the UK should be reduced, and second order elections combined with parliamentary elections, as frequent elections have a negative impact on turnout.

The two countries with the most frequent elections are the United States and Switzerland and these are also the two western democracies with by far the lowest levels of turnout. The effect is particularly pronounced for second-order elections, such as local or by-elections, which tend to have much lower turnout than national elections. The same is true for elections to the European Parliament. For instance, when the 2004 European Parliamentary elections in the UK were combined with local elections, turnout was higher than in those areas without combination and in comparison with turnout in 1999 (Electoral Commission 2005c). A number of explanations for this have been put forward, including voter fatigue when faced with numerous elections and the idea that frequent elections increase the cost of voting.

Obviously, combining elections will not always be practical, particularly in the case of by-elections. Even where it is practical, it still needs to be approached with caution. The accumulation of very many elections and referendum questions on one long ballot can put voters off. In the US, when lower level elections are

9. If this analysis is correct, then the positive association between constituency marginality and turnout noted above is most probably explained by an underlying feature characteristic of both marginal constituencies and high turnout ones. Obvious candidates include relative prosperity and an older demographic.

on the same ballot as presidential elections voting participation improves, but there also tends to be considerable roll-off where voters cast their vote for president but not for less prestigious offices (Lijphart 1997). The complexity of the ballot therefore needs to be balanced against the convenience of combining elections. Nevertheless, the guiding principle should be that, where possible and practical, elections should be combined.

Ease of voting

It is important to make voting as easy as possible so that possible barriers to participate are removed. A number of initiatives to increase the ease of voting have been discussed, including weekend voting, postal and electronic voting, and increasing the accessibility and flexibility of in-person voting.

Weekend voting appears to be a particularly promising option. Multivariate analysis of turnout in 29 countries found that, other factors being equal, weekend voting increases turnout by five to six percentage points (Hill and Louth 2004, Lijphart 1997). A rise of this magnitude would not increase turnout to levels where inequality was no longer a problem. However, it would have some impact and would be simple to implement. Furthermore, it would not be without support. Research by the ODPM (2002) found that 57 per cent of local authorities surveyed were in favour of piloting weekend voting.

Postal voting can also make voting easier and increase turnout. Mail ballots are worth another four per cent in first order elections (Lijphart 1997). This has already had an impact on turnout in the UK. All-postal voting pilots in the combined European Parliamentary and local elections in June 2004 resulted in turnout of 42 per cent in pilot areas compared to 36.9 per cent in non-pilot areas (Electoral Commission 2005a). Analysis of the 2005 general election though, found little difference (barely a percentage point) between turnout increases in seats where postal voting increased markedly and in those where it was little changed. Even in the 2004 pilot areas, the number of people who did not vote was higher than the number who voted, so turnout was not brought up to levels at which turnout inequality begins to level off. A more detailed look at the profile of postal voters also shows that postal voting does nothing to narrow turnout inequality. It is not an effective tool for reaching poor and poorly educated non-voters (Curtice *et al* 2004).

It is important to ensure that in-person voting is as easy and accessible as possible. MORI's survey for the Electoral Commission in June 2001 found that 57 per cent of non-voters spontaneously gave circumstantial reasons for not voting, the most common of which was that they could not get to the polling station because it was too inconvenient (Electoral Commission, Vote 2005). Some innovation is already happening. The ODPM (2002) found that the proportion of authorities using mobile polling stations had risen from half in 1996 to more than 60 per cent in 2002, and some authorities had experimented with polling stations in supermarkets. There had also been moves by some authorities to increase accessibility to polling places, although significant access issues still existed. We advocate expansion of these measures where appropriate.

A combination of holding elections at weekends, more accessible and flexible in-person voting arrangements and a well publicised and accessible postal voting system may help to increase ease of voting and possibly, therefore, turnout. It is unclear exactly what impact this would have on the demographic profile of voting, and more research would be needed on its impact. However, moves like placing polling booths in supermarkets, particularly if concentrated in deprived areas, could help to bring voting into the everyday experience of those who do not currently vote. To be most effective, this would also need to be combined with measures to increase registration in these groups.

Registration

Currently, much of the political debate about increasing turnout has focused on registration – and not without some reason. As we have seen, while it is not clear if overall registration rates have fallen, some groups and some areas have very low registration rates.

A number of measures have been advocated that could increase registration levels. One measure that might have some impact and could be implemented with little difficulty and expense, would be to move the deadline for registering to vote to after that election has been announced. During the 2005 general election campaign the Electoral Commission's call centre handled a large volume of calls from people perturbed to discover that they had missed the final date for inclusion on the register (Electoral Commission 2005b). Allowing people to register after the announcement of an election is a simple and cheap way of capturing many of those who have previously not got round to registering.

Local promotion of the importance of registration can also have a small but significant effect, and there is an appetite among many EROs and their staff for taking registration much more proactively into the community, working with, for example, local community and religious leaders, schools, colleges and universities, local charities, the voluntary sector networks, and care homes (Electoral Commission 2003). We support this and recommend that the promotion of registration should be an integral part of an ERO's role, especially among under-represented groups.

