

COMMISSION BRIEFING RESEARCH PAPER**The causes of the decline in
'electoral activity' in Britain: a literature review****Executive Summary**

This paper identifies the possible causes of the decline in electoral activity in Britain highlighted in *An introduction to the decline in political participation and involvement in Britain*. It is based on a review of academic, think-tank and other literature.

The paper identifies 19 possible causes of the decline in the literature surveyed. It groups these under seven headings as follows:

1. Problems of current political climate
 - the lack of competitive elections
 - the similarity of the main political parties
 - the lack of popular grievances resulting from widespread satisfaction with political and economic circumstance
2. Problems of political culture and public attitudes
 - low levels of trust in the probity and competence of politicians
 - a weak or changing sense of civic duty amongst citizens
 - a sense of disconnection from the political system on the part of citizens
3. Problems of individual resources
 - lack of information and/or knowledge of politics
 - lack of time available for political engagement
 - lack of financial resources
4. Problems of the media in British politics
 - the media promotes political distrust
 - the media weakens political knowledge
5. Problems of state structures
 - citizens lack significant influence over political decisions
 - the accountability of the state has been reduced
 - the modes of participation offered to citizens are 'out-dated'
 - the process of voting is inconvenient

6. Problems of mobilising agencies
 - the decline of traditional working-class networks
 - the replacement of traditional middle-class networks by leisure-based advocacy networks and single issue networks.

7. Problems of social and economic change
 - the shift to a post-industrial economy
 - the emergence of a socially excluded class

The paper proceeds to detail how each of these causes is explained as a factor in the decline of electoral activity by the surveyed literature. Where possible the paper tries to give some sense of the weight of evidence or strength of argument used to back each cause.

The paper concludes that most of the causes surveyed would recommend themselves for further consideration by the Commission on the basis of their standing in the literature. However, the paper suggests that the following two causes have no serious legitimacy within the literature and no evidence to uphold them:

- the lack of popular grievances resulting from widespread satisfaction with political and economic circumstance;
- the process of voting is inconvenient.

It suggests that the evidence upholding the following as *direct* causes of a decline in electoral activity is weak or contradicted by other evidence, although this is not to say that these are not important factors in contemporary political life:

- low levels of trust in the probity and competence of politicians;
- the media promotes political distrust.

It also suggests that firm conclusions about the following causes cannot be drawn without further research:

- the media weakens political knowledge;
- lack of time available for political engagement.

Introduction

This paper identifies the possible causes of the decline in electoral activity highlighted in *An introduction to the decline in political participation and involvement in Britain*. That paper also proposed a typology for different forms of political participation – ‘electoral activity’ was defined as: voting in elections and statutory referenda; standing for election; membership of a political party. Electoral activity was identified as the area of participation that was most clearly in decline and which has most directly raised concerns amongst politicians and media about the issue of participation.

This paper is based upon the premise that before effective recommendations for the resolution of a problem can be made, the causes of that problem need to be better understood. In the process of compiling this paper it also became clear that, given the profound and complex nature of some of the causes listed, any solution to declining participation will almost certainly require in addition careful thought about how political participation actually works in Britain.

The causes detailed below have been identified by carrying out a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. This includes: books, scholarly journal articles, Government publications, ministerial speeches, academic conference papers, policy conference papers, international and supranational institution publications, think-tank publications and journalistic output. All sources are listed in the bibliography.

A typology of causes

A literature review of this size inevitably produces a very large number of possible causes for the decline in electoral activity. To facilitate understanding and discussion, the various causes have been grouped under seven headings.

