

Commission Research Paper

The decline in political participation and involvement in Britain: an introduction

This paper does not have an Executive Summary as a full summary is provided in the Conclusion.

Introduction

This paper aims to provide a clear and detailed introduction to the key issues and debates surrounding the decline of political participation and involvement in Britain. It is structured as a series of answers to five key questions:

1. What is the problem?
2. Why is this a problem?
3. How serious is the problem?
4. What solutions have been attempted to reverse the decline?
5. What about other forms of political participation?

1. What is the problem?

It is now widely accepted that levels of participation and involvement in established democratic processes and politics in Britain has either declined or remained very low in recent years. This conclusion has been reached on the basis of two main facts.

- **The decline in election turnout:** General Election turnout has been in serious decline since 1992 and dropped to its lowest post-war level in 2001 by a striking 12% (Figure 1). In some constituencies turnout is extremely low (Table 1). In addition, local election turnouts have been very low for decades but have still continued to decline (Figure 2). European Parliamentary elections have not seen a serious decline in turnout but have remained at very low levels since their inception in 1979 (Figure 3). This turnout problem is the key issue for many politicians, commentators and academics.

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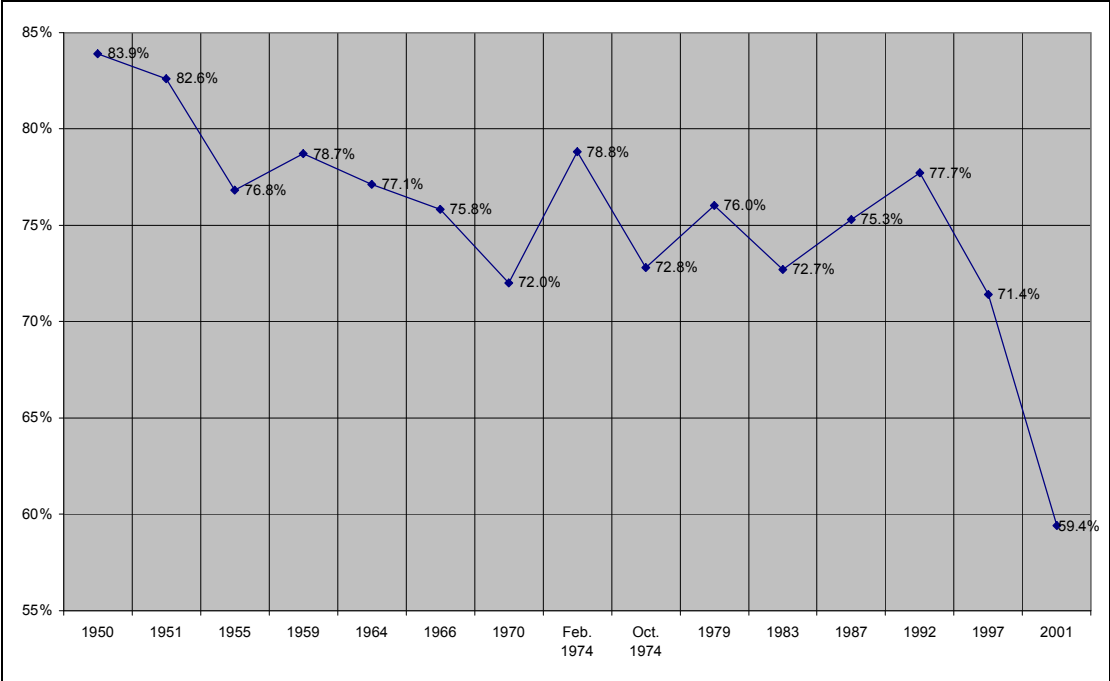


Figure 1: General Election turnout 1945-2001

Source: House of Commons library research

Constituency	Turnout
National turnout	59.4%
Liverpool Riverside	34.1%
Manchester Central	39.1%
Glasgow Shettleston	39.7%
Glasgow Maryhill	40.1%
Salford	41.6%