As discussed above, the annual canvass should also be used as an opportunity to encourage people to vote. There is considerable scope for linking the two, particularly through extending the role of EROs to that of non-partisan democratic advocates. A joined-up approach is likely to be much more successful at increasing turnout than a drive to get people registered that does not make the link to the importance of voting.

Finally, compulsory registration is also sometimes discussed as a way of increasing the numbers who register and so, in turn, vote. In the UK registration is not compulsory, although it is an offence to fail to return the annual registration form. However, there are very low levels of awareness of this requirement (Electoral Commission 2005b). Raising awareness of this requirement may help to increase the numbers who register, but it is likely that many of those who do not currently register exist below the radar of the local authority and so would not receive a form in any case. Hill and Louth (2004) also point out that while compulsory enrolment can boost turnout initially, it does not necessarily guard against a gradual decline, as happened in New Zealand. However, if compulsory voting were introduced, it would need to be accompanied by a system of compulsory registration. We deal with compulsory registration in more detail in the next chapter.

Any of these measures – allowing registration after an election campaign has been announced, encouraging electoral officers to take a more active part in boosting registration and turnout, raising awareness of the obligation to register or moving to a system where individuals are obliged to register themselves – could help increase registration and to some extent turnout. Nevertheless, their potential is limited, for there is no guarantee that people who are registered will vote. Even among those who do register, large numbers do not vote. The 59.38 per cent and 61.36 per cent turnouts for the 2001 and 2005 general elections are measures of the numbers of registered electors who voted in those elections – not of the number of those of voting age. In 2005 39.64 per cent of those who were registered chose not to vote. Increasing the number of registered electors is unlikely to change this by itself.

Incentives to vote

It has been suggested that incentives to vote, such as a £5 reduction in council tax, could be introduced¹⁰. This is not a move that we would advocate. While, theoretically, incentives should increase turnout disproportionately among the poor, since an economic incentive would be more valuable to people with lesser financial resources, there are very few examples where it has been tried. The few instances that do exist – mainly in California and involving things such as free doughnuts and chicken dinners – do not seem to have been very effective¹¹.

There is also concern that the use of incentives would suffer from some of the same drawbacks as compulsory turnout discussed in Chapter 4: that is, poorly considered voting choices and a devaluation of the political process. Unlike compulsory turnout, however, this initiative would be less likely to create a culture in which voting came to be seen as a social norm, backed up by statute. It would also be expensive, particularly as there is no analysis of what level at which the incentive would need to be set to be effective, and it would need to be accompanied by a major publicity campaign. Finally, there is concern that introduction of money into the calculus of voting would undermine the perception of voting as a collective good, by encouraging individuals to focus their voting decisions solely on their own economic well-being.

10. In the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into electoral law and administration (2005) Chris Rennard argued against compulsory voting, suggesting incentives to vote, such as £5 off council tax, as a reasonable alternative.

11. We are aware of only two modern examples of the use of incentives. These were free doughnuts or trips to a chiropractor to Californian voters on production of voting stubs and, again in California, US\$5 coupons for free chicken dinners in return for voting. The latter was offered exclusively in poor, African-American neighbourhoods in an attempt to shore up support for the Democrats. There is no evidence that either was effective (Hasen 2000).

Summary

In this chapter we have identified some changes that could be made, particularly: moving the deadline for registration to after an election has been announced; combining elections where possible to reduce their frequency; holding elections on weekends; placing polling stations in accessible places like shopping centres; and creating a more explicit link between registering to vote and using one's vote. There is also some evidence that introducing proportional representation could have an impact although the impact is likely to be slight at best. But even taken together, these methods are unlikely to have the kind of dramatic impact that is required if we are to halt the trends of falling turnout and increasing inequality in turnout. The one measure that seems to have the potential to achieve this is compulsory turnout.

Chapter 4 Compulsory turnout

Compulsory turnout is effective at both raising turnout and reducing turnout inequality. Its introduction is invariably accompanied by a remarkable rise in participation. In countries where it has been enacted only in certain regions, these display more intense participation than the regions without compulsory voting. Even in countries with compulsory turnout there is still some turnout inequality, but it is invariably much less pronounced than those countries without compulsory turnout.

Compulsory turnout, not compulsory voting

Though the term 'compulsory voting' is generally used to describe the systems we are considering, it is inaccurate. Countries with 'compulsory voting' do not compel people to vote, but merely to turn out to vote – whether in person, at a polling station, or by filling in a postal or electronic ballot. Voters who for whatever reason do not want to give their support to any of the candidates standing, or wish to register their objection to the political system as a whole, can do so – either by spoiling their ballot, or, where the option exists, writing in a candidate of their choice or endorsing a 'none of the above' option. For this reason we suggest a better name for these systems is 'compulsory turnout' and this is the term we use here.