1. **Problems of current political climate:** causes that result from relatively short-term characteristics of British politics; examples include the uncompetitive nature of elections or the similarity of the main parties’ policies.
2. **Problems of political culture and public attitudes:** causes that result from the nature of, or changes in, the shared values and attitudes that inform citizens’ relations to politics; examples include low levels of trust in politicians’ probity or competence or a weakened sense of civic duty.
3. **Problems of the media in politics:** causes that result from the nature of, or changes in, the way in which the media present issues, debates, policies and decisions to the public; examples include the promotion of political distrust or a decline in informative content.
4. **Problems of individual resources:** causes that result from limitations on the resources required to engage in politics; examples include lack of information or lack of time.
5. **Problems of state structures:** causes that result from the nature of, or changes in, the way government, parliament and government agencies work in Britain; examples include the limited nature of public influence over political decision-making or the decreasing power of national governments in the face of global and corporate institutions.

6. **Problems of mobilising agencies:** causes that result from the nature of or changes in the non-governmental or quasi-governmental organisations which encourage involvement in politics; examples include the decline of key networks, such as faith communities and trade unions, or the decline in membership of the political parties.
7. **Problems of social and economic arrangements:** causes of the decline in electoral activity that result from changes in the social and economic circumstances of citizens' lives; examples include the shift to a post-industrial economy and the emergence of a socially excluded section of the population.

The rest of this paper explores the causes that fall under each of the above headings. For each cause the following information will be given: a description of the cause and the process by which it results in a decline in electoral activity; some assessment, where possible, of the significance of the cause in decreasing participation. General observations, about individual causes, which may be of use to the Commission will also be included.

One important factor to keep in mind while reading this paper is the distinction between disaffection and disengagement from politics. The public debate often assumes that these are either one and the same thing or that the former automatically leads to the latter. However, it is very clear in the research that a sense of disillusion with politicians and politics need not automatically lead to withdrawal from political activity. Indeed, it is quite possible that such feelings could be a spur to more intense activity. Thus, the analysis presented in this paper aims to be clear that if research shows that a particular cause promotes distrust or annoyance with politics, it has not necessarily shown that the same cause explains a decline in political participation.

1. Problems of the current political climate

Three causes of the decline in electoral activity can be grouped under this heading:

- the lack of competitive elections
- the similarity of the main parties
- the lack of popular grievances due to widespread satisfaction with political and economic circumstance

Problems of current political climate: lack of competitive elections

It is argued that when the outcome of elections appears a 'foregone conclusion' then voter turnout will decline. This is because voters feel that their vote will have less impact on the outcome of the election and thus have less reason to vote.

The literature contained strong quantitative evidence to support this claim. Studies have found that:

- the extent of 'political efficacy' reported by survey respondents was very closely related to the difference in share of the vote – both in reality and as perceived by voters – between the two main parties at the various General Elections between 1945 and 2001 in Britain;¹
- turnout in different countries rise or falls with the size of the share of the vote for the winning party;²
- variations in British local election turnouts are closely related to the marginality of the election.³

Despite the above, it should be noted that one dissenting study – based on interviews with non-voters – reported that none of their subjects ‘spontaneously’ gave the closeness of the result of the 2001 General Election as a reason for not voting.⁴

While it seems likely that lack of competitiveness does have some negative impact, it is equally important to recognise that the evidence referred to above came from studies which tended to look exclusively at issues to do with the current political climate. These studies do not seek longer term or structural causes of declining participation. It would therefore be misguided to uncritically accept a lack of electoral competition as the sole or primary cause of declining electoral activity.

Problems of current political climate: similarity of main political parties

The claim that the main parties espouse very similar policies and that this leaves voters feeling there is no purpose in voting since it will make little difference to the direction of the Government is a popular theme in media comment and in think-tank literature.⁵ Two studies based upon consultation with 14-24 year olds and on focus group research with the general population identified this as a popular reason given by citizens for their failure to vote.⁶

Quantitative studies based upon larger survey research also tend to identify similarity in the parties’ policy positions as a cause of decline in turnout but only in association with lack of competitive elections and/or a low sense of political efficacy amongst citizens (i.e. the extent to which a citizen believes their vote will make a difference). Evidence includes studies which found that:

- those who voted in the 1992 election and saw little difference between the main parties by 1997, were seven times more likely to abstain but that this occurred alongside a decline in a sense of political efficacy and a rise in the perception of an uncompetitive election;⁷
- the extent of ‘political efficacy’ when understood as a combination of the closeness of an election and the ‘differential expected benefits’ of a change in Government (i.e. how much advantage could be gained by having one party in government as opposed to another) is a very good predictor of voter turnout in British General Elections.⁸

The qualifications voiced about the evidence concerning the role of competitive elections in reducing participation are also relevant to this cause (see final bullet points below).