Table 1: Lowest constituency turnouts – General Election 2001

Source: House of Commons Library research

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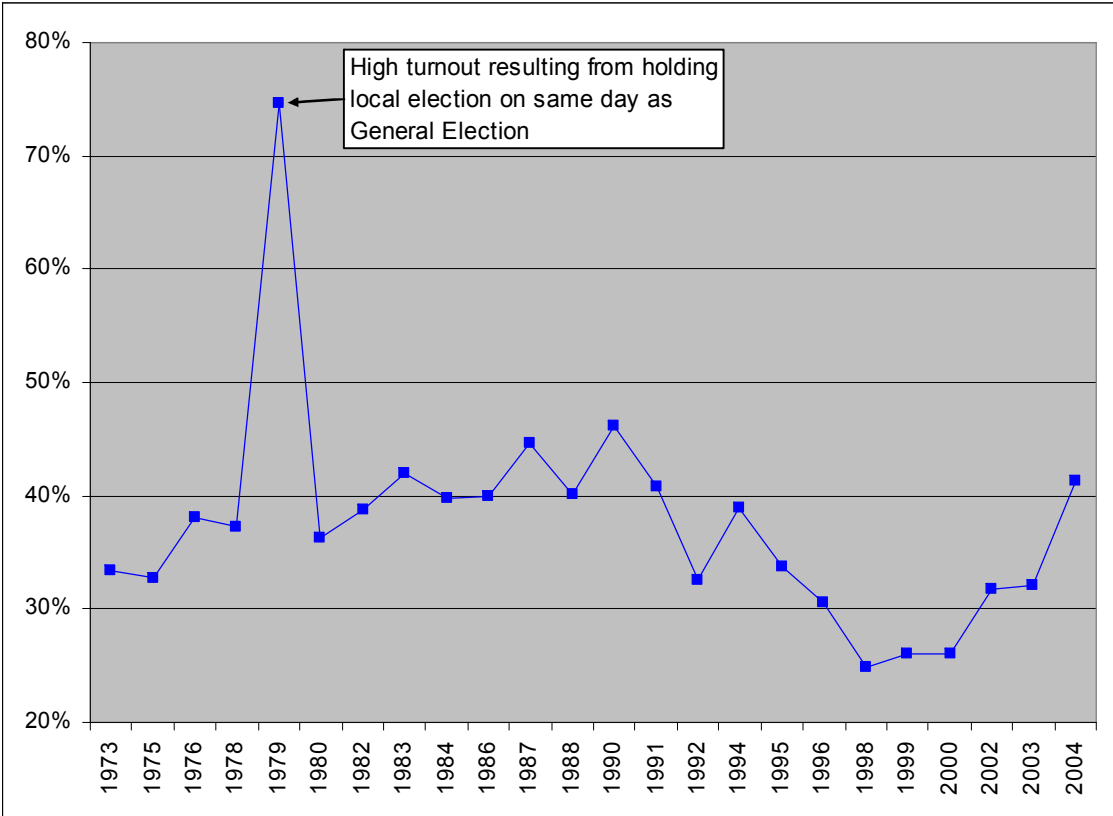


Figure 2: Local Election Turnouts (English Metropolitan Councils)¹

Source: Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre

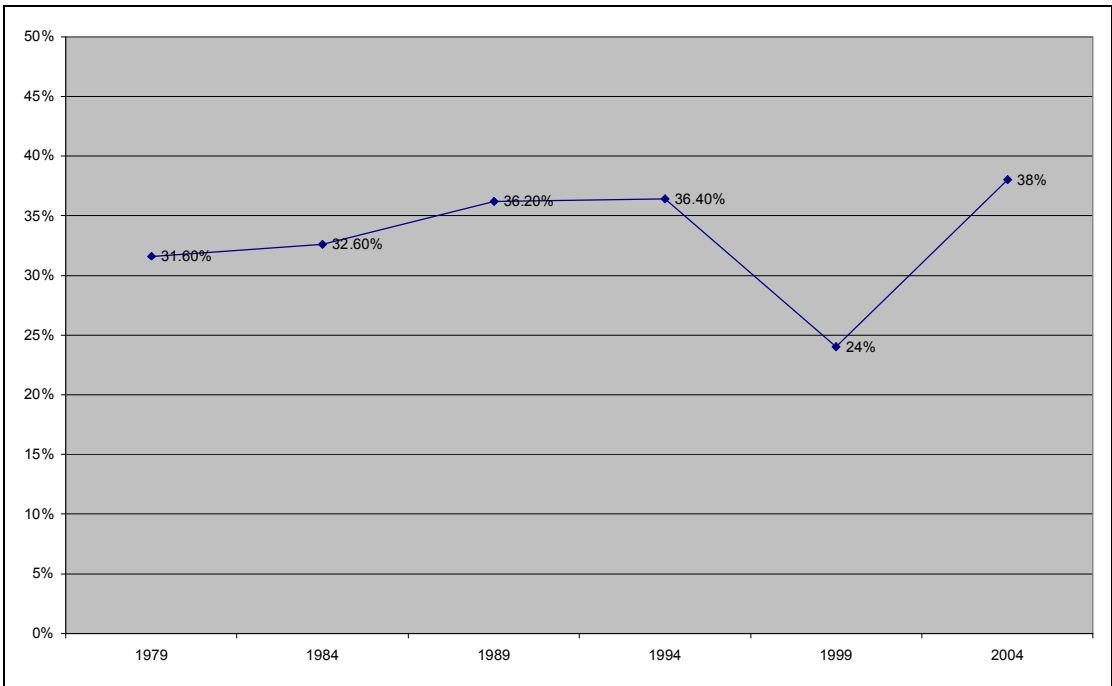


Figure 3: European Parliament election turnout 1979-2004

Source: International IDEA

- **The decline in party membership:** Party membership has experienced an ongoing decline since the early 1960s. Membership of the three main parties in 2001 was less than 25% of its 1964 level (Figure 4).