Countries with compulsory turnout

All global regions except for North America and Central and Eastern Europe have countries with compulsory turnout laws. Latin America, Western Europe, Asia and Oceania all have countries where compulsory turnout is strictly enforced. Table 4.1 lists the countries that have some element of compulsory turnout, the sanctions that are imposed, and the degree of rigour in their enforcement.

Table 4.1. Countries with compulsory voting

Country	Sanctions*	Level of enforcement
Argentina	1, 2, 4	Weak
Australia	1, 2	Strict
Austria (Tyrol)	1, 2	Weak
Austria (Vorarlbera)	2, 3	Weak
Belgium	1, 2, 4, 5	Strict
Bolivia	4	Not available
Brazil	2	Weak
Chile	1, 2, 3	Weak
Costa Rica	None	Not enforced
Cyprus	1, 2	Strict
Dominican Republic	None	Not enforced
Ecuador	2	Weak
Egypt	1, 2, 3	Not available
Fiji	1, 2, 3	Strict
Gabon	Not available	Not available
Greece	1, 5	Weak
Guatemala	None	Not enforced
Honduras	None	Not enforced
Italy	5	Not enforced

cont. next page

Country	Sanctions*	Level of enforcement
Liechtenstein	1, 2	Weak
Luxembourg	1, 2	Strict
Mexico	None / 5	Weak
Nauru	1, 2	Strict
Netherlands		Enforced until 1970
Paraguay	2	Not available
Peru	2, 4	Weak
Singapore	4	Strict
Switzerland (Schaffhausen)	2	Strict
Thailand	None	Not enforced
Turkey	2	Weak
Uruguay	2, 4	Strict
Venezuela		In practice 1961-1999

Source: Data from Voter Turnout Since 1945, IDEA www.idea.int

***Key to sanctions:**

1. Explanation. The non-voter has to provide a legitimate reason for his or her failure to vote to avoid further sanctions, if any exist.

2. Fine. The non-voter faces a fine. The amount varies by country: three Swiss francs in Switzerland, between 300 and 3,000 schillings in Austria, 200 pounds in Cyprus, 10 to 20 pesos in Argentina, 20 soles in Peru, and so on.

3. Possible imprisonment. The non-voter may face imprisonment as a sanction (we do not know of any such documented cases). This can also happen in countries such as Australia where a fine is common. In cases where the non-voter does not pay the fines after being reminded or after refusing several times, the courts may impose a prison sentence. This is, however, imprisonment for failure to pay the fine, not imprisonment for failure to vote.

4. Infringements of civil rights or disenfranchisement. In Belgium, for example, it is possible that the non-voter, after not voting in at least four elections within 15 years, will be disenfranchised. In Peru, the voter has to carry a stamped voting card for a number of months after the election as proof of having voted. This stamp is required in order to obtain some services and goods from certain public offices. In Singapore the voter is removed from the voter register until he or she reapplies to be included and submits a legitimate reason for not having voted. In Bolivia, the voter is given a card when he or she has voted as proof of participation. The voter cannot receive a salary from the bank if he or she cannot show proof of voting during three months after the election.

5. Other. In Belgium, for example, it might be difficult to get a job within the public sector. In Greece if you are a non-voter it may be difficult to obtain a new passport or driver's license. There are no formal sanctions in Mexico or Italy but there may be possible social sanctions or sanctions based on random choice. This is called the 'innocuous sanction' in Italy, where it might for example be difficult to get a place in childcare for your child, but this is not formalised.