Problems of current political climate: lack of popular grievances

The claim that voter turnout has declined because citizens are broadly satisfied economically and politically is backed by no research evidence. Beyond claims made by representatives of the Government after the 2001 election, this cause is not proposed in the literature surveyed. If it is mentioned at all it is only in order to be rejected.⁹ Indeed, as *An introduction to the decline in political participation and involvement in Britain* argued there is a very strong argument indicating that personal satisfaction is definitely not a cause of withdrawal from participation. This is expressed well by the researcher Ben Rogers who states:

If disengagement really were attributable to affluence or consumerism we would expect to see greatest engagement among the worst off. Yet engagement is lowest not among the richest but among the disadvantaged and marginalised. Liverpool Riverside, which has three of the top ten most deprived wards in the UK, had the lowest turnout in 2001 (33 per cent); affluent Winchester had the highest (72 per cent).¹⁰

From the survey of literature, it is fair to conclude that lack of competitive elections and similarity of parties *do* have an impact on electoral activity – specifically voter turnout – but that they can only be a partial explanation for the following reasons (first presented in *An introduction to the decline in political participation and involvement in Britain*).

- Associating the decline in participation and involvement solely with nationally specific factors like lack of political competition or party similarity is difficult to sustain in the light of the fact that similar declines have occurred across most advanced democracies during the 1990s.
- These factors cannot explain the long-term decline in party membership and consistently low levels of local election turnout.
- They cannot explain the severity of the decline since the early 1990s given that lack of political competition and party similarity have existed in the past without causing such a significant drop in turnout unless we fully accept that recent elections have been far less competitive and the parties far more similar than at any time in the past.
- They cannot fully explain the low levels of trust in politicians and a weak sense of influence over political decisions amongst the public which have existed for many years and continue today (see section 5 below).
- They cannot explain why voter turnout is more marked amongst certain sections of the population than others (i.e. ethnic communities; less affluent economic classes; younger people).

2. Problems of political culture and public attitudes

Many possible causes of declining participation relating to political culture and public attitudes are explored in the literature. They can be grouped together under three broad headings:

- low levels of trust in the probity and competence of politicians
- a weak or changing sense of civic duty amongst citizens
- a sense of disconnection from the political system on the part of citizens

Problems of political culture and public attitudes: low levels of trust in the probity and competence of politicians

In popular debate and the media, there is a common claim that the British public have lost trust in their leaders. This, it is often argued, has resulted from a decade of sleaze scandals and a long series of misleading statements by ministers (from BSE in the early 1990s to the intelligence for the Iraq War most recently). Alternatively, some blame a hyper-cynical media always seeking negative scoops at politicians' expense (see section 3 below). Another analysis suggests that in an era where there is little room for genuine policy difference between parties – particularly on economic matters – and when ideological vision is largely absent, the only way politicians can differentiate themselves

from their opponents is by attacking competence or probity. Over time, this inevitably leaves the public with a sense that lack of probity and incompetence are features of all politicians.¹¹

However, as *An introduction to the decline in political participation and involvement in Britain* showed, the surveys that have been carried out consistently display very low levels of trust in politicians at least since the early 1980s. Surveys tend to find that those who say they trust politicians rarely rises above 25% and usually hovers at just below 20%. This is usually the response to survey questions such as: “how much would you say you trust politicians”; or “how much do you trust politicians to tell the truth”.