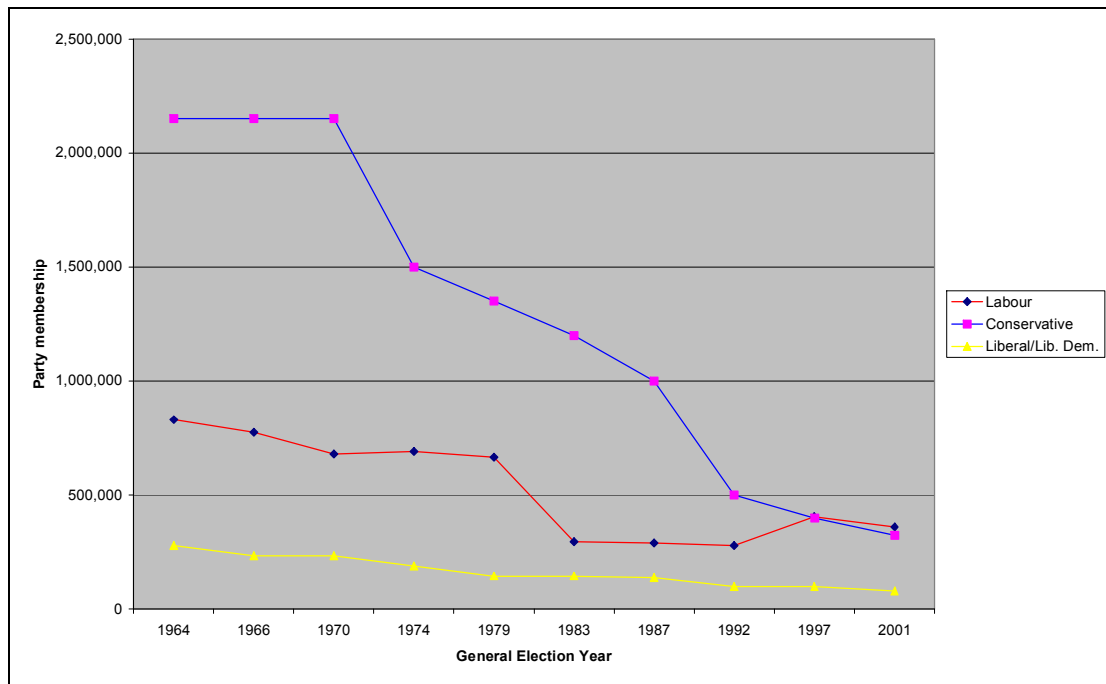


Figure 4: Membership of the three main parties 1964-2001²

Source: Beetham *et al.*, *Democratic Audit*, 2002

2. Why is this a problem?

There are many reasons why declining participation, involvement and trust in politics and political decision-making are a problem. All relate to the fact that they undermine key principles or practices associated with democracy.

- **Loss of mandate and legitimacy:** Clearly, the fundamental feature of any representative democracy is that a Government derives its legitimacy and mandate to govern by winning the consent of its community through periodic elections. An ongoing and serious decline in turnouts could mean that British governments no longer have a mandate to govern. There is particular concern that should turnout drop below 50% at the next General Election, there will be a popular perception that the elected government does not possess legitimacy. Some have argued that such a crisis of legitimacy already exists in local government where the great majority of turnouts have not reached over 50% for many years.

It should be pointed-out that a drop below 50% is a symbolic rather than a real barrier. This would not indicate that the elected government had broken historical precedent by taking office with a minority of popular consent. Due to the nature of the electoral system, the highest share of the vote for a winning party since 1945 is

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49.7% and the highest turnout is 84.1%. Therefore, it is usual for British governments to be elected by a minority of those eligible or registered to vote.

Thus, a continuing drop in turnout could be taken to indicate the degree to which a very large section of the British public feel disillusioned with politics and the political process but this would be a political rather than constitutional crisis of popular legitimacy.