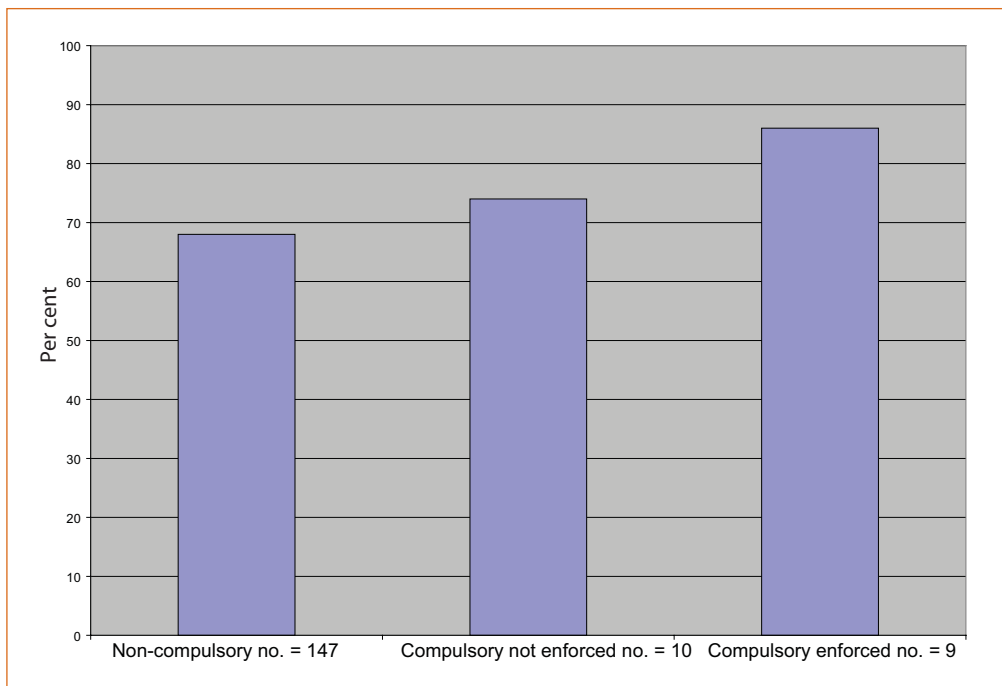
The impact of compulsory turnout

The evidence for impact on voting rates is impressive. In Europe those states with some element of compulsory turnout (approximately 18 per cent of the continent) are all situated in the top 45 per cent for turnout, and four of the top five countries have compulsory turnout regimes. In Australia the introduction of compulsory voting for Commonwealth elections in 1924 resulted in a dramatic increase in the voting levels from 57.9 per cent at the 1922 election to 91.3 per cent at the 1925 election, and turnout in Australia has averaged 94.5 per cent in the 24 elections since 1946. In Belgium turnout has averaged 92.7 per cent in nineteen elections since 1946 (Bennett 2005). Jackman (1987) found that compulsory turnout had the largest

impact on turnout out of a number of factors including competitiveness of elections, electoral disproportionality, the number of political parties and unicameralism versus bicameralism. Jackman argues that compulsory turnout is the only institutional mechanism that can achieve voting levels of over 90 per cent on its own.

Figure 4.1 demonstrates that cross-nationally, enforced compulsory turnout increases turnout by a little more than 15 per cent compared with countries where voting is voluntary. Even in countries where compulsory turnout is not enforced, turnout is higher from where it is not compulsory. However, there is clearly a strong correlation between the level of enforcement of compulsory voting laws and voter turnout.

Figure 4.1: International turnout rates according to whether voting is voluntary, compulsory but not enforced, or compulsory and enforced



Key: no. = number of elections

Source: Data from Voter turnout since 1945, IDEA www.idea.int

The impact of compulsory turnout tends to be greater the lower turnout is to start with. This is what makes it so important for second order elections, where turnout is generally very low. In Belgium, where voting is compulsory for provincial and local elections, average turnouts for both were just under 94 per cent between 1976 and 1994, practically the same as for national elections (Lijphart 1997). In Australia while turnout is compulsory for all Commonwealth, State and Territory elections, it is only compulsory for local government elections in some states, and the degree of compulsion for these varies markedly. However, those states with the highest degree of compulsion also have significantly higher turnout rates, averaging between 85 per cent and 95 per cent.

While this evidence is convincing and comprehensive, it does not prove causality. It could be that countries with high levels of voluntary participation are more likely to make turnout compulsory, rather than the other way around. However, within-country comparisons (before/after implementation/repeal of compulsory voting or across sub-national units with/without compulsory voting) still find that compulsory turnout has a large effect on aggregate voting levels with many other factors remaining constant. In Australia, for instance, in the nine elections for the House of Representatives before the implementation of compulsory voting in 1924 the average turnout was 64.2 per cent, while in the nine elections after implementation the average turnout had risen to 94.6 per cent: an increase of over 30 per cent. Similar patterns are discernable in the Netherlands where the abolition of compulsory voting in 1970 was followed by a drop in turnout of about 10 per cent.

Compulsory voting does not provide complete protection against falling turnout in mature democracies. In Belgium the number of non-voters is slowly rising despite compulsory voting, from 5.1 per cent of all citizens over the age of eighteen in 1977 to 8.8 per cent in 1995. However, this figure is still dramatically lower/better than its UK equivalent, and if compulsory turnout were rescinded in those countries where it

does exist, the effect on turnout would be far more significant, following the pattern of the Netherlands. In Belgium a 1991 election study found that 30 per cent of interviewees said they would not vote again if compulsory turnout were abolished, bringing turnout to around 60 to 70 per cent.

To this point, we have been reviewing the evidence that compulsory turnout increases voting rates. This, we argued, should in turn diminish voter inequality – as a general rule the lower the turnout, the high levels of voter inequality. Such evidence as there is confirms that compulsory turnout does indeed narrow the gaps between which different groups turnout. This is powerfully demonstrated by data from the Netherlands, where the abolition of compulsory voting in 1970 resulted in a striking increase in turnout inequality. The reported turnout for five educational groups in elections following abolition varied between 66 and 87 per cent, the highest levels of turnout being displayed by those groups with the highest levels of education. This is in comparison to the last parliamentary election conducted under compulsory voting in 1967, which showed turnouts for all groups above 90 per cent (Lijphart 1997). Simulations from Belgian also indicate that the fall in voting that would follow the abolition of compulsory turnout would be overwhelmingly concentrated among those with low levels of education and professional status, leading to a distortion of political representation (Hooghe and Pelleriaux 1998).