It could be argued that such questions are too general and tend to encourage respondents to express a popular but unthinking cynicism about politicians.

More precise formulations of the question obtain a different response, but, interestingly, one that indicates a genuine decline in trust over time. For example, when asked whether they agreed with the statement: “British governments of any party can be trusted to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party”, those who agreed fell from 37% in 1987 to 16% in 2000 and has only risen slightly since.¹²

The term “trust” is also problematic because in many surveys it is not clear whether respondents are thinking of trust in a politician’s probity or in their competence. This is significant because a survey which asked specifically about competence found somewhat better results although far from satisfactory. When asked whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the way: MPs were “doing their job”, 32% were satisfied and 36% were dissatisfied; “your MP is doing his/her job”, 41% were satisfied, only 13% dissatisfied; that parliament works, 36% were satisfied and 32% were dissatisfied. Interestingly, there were unusually large numbers who suggested they were neither satisfied or dissatisfied or didn’t know – a factor which might indicate the significance of lack of political information and knowledge discussed in this section below.

However, while low or declining levels of trust in politicians and a political system are obviously a matter for concern, it is not entirely clear that this is closely linked to a decline in participation despite common assertions to the contrary in media and politics itself. Of the detailed academic studies of the link, all but one¹³ broadly conclude that the causal relationship between trust in politics and political participation is “weak and patchy” and “not at all robust”¹⁴ as one study put it.

Problems of political culture and public attitudes: a weak or changing sense of civic duty amongst citizens

Studies that highlighted issues to do with civic duty can be divided into two categories: some argue that civic duty is either weak or essentially non-political in Britain; others assert that, in recent years, the way civic duty is understood by British citizens has undergone radical change and that this change has promoted withdrawal from electoral activity.

A series of studies have identified a weak sense of civic duty amongst British citizens. These have found that:

- ‘the norms supporting political activity have weakened over time’: in 1959, 70% of those questioned thought a citizen should participate in the “local affairs of his town or district” to some degree; in 2000, only 44% agreed with the statement “every citizen should be involved in politics if democracy is to work properly”;¹⁵

- a comparison of civic duty between those who reached voting age under different governments found a gradual but serious decline: when asked if they felt it would be a serious neglect of duty not to vote, 79% of those who first got the chance to vote during Macmillan's premiership answered yes; this declined to 70% of the Wilson/Callaghan generation; 53% of Thatcher's generation and only 41% of Blair's;¹⁶
- this is supported by a survey which found that, while 74% of the whole population agreed it was a duty to vote, this stood at only 58% amongst 18-24 year olds and at 61% amongst 25-34 year olds;¹⁷
- the main determinants of whether someone voted in local elections was "a stronger general belief in voting as a civic duty".¹⁸

An alternative to this approach is to explain the British sense of civic duty not as weak but as essentially non-political. A major survey asked British respondents to indicate what responsibilities they felt they had as a citizen. Amongst the general population, the most popular three choices were: obeying the law, respecting others, and being a good neighbour. Activities which required involvement in the community or political activity were the least popular choices. The bottom three were: volunteering to do things, being active in the community, and challenging the law when you think it is wrong. "Having a say in what goes on" was also relatively unpopular with only 28% choosing this option.

Amongst young people (15-24 year olds), there was a very similar pattern with the least popular options being chosen by even smaller proportions of those questioned. Only 18% believed it was their responsibility as a citizen to challenge the law when they thought it was wrong and only 15% felt they had a responsibility to volunteer to do things.¹⁹

What this evidence surrounding both the weak civic duty and non-political civic duty arguments suggests is that citizens today feel little moral pressure to participate in electoral activity. If the public's sense of civic duty is weakening, this situation could even be getting worse.

However, some studies challenge this perspective arguing that citizens do not have a weakening sense of civic duty but have a *changing* sense of civic duty the outcome of which is a declining willingness to get involved in the formal political system.