- **Loss of political equality:** A fundamental principle or aspiration of democracy is the notion that all have an equal say or an equal right to participate in government. However, the decline in turnout has varied considerably across different population groups. Most notably, under-25s, ethnic communities, less affluent economic classes, and certain regions have lower turnouts than the population as a whole (Table 2 & 3). This may suggest that, for whatever reason, specific groups and individuals are being excluded from the democratic process leading to effective disenfranchisement and hence undermining political equality.

	2001 Election Turnout %
All	59
By age	
18-24	39
25-34	46
35-44	59
45-54	65
55-64	69
65	70
By social class	
AB	68
C1	60
C2	56
DE	53
By ethnicity	
White	60
Non-white	47

Table 2: 2001 General Election turnout by age, class and ethnicity

Source: MORI

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	2001 Election Turnout %
National	59
London	55
North West	56
North East	56
Yorks. & Humber	57
Scotland	58
East Midlands	59
Northern Ireland	59
West Midlands	61
Wales	61
South East	62
South West	65

Table 3: 2001 General Election turnout by region

Source: House of Commons library research

- **Loss of dialogue:** Dialogue between government and governed has long been accepted as a positive outcome of democracy ensuring ongoing legitimacy between elections, the development of effective policies, and the creation of a sense of trust in and ownership over government decisions. However, a decline in involvement in democratic processes means this dialogue is under threat. Political parties are often identified as the institutions which played the central role in maintaining this dialogue, so their serious decline in membership is regarded as particularly worrying in this context.
- **Loss of effective political recruitment:** Political parties are the main way by which politicians are recruited to represent the people and ultimately lead the country. The decline in party membership means that this recruitment is increasingly made from a much smaller pool than was the case in the past. This may have a negative influence on both the calibre and diversity of those being recruited to elected positions at local and national levels.
- **The rise of undemocratic forces:** The damage to legitimacy posed by declining turnouts may offer opportunities to anti-democratic and/or populist forces to benefit from this situation by claiming that they better represent the views of large sections of the British people and to denigrate democracy. It could be argued that recent higher levels of support for the British National Party and the UK Independence Party are early examples of this process.
- **The risk of authoritarian ‘creep’:** The increasing failure of large sections of the population to engage with the political process may lead to a situation where governments are no longer effectively held to account. Over a period of time, this could encourage a gradual growth of authoritarianism in Britain where policy and law is made in consultation with a small coterie of supporters and with little reference to the wishes of the people. Under such circumstances, the processes of democracy, including General Elections, become empty rituals. The more critical commentators may argue that this situation has already arrived.

3. How serious is the problem?

Some have argued that the decline in political participation and involvement is the result of historically specific factors and can be addressed through relatively minor reform and will be rectified over time and as circumstances become more favourable to political activity. Thus, the decline offers no fundamental challenge to the democratic system nor democratic principles in Britain. This 'optimistic approach' was employed by those speaking on behalf of the Government during and after the 2001 General Election³.

The two arguments which are employed to uphold this view are as follows.

- Britain's sustained period of economic growth and stability since the mid-1990s has generated a high level of personal satisfaction reducing a sense of grievance against the political system or wider social and economic arrangements. As a result, the incentives to change governments or government policy is lower than historical levels. This argument suggests that decline in turnout is actually a sign of a wider economic and social well-being and that participation and involvement will probably increase if and when Britain suffers economic problems.
- The weakness of the Conservative opposition has meant that the results of British elections since the mid-1990s have been foregone conclusions leading to a widespread sense that voting will have no impact on the final outcome. As such, while the Conservative Party fails to mount a significant challenge to the Government, turnout is likely to remain low. This view is upheld by the fact that less competitive elections *have* tended to see a limited decline in turnout (Table 3). It is also supported by data showing that turnout in marginal parliamentary seats tends to be higher than in safe seats (Table 4).

Average turnout in General Elections since 1950 popularly perceived as competitive	76.3%
Average turnout in General Elections since 1950 popularly perceived as uncompetitive	71.5%

Table 4: Average turnouts in competitive and uncompetitive General Elections⁴

Data sourced from: House of Commons library research

Average turnout in nine marginal seats in 2001 General Election	65.8%
Average turnout in nine safe seats in 2001 General Election	61.0%

Table 5: Average turnouts in nine marginal and nine safe seats in the 2001 General Election⁵

Data sourced from: House of Commons library research

While elements of the optimistic approach may explain the decline, it is at best a partial account as the following objections make clear.

- Associating the decline in participation and involvement with economic well-being is difficult to sustain in the light of the fact that similar declines have occurred across most advanced democracies during the 1990s (Figure 5), many of which have not enjoyed Britain's recent history of sustained economic growth. This cross-national phenomenon also suggests that powerful social and economic factors may be promoting decline rather than the shorter term causes identified by the optimistic approach.