Compulsory turnout and election campaigns

Compulsory turnout not only increases turnout, it also cuts down the cost of political campaigning and encourages the political parties to engage with those groups least interested in politics or most dissatisfied with the political system. Where turnout is voluntary, most political parties focus on motivating their supporters to vote, rather than winning the support of undecided voters.

Both national and local campaigning tend to be directed to this end. Where turnout is compulsory, however, parties can generally rely on their supporters turning out. This can reduce the cost of electioneering and/or encourage parties to concentrate on winning over people who do not support any political party – people who often feel alienated from the political system. This in turn can increase the public's sense of political efficacy and their confidence in the political system (Lijphart 1997).

The history of compulsory turnout

Almost all western democracies that have adopted compulsory turnout instituted it in the early 20th century, shortly after the expansion of voter suffrage and the political organisation of the labour movements. In the UK the debate has continued intermittently since the 1920s, and the first private members bill on compulsory turnout was in 1921. Objections were similar to those raised today: enforcement is costly, difficult and time-consuming and it is unethical to force citizens to vote. Nevertheless, Winston Churchill, among others, supported making turnout obligatory (Watson and Tami 2001).

By 1950, turnout was approaching 84 per cent and the issue faded from political debate. The subject was not revived until falling turnout in the 1997 election brought the question back to prominence. Since then, a number of MPs and influential commentators have come out in support of compulsory turnout. These include Labour MPs Tom Watson, Mark Tami (Watson and Tami 2001) and Gareth Thomas¹²; several Cabinet-level ministers including Geoff Hoon, Leader of the House of Commons, in a speech for ippr (Hoon 2005) and Peter Hain; the journalists Simon Jenkins (Jenkins 2004) and Polly Toynbee (Toynbee 2005); and Nicholas Bowles, the head of Policy Exchange, a Conservative think tank. But despite the conclusion of the 1998 Home Affairs Select Committee report *Electoral Law and Administration* that a public debate was needed on the issue, the debate has never been joined.

Objections to compulsory voting

Compulsory voting is a contentious issue. Even in those countries that have long-established traditions of compulsory voting there are prominent voices arguing for its withdrawal, and in some countries, such as the Netherlands, it has been withdrawn. The objections can be classified under three main categories: the right not to vote; the resultant political imbalance; and the poor quality of political decision-making produced by enforcing participation of the uninterested and ill-informed.

12. Gareth Thomas introduced a Private Members Bill in favour of compulsory turnout in 2001.

The right not to vote

The most common objection to compulsory voting is that it denies people their right not to vote. The question is, even if compulsory voting does increase turnout and reduce class bias, is it legitimate, in a democratic country, to compel people to vote? And in what sense do elections conducted under such circumstances remain free and fair?

The first response to this is an important one: compulsory voting cannot, because of the secrecy of the ballot, require people to vote but only to attend the polling booth. In Belgium this distinction is made explicit in law. As already indicated, what we are really discussing is compulsory turnout. The citizen is not required to cast an actual valid ballot and, consequently, the right not to vote remains intact.

'Compulsory voting' does not, therefore, impinge on the right not to vote. However, it does impinge on the right not to take part in the political process at all. While this does represent some curtailment of personal freedom, it should be seen in context. Compulsions of one kind or another are quite usual within democratic society, from taxation, to jury duty, to the obligation to educate one's children. An element of compulsion is generally held to be acceptable so long as the resulting public good is of sufficient value. In the case of compulsory turnout, it can be argued that the benefits of increased legitimacy, representativeness, political equality and minimisation of elite power justify the element of compulsion, especially considering the relatively minor restriction of personal freedom that is entailed.

The right to withdraw democratic legitimacy

Related to this argument is the belief that compulsory turnout takes away the power to withdraw democratic legitimacy from a government by not voting. However, as we argue below, a vital part of a compulsory turnout system would be some form of formalised protest vote. This would in fact be a far more effective means of withdrawing democratic legitimacy than abstention, as it could not be misread as apathy. Compulsory turnout implemented in this way can, therefore, be seen as strengthening our democratic processes.

The political impact

Another concern about compulsory turnout is that it alters the political landscape. Some analysis suggests it can provide a boost to parties and policies of the left because it increases the proportions of low-income voters and these tend to vote for parties of the left. The evidence for this, however, is far from clear, particularly given decline in working class support for left parties over recent decades. In Australia, where turnout averages about 95 per cent of registered voters, Ian McAllister's 1986 study found that slightly higher turnout gave a perceptible boost to the Labour Party and that slightly lower turnout benefited the parties of the right, hypothesising that the abolition of compulsory turnout would strengthen this pattern and give the political right an inbuilt advantage (Lijphart 1997). But simulations of the possible impact of abolishing compulsory voting in Belgium suggested that there would be little impact on overall electoral results and that the fundamental balance of power would not be altered (Hooghe and Pelleriaux 1998).