The influential British political scientist Pippa Norris has made a detailed cross-national survey of data on political participation. She argues that declines in electoral activity are only part of a wider story which does not suggest a weakening sense of civic duty. Instead, the populations of post-industrial societies now engage in a repertoire of political activity which is wider than the traditional and formal modes of political participation. In essence, people are just as comfortable using 'pressure activity' – as defined in *An introduction to the decline in political participation and involvement in Britain*²⁰ – as electoral activity to influence politicians and decision-makers. Young people may actually feel *more* comfortable using pressure rather than electoral activity.²¹

Other similar studies concur with Norris's findings.²² All of these studies agree that the causes of this shift are deep changes in the social and cultural circumstances of the populations of the advanced economies. To crudely summarise some complex arguments, one can assert that societies based on class and community loyalty, deference to authority and the struggle for the material basics of life have been replaced by societies based on consumer choice, self-worth, self-advancement, affluence and the search for personal fulfilment. Under these circumstances, these 'post-industrial' populations are bound to drift away from or seek alternatives to traditional political structures which are still based on mass parties which rely on tribal loyalty and have their roots in class identity and a system of representative democracy that is determinedly hierarchical and values party allegiance of representatives over citizen involvement and influence. Far more detail on the other aspects of this 'post-industrial' approach are given in section 7.

This analysis does receive some backing from studies of interest in politics especially amongst young people. One would expect that if there was a weaker or non-political sense of civic duty, especially amongst young people, that interest in politics would be low or declining. However, most studies have found that interest in politics is reasonably high and that there is little or no difference between the interest of the general population and young people.²³ One study of the 2001 General Election recorded particularly interesting findings. It found that, in 2001, 59% of the population professed themselves interested in politics. This is the same as the percentage that voted. Amongst young people, however, while 53% declared themselves interested in politics, only 39% voted.²⁴

The support this gives to the Norris's approach may be strengthened further by a separate study of non-voters in 2001: it reported that most non-voters attributed their failure to vote to a conscious decision to abstain rather than to apathy or disinterest.²⁵ It is also backed by another study which found that interest in 'national issues' and 'local issues' was very high at 82% and 78% respectively but was much lower for 'news about elections' and 'politics' at 60% and 58%.²⁶

Problems of political culture and public attitudes: a sense of disconnection from the political system

A less tangible problem of political culture or public attitudes identified quite widely in the literature is citizens' sense of disconnection from the political system and politicians.²⁷ This identification of disconnection is based upon analyses which assert that citizens find politics and politicians "out-of-touch", distant, or largely irrelevant to their concerns. Studies have found that:

- 16-21 year olds regard government policy or help as a "vanishingly small" factor in their likely success;²⁸
- when asked to say why they did not feel connected to their elected representatives, only a small minority expressed dislike for their political views or cited failure to represent their interests; instead, most complained that their representatives did not listen or communicate well and that they were 'invisible', 'aloof' or 'arrogant';²⁹
- when surveyed in 2004, the vast majority regarded politics as something done by other people who they do not know; only a minority saw politics as about involvement by themselves or by active individuals.³⁰

A case could be made that this degree of disconnection means that citizens do not get involved in electoral activity because they simply regard it as something which does not, and will never, have any meaning for themselves.

Explanations for this sense of disconnection are various. It has been argued that people find it difficult to understand how the outcomes of high profile but distant political processes like Prime Minister's Question Time or even General Elections have a direct impact on them and their local area.³¹ Alternatively, one study asserts that most politics is still conducted around an agenda focussed on ensuring basic security and opportunity; this agenda largely ignores issues of increasing importance to a large section of the population – for example, work-life balance, opportunities for cultural participation and the 'liveability' of cities.³² Other sources refer to the argument made in the previous section about the deep change in the nature of society and the values of citizens which means a political system based on hierarchy and class division appears unrelated to people's actual lives and outlooks.³³

There is strong consensus in the literature surveyed that British political culture and public attitudes are characterised strongly by mistrust of politicians, a sense of disconnection from politics and the political system and a sense of civic duty that does not encourage enthusiastic or growing involvement in the formal political system.