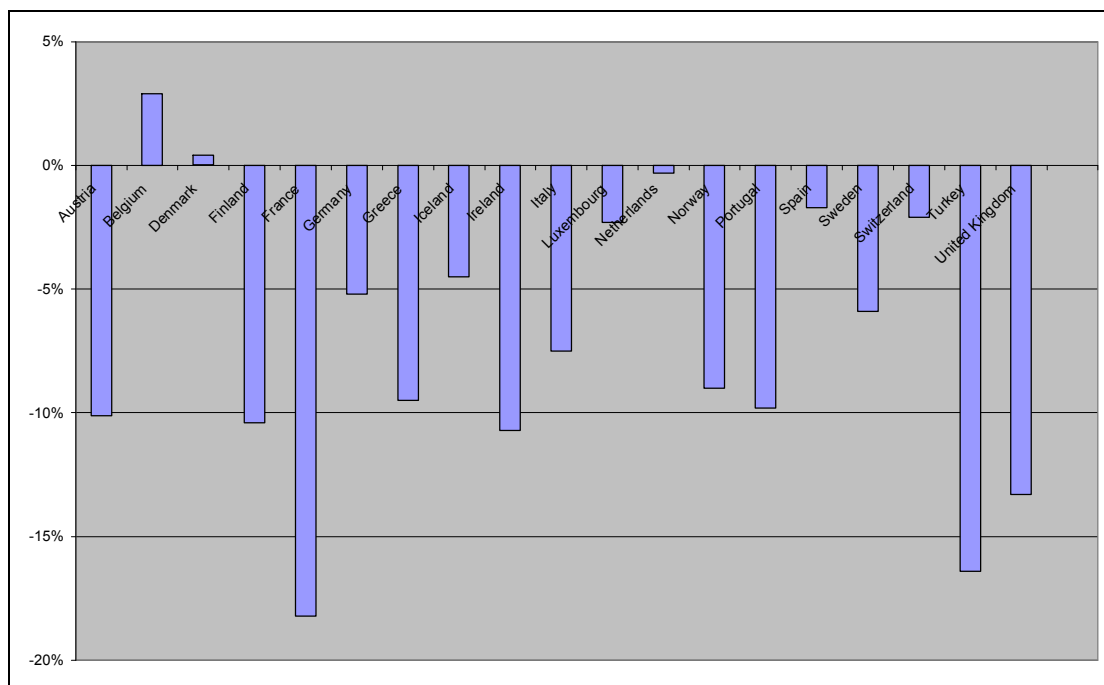


Figure 5: Change in turnout in Western Europe; comparing turnout for most recent national parliamentary election with fifth most recent⁶

Data sourced from: International IDEA

- The notion that periods of economic well-being produce lower turnouts is not borne out by recent British history. Accepting of course that many factors influence levels of voting, it is interesting that average turnout during the relatively prosperous period between the 1955 and 1966 elections was 77.15%, while average turnouts during the economically troubled period between the 1970 and 1983 elections was 74.5% - the reverse of what would be predicted by the optimistic approach.
- Furthermore, the optimistic approach cannot explain some key features of the decline:
 - It does not give adequate reasons for the long-term decline in party membership and local election turnout.
 - It does not explain why the decline is more marked amongst certain sections of the population than others. Indeed, if economic well-being and a sense of personal satisfaction were causes of political disengagement, higher rather than lower

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participation amongst ethnic communities and less affluent social groups might be expected.

- It cannot explain the severity of the decline since the early 1990s given that economic growth and lack of political competition have existed in the past without causing such a significant drop in turnout.

- Shorter-term factors such as economic well-being and lack of political competition cannot explain low levels of trust in politicians (Table 5) and a weak sense of influence over political decisions (Table 6 & 7) amongst the public which have existed for many years and continue today.

Year	Do trust	Don't trust
1993	14	79
1997	15	78
1999	23	72
2000	20	74
2001	17	77
2002	19	73
2003	18	75
2004	22	71

Table 6: Percentages of those asked whether they do or don't trust politicians to tell the truth

Source: MORI

Year	1963	1986	1987	1991	1994	1996	1997	1998	2001
%	59	71	69	60	66	62	58	60	55

Table 7: Percentage agreeing with statement: 'people like me have no say in what government does'

Source: British Election Surveys;
British Social Attitudes;
Civic Culture Survey.

	Should	Do
1994	78	16
1996	78	13
2000	70	19

Table 8: Percentages of those believing they *should* have a great deal or fair amount of power between elections compared to those believing they *do* have a great deal or fair amount of power.