More fundamentally, it could be argued that it is unprincipled to base arguments for or against this or that electoral reform on narrow party advantage. The principles at stake – representativeness or stability in the case of PR, inclusiveness in the case of compulsory turnout – should not be allowed to become the playthings of party politics.

The quality of political participation

There is concern that compulsory turnout compels the participation of apathetic and poorly informed citizens who would otherwise abstain and are unlikely to cast a well considered vote. There is also thought to be a higher rate of invalid or 'donkey' ballots (where voters simply select the candidate at the top of the ballot). Some opponents of compulsory turnout argue that this is the cause of the large number of informal votes in Australia¹³.

Of course it may be the case that some people would not consider their vote carefully, but no one can claim that voters in the current system base their vote on an in-depth analysis of the parties and issues at stake either; but this does not mean that they should not be included in the political process. The argument that

13. In Australia a House of Representatives ballot paper is informal if the ballot paper has no vote indicated on it or the ballot paper does not indicate the voter's first preference for one candidate and an order of preference for all remaining candidates.

some people cannot be relied upon to vote intelligently was also used against the extension of the franchise to women and the working classes in the 19th and 20th centuries and was rejected then, as it should be now.

It has also been suggested that far from reducing the quality of political participation, compulsory turnout may have a positive effect both on voters and political parties. A cross-national study by Gordon and Segura in 1997 found a small but statistically significant impact on political sophistication in countries with compulsory voting (Jackman 2001). In American and European election studies respondents interviewed prior to elections were found to vote in greater numbers than expected due to the stimulation of these interviews, suggesting that political stimulus may help to increase political interest, and the compulsion to engage with the democratic process may, therefore, increase the desire to become more informed about it (Lijphart 1997).

Implementing compulsory turnout

Although the central objections to compulsory turnout can be countered, implementing a compulsory turnout system in the UK would still be difficult. It would require public support to be effective.

Introducing an obligation to turn out would also require reciprocal obligations from government, ensuring that voting was as easy as possible, that a public information programme was in place so people were aware of their duty to vote, and a guarantee that every vote counted. It would also require compulsory registration and an effectively enforced system of sanctions for those who did not comply.

Public attitudes

Though compulsory turnout schemes impose sanctions on those who do not turn out, they need public backing. Without it, the sanctions would be unenforceable. Where the public backs compulsory turnout, by contrast, a relatively low level of enforcement is required. This raises the question, what does or what would the British public make of proposals to introduce compulsory turnout?

The simple answer is, we do not really know, largely because there is very little research on British public attitudes to compulsory turnout. But we do know that compulsory voting is popular with countries that have it. Australian polls taken since 1943 have shown consistent support of between 60 per cent and 70 per cent, and there seems to be little difference between major-party voters on the question (Bennett 2005).

But what research there is suggests that the British public has mixed feelings about compulsory turnout. MORI's state of the nation poll in 1991 showed that 49 per cent supported compulsory voting and 41 per cent were opposed to it (Home Affairs Select Committee 1998). (Interestingly, the middle classes (AB) were on the whole against compulsory voting but a clear majority of the working classes (C2 and DE) were in favour. Supporters of the three main parties were in favour (or against) by roughly equal margins). However, a Joseph Rowntree poll in 2000 found that 30 per cent of those polled agreed or tended to agree with the introduction of compulsory voting, while 49 per cent disagreed or tended to disagree. In a MORI survey carried out for the Electoral Commission after the 2001 general election, the most frequent response to the question of how could turnout be improved was 'through compulsory voting'. However, opinion appeared divided down the middle on the issue, with the same number of people opposing its introduction (49 per cent) as supporting it (47 per cent) (Electoral Commission 2005g).

Building public support for compulsory turnout

The public might not be firmly set against compulsory turnout, but winning people over to it and getting it established will not be easy. Public opinion is unformed and likely to prove volatile. At the same time politicians and the media could easily make political capital out of compulsory turnout, caricaturising those who support it as authoritarian or nannying. Here we make some suggestions for building public support for the measure.

First, as already indicated, it is important to stress from the beginning that the measure in question would make turnout, not voting, obligatory. Beyond this, careful consideration should be given to the possibility of providing people with a formal opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with all candidates standing or the system as a whole. Voters would still be able to do this as they can today by spoiling or not posting a ballot, but formalisation of the procedure would send a clear signal that the system took voter dissatisfaction seriously. Several countries provide voters with an opportunity to explicitly abstain from

expressing any preference at all, including Italy and Russia¹⁴. Some sort of similar abstention or protest option should be made available in the UK.¹⁵

Second, policymakers need to understand much more than they do about public attitudes to this measure - about how people think about and weigh the arguments for and against it. This understanding will make it much easier to develop proposals in keeping with public values and attitudes, and, once developed, to win support for them.