The extent to which these factors are entirely new or have become more prevalent in recent years cannot be fully determined. However, in the context of declining party membership and election turnouts they certainly take on an added significance and are worthy of attention.

We may conclude, however, that this is not necessarily as gloomy a picture as it first appears. For a number of influential analysts, these factors result from a dissonance between a type of politics which was designed for a world of deference to authority and loyalty to the group rather than the contemporary world of self-worth, choice and individualism. This, in theory, suggests that political systems which might reform themselves to take account of this new world may well re-connect with their citizens. More will be said about this in the last three sections.

3. Problems of the media in politics

There is a great deal of academic research on the effect of the media on the political process. There is also a growing amount of journalistic comment about the role of the media in society and politics.

However, there is very little research that deals directly with the impact of the media on political participation. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is concern within academic, political and journalistic circles that the media is promoting two factors, all of which are potential causes of the decline in electoral activity dealt with in this paper. These are the exacerbation of low levels of trust in politics and the lessening of political knowledge and understanding.

Problems of the media in politics: the media and trust

The view that the media is undermining trust in politics and government is based upon some journalistic comment and academic analysis which claims that political interviewers approach their ministerial subjects from a position of extreme scepticism and verbal aggression. In addition, the press and, to a lesser extent, the broadcast media are constantly on the search for negative scoops or scandal which damages the standing of government and politics but makes for good copy in an highly competitive media market. It is often also suggested that politicians are now ever keen to manipulate the media and 'spin' stories in their favour. This has created a hostile relationship between politicians and journalists with the former pressurising the latter and the latter resisting the former.³⁴

In this environment, the public are either contaminated by the all-pervasive cynicism of the media, distrustful of the politicians' spin efforts or simply withdraw in despair and confusion from the political-media 'game'.

While this argument may or may not have merit with regards to the impact on the wider health of politics, it is far from clear that it has any direct or straightforward impact on political participation. Indeed, if the main outcome of this gloomy situation is lower levels of trust, then we know from the above consideration that mistrust itself seems to have little obvious affect on participation.

Problems of the media in politics: the media and political knowledge

There is a great deal of academic work on how the media affects political knowledge. Given that the consideration of the literature in the next section indicates that lack of knowledge can dampen participation, it is worth considering here what the literature on the media's effect on political knowledge has to say. Three general conclusions can be drawn.

- There is strong evidence that exposure to news media itself does little to enhance political knowledge or information. One study, for example, found that the average respondent can recall only about 1 of 20 stories from a television newscast within three hours after viewing.³⁵ However, there is also strong evidence that when news reports are discussed with others then recall, knowledge and understanding are enhanced.³⁶
- There is growing concern that exposure to news media is declining. Consumers now have far more options in broadcast media and can switch over to non-news channels while those channels that have traditionally carried news programmes are reducing the amount of time spent on news in general and politics in particular in an effort to compete with non-news channels.³⁷
- There is also concern that the quality of news coverage is in decline. Some assert that the traditional standards that have guided serious journalism have been weakened as media institutions seek to succeed in the new media marketplace. Alongside this there is the rise of new sources of news – primarily the internet – where advocacy is regularly presented as unbiased information and blatant misrepresentation of facts is common.³⁸
- Whether news media enhances or limits knowledge, there is extremely strong evidence from a variety of sources that higher levels of exposure to news media correlate to higher levels of citizen participation.³⁹ By contrast, studies of those with low levels of exposure to news media and higher exposure to light entertainment have less involvement in community and political activities.⁴⁰ However, whether there is a causal relationship between news media exposure and participation is questionable. It seems highly probable that those who participate, as a result of any other cause, are much more likely to watch news programmes simply because it is useful and of interest to them. Nevertheless, what this evidence does suggest is that exposure to news media does *not* dampen participation as might be suggested by those fearful of the 'corrosive cynicism' of the media.