Source: Dunleavy *et al.*, *Voices of the People*, 2001

For these reasons, it is clear that there are longer-term and profound, cross-national factors involved in the decline which indicates that the problem is more serious than the optimistic approach allows. This suggests that participation, involvement and trust will not simply be renewed as a matter of course. Some degree of concerted action will need to be taken to understand and address the underlying causes, if the trends are to be reversed.

This process of understanding the causes and making recommendations for how to address the decline is fundamental to the work of the Commission. Initial discussions of causes and solutions can be found in *Commission Paper 2: The Causes of the Decline in Formal Political Participation and Involvement in Britain – A Literature Review* and in *Commission Paper 4: Innovations in Democratic Practice – Interim Report of the Innovation Study*.

The above reasoning should not be taken however to mean that democracy is in imminent danger of collapse. Polls consistently show a widespread popular wish to be consulted upon and take part in political decisions (Table 6). Nevertheless, as the list of potential problems outlined above shows, if current trends are not addressed, then there may well be serious consequences for the health of British democracy in the near future.

wanted a say over government decisions	75%
felt ordinary voters should have a great deal or fair amount of influence over government policies	90%
consider it a duty to vote	74%
Disagree that voting is unimportant	90%

Table 9: results of some recent opinion poll questions on democracy and influence

Sources: MORI /Electoral Commission (2001;2004); ICM/Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (2004)

4. What solutions have been attempted to reverse the decline?

A number of different attempts have been made to improve levels of participation and involvement either directly or indirectly.

- **Constitutional reform:** Constitutional reform was always about much more than increasing participation, involvement and trust. However, it has often been argued by reformers that change would encourage participation and a sense of engagement between the government and the governed. The significant programme of reform undertaken by the Labour Government since 1997 has clearly not delivered this. Indeed, the main plank of that reform programme, the devolved assemblies and the London Mayor, have not enjoyed high turnouts (see figure below).

Election	Turnout %
Scottish Parliament 2003	49.4
Welsh Assembly 2003	38.2
London Mayor 2004	36.9
London Assembly 2004	36.0

Table 10: Recent turnouts for devolved institutions

Source: House of Commons library research

The claim often made by reformers that proportional representation is the key reform which would re-engage with the public and inspire greater involvement is not easy to judge. On one hand, the devolved assemblies are elected by PR and the elections to the European Parliament in the UK have been conducted under a PR system since 1999 and, as the table and figure above shows, neither have enjoyed high turnouts. On the other hand, the devolved assemblies and the European Parliament have limited powers which might make them unattractive to voters. This is an area the Commission may wish to investigate in greater detail.

- **Alternative voting techniques:** The Government has experimented with various alternatives to the traditional method of voting in person at a polling station. A number of pilots were held during the 2001 General Election and 2004 Local and European Elections, including voting in shops, extending opening hours for polling stations, and holding all-postal ballots. Only the latter seemed to make any significant difference to turnout although this remained under 50% in the areas in which it was piloted. Concerns have also been raised about the integrity of an all-postal ballot.
- **More Public Involvement in Decision Making:** One response to the sense of disengagement expressed through opinion polls is to make greater efforts to consult and involve the wider public and/or stakeholders in key political decisions. As such, there has been a recent increase in the use of forums and techniques such as Local Strategic Partnerships, citizens' panels, questionnaire surveys, internet consultation and focus groups. In addition, the Government has established processes such as the Big Conversation and the national debate on genetically modified crops to engage more effectively with the public. Research shows that those directly involved in well-planned consultative exercises that have a clear impact on decision-making find the experience very useful and experience an increase in their interest in and understanding of policy and politics⁷. However, the impact of these new developments on general levels of participation, involvement and trust is unclear and requires further research.
- **Citizenship Education:** Courses designed to educate young people about civic values, democracy and politics are now part of the National Curriculum. This policy was developed and implemented as a direct response to declining levels of interest, knowledge and involvement in politics and community activity amongst young people. Longitudinal research assessing the impact such courses have on the values and activities of school pupils and leavers is currently being conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research to be completed in 2010. Interim findings have so far only reported on the quality of the courses and not on their impact on pupil attitudes or behaviour⁸.
- **Greater Regulation and Scrutiny:** A number of reforms have been implemented by the Government in a direct attempt to restore public trust in politicians following many years of political sleaze and scandal. Some feel that this decline in trust is responsible for the decline in turnout (this is discussed in detail in Commission paper 2). These have included establishing: a Parliamentary Ombudsman to enforce principles of good conduct and probity within parliament; a code of conduct for local councillors; a compulsory register of donations for political parties; and making the register of interests for MPs mandatory.