More substantially, those in favour of making turnout obligatory should ask themselves whether there are other measures that could accompany it, and that would make the public more inclined to support it. Could compulsory turnout be made part of a deal whereby the public get new rights as well as being given new duties? Would people be more willing to accept compulsory turnout, for instance, if it was accompanied by further measures to make voting easier (like weekend voting), by laws equalising the size of constituencies, or, most radically, by introducing a more proportional voting system for Westminster?

As already indicated, the present first-past-the-post system does not appear to deter people in great numbers from voting. Nevertheless, many people do object to it strongly on grounds of its unrepresentative nature - and polling suggests that most people would prefer a more proportional system. Supporters of PR might similarly consider whether they could gain from a strategy that presented compulsory turnout and PR as a package. The presence of compulsory voting on the ticket might well persuade many people who currently have doubts about PR to support it. This is perhaps particularly true of Labour politicians and sympathisers, who are wary of PR, but concerned about the exclusion of working class and disadvantaged groups from the electoral process.

We would also encourage the Government to consider encouraging local pilots of compulsory turnout (Electoral Commission 2005g)¹⁶. The Government is currently interested in devolving new powers to local government and to local people at the neighbourhood level (Miliband 2006), and this could provide another way of building compulsory turnout into a deal: local people get more power but also more obligations.

Finally, it will be vital to make clear from the outset that members of the public themselves should have the ultimate say on whether compulsory turnout should be introduced.

One option would simply be to hold a referendum on the issue. Any government is now more or less obliged to hold a referendum before reforming Westminster's voting system, so that if, as suggested above, electoral reform and compulsory voting were conceived as a package there would anyway be a referendum on compulsory voting. If compulsory turnout were introduced as a stand-alone measure, then the public should be given a chance to vote on this measure alone.

Another more radical option would be for government to create a 'citizen's assembly' - a commission of ordinary voters - to examine the case for compulsory turnout and, if there was support for it, to design a system for the UK. The Assembly's recommendations could then be put to the public in a referendum. (The Canadian state of British Columbia has already held a Citizens' Assembly on electoral reform, which recommended that the state adopt a Single Transferable Vote system. Ontario is about to follow suit.¹⁷)

Compulsory registration

To ensure that compulsory turnout did not create an incentive not to register in the first place, it would need to be accompanied by a system of compulsory registration. Currently, although registration is not compulsory, it is an offence not to return the registration form distributed at the annual census. The penalty is a fine of up to £1000 but this is almost never enforced.

Compulsory turnout would require moving to compulsory registration on the Australian model. All eligible Australian citizens are required to register, and failure to do so may be punished, on conviction, by

14. In Russian presidential elections voters are offered the option to vote 'Against All'. In the election on 26 March 2000 1.88 per cent of voters voted against all candidates (Hill 2002b).

15. It will of course be important to prevent the formation of an 'Against All' or 'None of the Above' party.

16. The Election and Representation Act of 2000 allows local authorities, with the agreement of central government, to experiment with new ways of voting and new ways of counting votes. Electoral experts consulted by ippr, however, report that it is not clear whether this would allow a local authority to pilot compulsory turnout.

17. See Rogers 2005; www.jhsnider.net/citizensassembly/; and www.democraticrenewal.gov.on.ca/english/assembly/.

a fine of up to AU\$50. However, once a person gives the Australian Electoral Commission a completed enrolment form he or she cannot be prosecuted for not enrolling before, no matter how long he or she has technically been in breach of the law. This ensures that the penalty for failure to enrol does not act as a disincentive for future enrolment.

Ensuring compliance

As shown above, compulsory turnout is most effective when there is a system to ensure compliance. Levels of enforcement vary across countries. Generally, however, countries with compulsory turnout impose fairly minor sanctions. The most common process for ensuring compliance begins with the opportunity to provide a valid reason for non-voting or to pay a small fine. This rises incrementally on refusal to pay, with a short term of imprisonment as a final and generally unused sanction.

Valid reasons tend to include illness, absence from the country and so on, although it is not generally considered to include indifference between candidates or political alienation. In Australia, citizens who do not provide a valid reason for not voting are fined AU\$20 – about £8 – though the fine can increase to a maximum of AU\$50 as a result of non-payment.

The implementation of sanctions does require considerable administrative resources, although these should decrease with time as the policy becomes embedded. There is also a danger that fines might fall disproportionately on poorer members of society, as they are already less likely to vote. Campaigns both to convince the public and to heighten awareness of the obligation to vote should, therefore, be focused on the communities that already have the lowest turnout rates. Fines should also be low, so that while the principle is asserted, they do not compound hardship.

As Watson and Tami (2001) have pointed out, the greatest risk faced by any compulsory voting scheme is that large numbers of the public might refuse to co-operate with it. The approaches we have outlined above – conceptualising and presenting compulsory turnout as a deal accompanying its introduction with other measures that would advance the ‘rights’ of voters, and holding a referendum, perhaps alongside a citizen’s assembly – should ensure that any measure that is introduced has broad public support. Nevertheless, were compulsory voting to be successfully introduced, government would need to monitor its development very closely, ensuring that the measure did not heavily discriminate against the very groups it is meant to favour – the groups that currently turn out in very low numbers.