It is fair to conclude from these considerations that there is concern if little direct evidence that media practices promote political distrust. However, the research evidence described above suggests that distrust is not a clear cause of declining participation. Thus, the media's involvement may not be of direct relevance.

There are also concerns and some evidence that current news media practice is downgrading serious news journalism and hence possibly weakening political knowledge. However, a direct link between this media practice and levels of political participation is far from conclusive. The section on political knowledge immediately below may help clarify this issue to some extent.

Considering the growing concern about the role of the media in politics, it is surprising that the research on the direct relationship between the media and political participation is so limited. This is an area the Commission may wish to address when considering the Inquiry's research programme. This may also be considered in light of the fact that some feel that changes in media news may have changed the nature of political participation in recent years – particularly by encouraging pressure activity – without actually concluding that it has dampened electoral activity.⁴¹

4. Problems of individual resources

One way of considering the decline in participation is to question whether citizens today have the resources necessary for participation. There are three such resources:

- lack of information and knowledge of politics;
- lack of time available for political engagement;
- lack of financial resources.

Problems of Individual Resources: Lack of information and knowledge of politics

In recent years, the Government has been keen to remedy what it regards as a lack of understanding of politics and the political system particularly amongst the young. Its chief policy to this end has been the introduction of citizenship education as a subject in the National Curriculum. While countering a decline in political understanding can be seen as a good in itself, there is also a strong body of opinion within public debate suggesting that lack of information and knowledge about politics limits participation.

There is little doubt that surveys of political knowledge show very low levels of political understanding. Studies have found that:

- 64% felt they knew 'just a little' or 'hardly anything' about how parliament works – this increased to 81% amongst 15-24 year olds;⁴²
- 57% felt they knew 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about politics⁴³ – this increased to 71.1% amongst 18-24 year olds;⁴⁴
- in a seven question political knowledge quiz of 2,000 adults only 45% got four or more answers correct and only 3% got all answers correct – only 27% knew that a General Election does not have to be held every four years and only 49% knew that the House of Commons has more power than the Lords.⁴⁵

While a number of sources report that these low levels of knowledge dampen political participation,⁴⁶ few actually explain why this should be the case. One analyst has suggested that people who feel they know little about politics are less likely to vote because they fear making the 'wrong' choice. This source also suggested that in the past many were guided in their voting – in a relatively unthinking way – by the strong party identification of their family or community. As partisanship has declined, citizens feel less able to make a choice without knowing more about the options on offer.⁴⁷

The most detailed work on knowledge and participation was conducted by Henry Milner. Milner feels that many citizens do not vote because of a prevalent view that "all politicians are the same". He argues that this view is held by two different types of citizen. The first is politically informed and holds that view as a reasoned conclusion. S/he may be politically active in other 'more meaningful' ways. The second simply comes to that view because s/he does not possess the information to distinguish among the candidates or parties. According to Milner evidence shows that the second type of citizen is on the rise and this in turn helps to explain declining turnout and participation.⁴⁸

Milner also attempts to explain the rise of this "uninformed citizen". He argues that the "replacement of newspapers and public service radio and television by commercial television as the primary source of political information"⁴⁹ has left little space for programming of a purely informative or critical character. He contrasts the United States, where he feels this problem is most advanced, with Scandinavian countries – particularly Sweden – where the state actively promotes political information and education through

libraries, the press, public TV, 'study circles' (see *Democratic Innovations – Interim Report*) and adult education schemes.⁵⁰

While much of the work on political knowledge has attempted to link it directly to the decline in voter turnout, research has not considered its effect on other forms of electoral activity – joining a political party or standing as a candidate. This may be something the Commission will want to investigate in more detail.