5. What about other forms of political participation?

The current debate on political participation has tended to focus on voting and party membership. However, there are other well-established forms of political activity which may be equally significant in the context of the Commission's deliberations. Although research on these areas of activity is not as developed as that on voting and party membership, there are good indications that participation remains either stable or has increased.

To inform this section, the Inquiry Team has created a short typology of political activity. As with all such typologies, the distinctions between the categories are sometimes blurred and the range of activity included within each category may be open to interpretation. However, it is felt that this typology presents a more accurate and useful approach to the current state of political involvement in Britain for the purposes of the Commission.

- **Electoral Activity:** this includes voting in elections and statutory referenda; standing for election; membership of a political party; donating resources to a political party.
- **Pressure Activity:** this includes taking part or supporting the wide array of activities designed to influence decision-making by powerful individuals and organisations without seeking electoral advantage. Popular activities in this category include: attending demonstrations; signing petitions; lobbying elected representatives; sending letters or postcards to elected representatives; donating resources to campaign bodies.
- **Consultation Activity:** this includes taking part in the various exercises in public consultation now regularly operated by government and government agencies as mentioned above. These include a sizeable array of methods including, amongst others: survey questionnaires; citizens' panels; focus groups; public forums; internet consultation; and partnership bodies.
- **Do-it-Yourself Activity:** this includes activity designed to bring about some degree of social, political or economic change without recourse to methods or processes which aim to influence decision-makers. There are many forms of this activity, the two most common examples include: establishing mutual associations such as credit unions or co-operatives; campaigning to influence personal behaviour such as promoting vegetarianism or anti-racism.

Three key points arise from taking a wider look at political activity beyond the electoral.

- Electoral activity may be in decline but the same cannot be said for pressure activity which has increased in recent years (Figure 6).

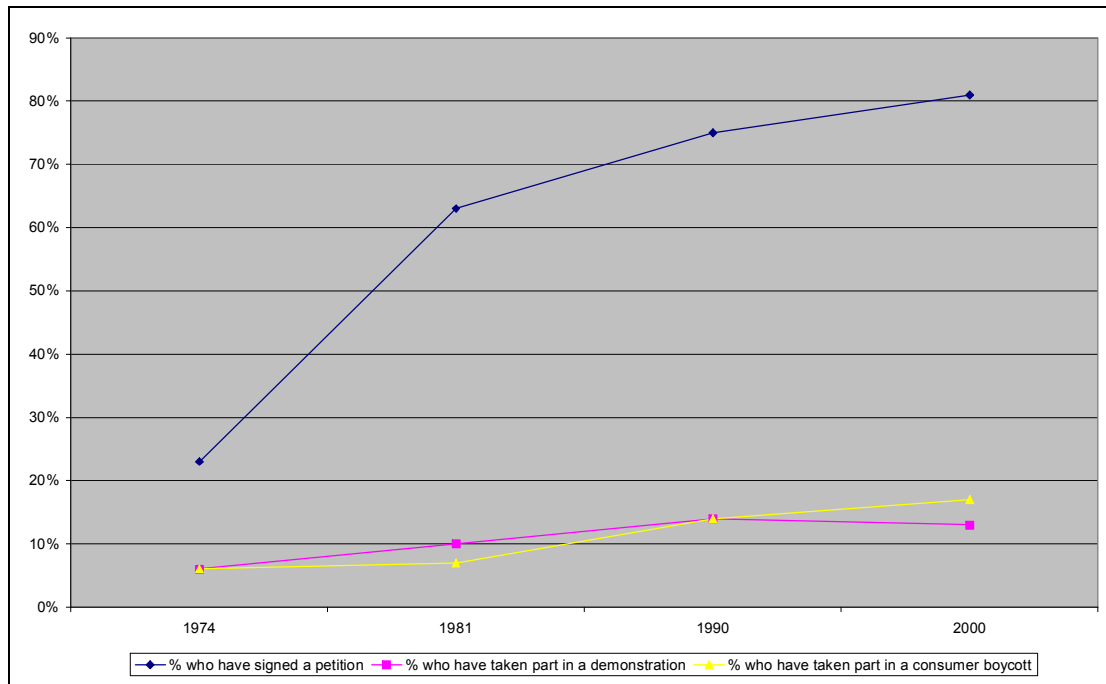


Figure 6: Rise in pressure activity in Britain⁹

Source: World Values Survey

The reasons for this are open to question and research remains inconclusive. Possible explanations include the following.