Case study: compulsory voting in Australia

All eligible Australian citizens on the electoral roll are required to cast a vote in federal and Commonwealth elections, unless they can provide a valid and sufficient reason for not voting.

Valid and sufficient reasons for not voting include:

- Abstaining from voting being part of the elector's religious duty
- Not being present in Australia on polling day
- Holding the belief that it is morally wrong to vote
- Being physically obstructed, either through sickness, natural events or accident.
- Being diverted to save life, prevent crime or assist in a disaster.

Reasons not considered to be valid or sufficient include:

- Having conscientious objections to compulsory voting, falling short of a belief that it is morally wrong to vote
- Believing that compulsory voting is inconsistent with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights
- Having no preference for any of the candidates.

The process of enforcement

- The Electoral Commission is required to send three notices to all those who appear to have failed to vote, asking for a valid and sufficient reason or requiring the non-voter to pay a fine of AU\$20 – about £8.
- Court proceedings for failure to vote are prohibited if the elector pays the penalty or has a valid and sufficient reason for failing to vote.
- If, after receiving the third notice, the elector does not pay the penalty, the Electoral Commission may prosecute the elector for failure to vote. The court may impose a maximum penalty of AU\$50 – about £20.
- A magistrate cannot sentence an elector who has been convicted of the offence of failure to vote to imprisonment. However, if an elector is fined by the court and refuses or neglects to pay the fine within the time allowed for payment, an arrest warrant may be issued.

Levels of non-compliance

In the general election of 1993, of the 11,384,638 people on the electoral roll, 96.22 per cent, or 10,954,258 people voted. Following the election, 23,230 people paid a AU\$20 penalty to the Australian Electoral Commission and 4,412 non-voters were summonsed to appear before the court. At least 43 non-voters who had failed to pay their fine received sentences of one or two days in jail.

As of 6 October 2005, procedures for the 2004 election had not been finalised. However, 33 summonses had been issued, one of these cases had been dismissed, 22 convictions had been recorded, one case had been proven but no conviction had been recorded and nine cases were still to be heard (Bennett 2005).

Conclusions and recommendations

As voting has fallen over recent years, so inequality in turnout has increased. Young people and poor people – and above all young, poor people – are now much less likely to vote than their older and richer compatriots. These are troubling developments for democracy and for under-represented groups – all the more so as they look unlikely to reverse themselves if left alone.

A full strategy to raise turnout and voter equality will have to have a number of fronts. Among other things, it will have to tackle social exclusion and deprivation – especially place-based deprivation. It will need to strengthen local campaigning. And it will have to improve confidence in the political system, and find ways of drawing more people into civic and political life. The evidence all points to compulsory turnout, however, as one particularly effective method for raising turnout and reducing voter inequality. It could also prompt parties to spend less time persuading their supporters to vote and more time canvassing undecided or disengaged voters.

As we have suggested, it is difficult to object to compulsory turn out in principle. Government exists in a large part to defend our rights. But it can only do so by imposing duties on us. Compared to many of the duties it imposes, the duty to attend a polling station or sign a postal ballot every year or so is hardly exacting. As we have also suggested, arguments for compulsory turnout are not as unrealistic as they are sometimes portrayed.

There is growing political interest in and sympathy with compulsory voting among policymakers and politicians, within the Labour Party and beyond. And the little attitudinal research there has been suggests that the public are at least not firmly set against it. Some have suggested they are in fact supportive of it.

Finally, the measures that we have suggested should precede or accompany compulsory turnout – proper public consultation, the possibility of linking it with other forms of electoral reform, and the guarantee of holding a referendum – make the measure much less risky, politically, than might at first be thought.

The time has come to take compulsory turnout seriously.

Compulsory turnout: our conclusions and recommendations

Over recent years turnout has fallen and the difference in the rate at which different groups turn out has grown dramatically. Some groups – mainly older and richer groups – now exercise much more influence through the ballot box than younger and poorer groups.

Compulsory turnout is the most effective way of addressing low turnout and high turnout inequality. A comparatively simple reform, it does not violate any important liberties and it could probably alone reverse the trends of recent years and return turnout to post-war levels or higher.

Compulsory turnout is popular in countries that have it. The British public appear to have mixed views about it, with about half inclined to favour it and half inclined against it.

Compulsory turnout can reduce the cost of political campaigning and/or encourage political parties to focus on winning the support of undecided and alienated voters.

For these reasons we believe the time has come for a serious debate on compulsory turnout.

We favour a system that would make turnout compulsory, while giving voters the right to endorse a 'none of the above option' on the ballot paper.

We believe that compulsory turnout should only be introduced if the public support it in a referendum.

We favour a system that would impose a very modest fine on people who did not vote and did not present a valid reason for not voting. Valid reasons for not voting would include being unwell, having to look after someone who is unwell, being out of the country, and having unavoidable work or family commitments.

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