

COMMISSION BRIEFING RESEARCH PAPER
Analytical Approach and Research Programme – Initial proposal

Introduction

This brief paper suggests three ways in which the list of causes presented in *The causes of the decline in 'electoral activity' in Britain: a Literature Review* can be ordered and explained. Developing a broad approach of this sort is vital with regards to setting the 'tone' of the Inquiry and identifying the key causes and the types of recommendations upon which the Commission will focus. It is recommended therefore that the Commission discuss the extent to which they endorse one or other of these approaches at some length.

This paper will be expanded to include key themes, questions and research objectives once the Inquiry Team receive a sense from the Commission of how they wish to proceed based on this paper's suggestions or their own proposals.

The Commission may wish to use the witness sessions and research programme to aid this decision while keeping in mind that an approach needs to be defined early to enable exploration of appropriate recommendations.

The three possible ways of ordering the various causes can be described as follows:

- the political thesis
- the post-industrial thesis
- the combined thesis

Although, these names have been selected for the purposes of this paper and the Commission, they broadly describe approaches which are developing within the literature and within policy circles.

It is also possible to approach the issue in a much broader way by discussing the legitimacy and significance of each of the seven types outlined in the *Literature Review* or even by discussing each of the causes themselves. Commissioners may want to keep this approach in mind while reading this paper should none of the three theses below appeal.

The Political Thesis

This thesis generally reflects the view that exists amongst the most influential British political scientists. This is particularly the case for those academics who rely heavily on quantitative analysis. It is also the view that most senior politicians expound.

The 'political thesis' suggests that the problem of political participation arises largely from an unfortunate coincidence of short and medium term causes. The most significant of these are:

- lack of competitive elections
- similarity of the main parties
- low trust in the probity and competence of politicians
- declining sense of civic duty particularly duty to vote
- lack of political knowledge
- problems of mobilising agencies particularly the shift from collective to individual political activity (e.g. the rise of 'cheque book activism')
- problems of the media – particularly its role in promoting distrust and weakening political knowledge.

Those relying on this thesis would rarely if ever attempt to set these causes within a wider social, economic or historical context. Those academics most wedded to a quantitative approach would not necessarily look for reasons why these causes have arisen but simply identify the extent to which they are significant.

Clearly, if the Commission decided to adopt this approach, it would focus most intensively on the above causes. Further research work may need to be done to explore the relative significance of each cause and possibly to investigate how exactly they work to dampen participation. The Commission would develop recommendations to resolve some or all of these causes.

The Post-Industrial Thesis

This thesis suggests that the decline in electoral activity results from longer-term and profound shifts in the nature of the economies and societies of the advanced democracies. It points to the way in which a shift from an economic reliance on manufacturing industry towards a reliance on the service sector has radically weakened the old values, identities and allegiances which underpinned established political structures. For this thesis, the fundamental problem is that the existing ways of doing politics in Britain are suited to an era that has been in rapid decline since the 1960s.

While the academic proponents of this thesis often rely on quantitative evidence, there is a greater willingness to use reasoned judgement and theoretical analysis to seek deeper socio-economic causes than exists amongst the proponents of the political thesis. There are also some signs that senior figures in the political establishment are starting to take this approach more seriously.

The post-industrial thesis would particularly highlight the following causes, all of which it regards as being closely linked to one another within the context of post-industrial change:

- the emergence of a post-industrial society
- the decline of working-class mobilisation networks

- the decline of traditional middle-class mobilisation networks and the growth of leisure-based advocacy and single issue campaign networks
- the lack of influence citizens have over political decisions
- the out-dated methods of democratic participation
- the rise of a socially excluded group in society.

The post-industrial thesis would not wholly reject the significance of the factors highlighted by the political thesis but would tend to see them more as symptoms of a profound long-term challenge to democracy than causes in themselves.

If the Commission adopted a post-industrial approach it would focus on the above causes and would develop recommendations which particularly addressed the decline of mobilisation networks and the mismatch between political structures and popular expectations. It is possible, although not necessarily the case, that the recommendations in response to a post-industrial thesis may include more radical proposals than those formulated in response to the political thesis.

The Combined Thesis

It is quite possible for the Commission to decide to combine the post-industrial thesis and the political thesis. This would mean accepting that while the post-industrial thesis has a strong explanatory power, it overlooks some of the shorter-term and nationally specific factors. This would then be a broadly post-industrial approach, but one which will also look in detail at one or more of the following:

- uncompetitive elections
- weak political knowledge
- a weak or non-political sense of civic duty
- problems of the media
- the weakened accountability of the state.

This approach is not widely used in academia or elsewhere but that need not dissuade the Commission from choosing this option if they feel it is the most suited to their purposes and judgement.

The emphasis on the importance of the post-industrial thesis and its longer-term causes would need to be maintained in this approach to ensure that the Commission does not simply return to the original list of undifferentiated causes presented in the *Literature Review*.

The implications for the Commission's work of adopting this thesis would almost certainly mean developing a set of recommendations which addressed the short, medium and long term causes identified in the thesis. Further research work may need to be done to investigate how some of the shorter and medium term causes work to dampen participation.

Conclusion: choosing a thesis

There are two immediate considerations associated with choosing the Commission's broad approach. The first is being able to develop a research programme focusing on key themes – this includes deciding who will be invited to submit oral and written submissions to the Commission, who will be interviewed by the research team, and planning any contracted-out research work. The second consideration is giving guidance to the Team so it can carry out a further literature review on suggested practical solutions to the key causes on which the Commission has chosen to focus – if the Commission decides such a document would be helpful.

There are three possible routes for the Commission in taking this decision.

1. It may be clear by the end of the first meeting (5 November) that there is a consensus on this issue, in which case the Team can undertake further research and preparation work immediately.
2. The Commission may want to reserve judgement until their second meeting (26-27 November) following further deliberation and any further research work the Team can conduct to support that process.
3. The Commission may want to make their decision part of the formal witness sessions. In this case, the Clerk recommends using the first Commission Witness Session in December to question proponents of the three theses. The Clerk suggests Professor John Curtice and Professor Paul Whiteley as witnesses who lean to a political explanation; Professor Russell Dalton and Professor Colin Crouch who expound a post-industrial approach and Professor Pippa Norris who may be considered as a proponent of the 'combined thesis'.

However, the Clerk does recommend that postponing the decision any later than December will cause problems for the organisation of further witness sessions, research and other activities associated with the Inquiry.