- Pressure activity is perceived as more effective at achieving political change than electoral activity.
- Pressure activity is more expressive and clearly oppositional and thus better meets the disaffected public mood of the last few years.
- There has been a long-term shift in the way civic involvement and political activity is understood (e.g. more single-issue oriented and less deferential), particularly by the young, which better coincides with the aims and style of pressure activity than electoral activity.
- The decline in electoral activity and rise of pressure activity are not necessarily linked. The decline in turnout is due to disengagement by members of less affluent social classes who are *not* engaged in pressure activity. While the rise in pressure activity involves more affluent social classes who are still actually voting (Table 8).

All of these possible explanations are explored in greater detail in Commission Paper 2. Exploring the differing levels of electoral and pressure activity is likely to be central to any consideration of increasing and deepening participation.

Occupational class	Managerial/ professional	Other white collar	Skilled manual	Unskilled manual
% having engaged in at least one protest act	43.7	43.1	32.4	25.6

Table 11: Pressure activity by occupational class¹⁰

Source: World Values Survey, mid-1990s

- Consultation activity certainly seems to be a growing and innovative area of engagement with the public¹¹ but remains under-researched and there is as yet no clear sense of whether it is encouraging participation and involvement beyond those directly involved in a participation exercise.
- DIY activity is a well-established approach to political and economic change and has seen the development of innovative forms of political involvement in recent years but remains even less researched than consultation activity. Whether more people are taking part in DIY activity or whether it has remained stable or gone into decline is simply unknown. Both this area and consultation activity may be topics which the Commission may wish to explore in more detail.

Conclusion

The conclusions that can be drawn from the above discussion are as follows:

- Participation and involvement in the established institutions and processes of British democracy are in decline;
- the negative impact of the decline on democratic institutions and principles has the potential to be multi-faceted and profound;
- short-term factors may explain some part of this decline but more profound, long-term causes are also at work;
- a number of attempts have been made by government and its agencies to reverse the decline in electoral activity but the impact of these to date has been negligible or unclear;
- while there has been a significant decline in participation, involvement and trust in electoral activity, the same cannot be said of pressure activity which has increased; levels of engagement with consultation activity and DIY activity remains unresearched and unclear.

While these conclusions provide a useful starting point for the Commission's deliberations, they raise as many questions as they answer. Proposals for how the Commission may wish to approach these questions can be found in the other Commission Papers; in particular, *Commission paper 3: Analytical Framework and Proposals for Research Approach*.

¹ There are no statistics aggregating turnout for all types of local elections since the early 1970s to the present day; English Metropolitan Councils have been chosen to give an indication of local turnouts which tend to follow broadly similar patterns for all types of authority.

² Party membership figures are notoriously inaccurate but the trend over forty years is clear.

³ 'Turnout drops to lowest since 1918', *The Guardian*, 8/7/01

'Turnout at 80-year low', www.news.bbc.co.uk, 8/7/01

'Tony Blair's Interview with Guardian Journalists – Part Three', *The Guardian*, 11/9/01

⁴ Clearly some General Elections have been perceived by the electorate as foregone conclusions and others as much tighter races. However, for some elections, it is a matter of judgement whether the public perceived them as competitive or otherwise. Following consultation with a specialist in post-war British history, General Elections were classified as follows for the purposes of Figure 8:

discounted: 1945 (turnout abnormally affected by registration and voting difficulties)

competitive: 1950; 1951; 1964; 1970; February 1974; October 1974; 1979; 1992

uncompetitive: 1955; 1959; 1966; 1983; 1987; 1997; 2001

⁵ Calculations were based on the three most marginal and three safest seats for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties respectively. Rather than simply using the most marginal and safest seats irrespective of party elected, this method was chosen to reduce the influence of social class on turnout figures as the safest seats tend to be less affluent Labour constituencies and the most marginal seats more affluent Conservative and Liberal Democrat constituencies.

⁶ In all but one case, the fifth most recent national parliamentary election occurred in the 1980s.

⁷ V. Lowndes *et al.*, 'Trends in Public Participation: Part 2 – Citizens' Perspectives', *Public Administration*, Vol. 79, No. 2, 2001

⁸ Details and interim findings can be found at: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/citlong.asp>

⁹ Similar rises in pressure activity are found across Western Europe and the USA, see:

P. Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002;

Institute for Social Research, 'Activism Rises Around the World', *ISR Update*, Michigan, University of Michigan, Vol. 2, No. 3, Fall 2003

¹⁰ These figures are Europe-wide rather than the UK alone.

¹¹ ODPM, *Public Participation in Local Government: A Survey of Local Authorities*, ODPM, 2002

If you have any questions or comments on this paper or any other aspect of the research for the Commission, email Adam Lent at adam@powerinquiry.org .