Problems of individual resources: lack of time available for political engagement

There is not a great deal in the literature on how lack of time affects political participation. One quantitative study which did look at the issue claimed that:

Busy people are no less or more likely to engage in civic activism than are those with time on their hands.⁵¹

However, the more demanding aspects of electoral activity – active party membership, candidacy and holding political office – are undoubtedly time consuming and, despite the above study, those with limited resources of time would seem far less likely or even able to participate.

In this vein, research does exist to show quite clearly that lack of time impacts on other forms of community activity beyond the political. Studies have found that:

- by far the most common cause cited as a reason for not volunteering for charity work or community groups is lack of time – 58% cited this in 1997, an increase of 19% since a similar survey in 1991;⁵²
- Robert Putnam's famous survey of 'social capital' in the United States identifies lack of time as one of the five main reasons for a decline in associational activity.⁵³

It would seem logical that if lack of time is having an impact on volunteering and social capital, then it is almost certainly having an impact on political participation. However, it would probably need to be shown that time has become less available in recent years if it is to explain a decline in participation.

The fact that this is currently under-researched may, in part, be explained by the focus of many studies on voting rather than party activism and candidacy which makes very little demand on citizens' time.

Problems of individual resources: lack of financial resources

Given the literature's primary focus on voting, this is rarely raised as a significant cause of the decline in participation. However, studies dating from some years ago did identify lack of financial resources as a key barrier to enabling certain individuals to stand as parliamentary candidates. Those without the financial resources to pay for the costs of seeking nomination (travel, childcare, telephone, postage, training) were unable even to consider a candidacy for one of the main parties. Obviously those from less affluent social classes, ethnic communities, younger people and women are more intensely affected by this problem, due to their lower incomes, compared to other groups.⁵⁴

While this factor cannot explain a decline in participation, it may help to explain why these social groups are less likely to seek elected office than others. The 1997 election, which saw a marked increase in the number of female candidates and MPs did not just benefit from the use of women-only shortlists in the Labour Party: in 1993 an organisation called Emily's List was established which offers grants to women seeking Labour Party candidacies.

Apart from lack of knowledge and information, the role that other individual resources – time and money – have on political participation is extremely under-researched. This is despite the fact that lack of time and financial resources would potentially seem to be significant factors in preventing large sections of the population participating.

5. Problems of state structures

There is obviously a very great deal written about the problems of modern liberal democracies. This section reflects purely on those texts which identify such problems as a cause of the decline in electoral activity

The causes identified can be grouped under four headings:

- citizens lack significant influence over political decisions
- the accountability of the state has been reduced
- the modes of participation offered to citizens are 'out-dated'
- the process of voting is inconvenient

Problems of state structures: citizens lack significant influence over political decisions

The mechanism of this cause is clear. It is that the current structures of the British state do not allow citizens real influence over the decisions of their leaders thus removing the key incentive for participation.

The evidence that the majority of British citizens feel they have little say over political decisions is overwhelming. Studies have found that:

- 56% agreed that they have 'no say in what the government does' in 2003;⁵⁵
- the proportion of those who *strongly* believe that 'people have no say in what the government does' rose from 15% in 1973 to 30% in 1994;⁵⁶
- over two-thirds of people agreed in 1999 that 'parties are only interested in peoples' votes, not in their opinions';⁵⁷
- over three-quarters of those questioned in 2000 felt they had little or no power between elections;⁵⁸
- 40% disagreed in 2004 with the statement, 'when people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way the UK is run';⁵⁹
- while 36% agreed with the above statement, this dropped to 29% amongst the Black and Minority Ethnic population.⁶⁰

These figures are consistent and striking. However, most studies fail to establish whether this sense of powerlessness actually discourages participation. Logically, this would seem the case but empirically there is only limited evidence. This is important because it could be argued that a failure to participate may actually cause a sense of powerlessness rather than be its result. For example, if young people are failing to join political parties for some other reason, such as lack of understanding as to how they work, they may later feel powerless because they are not involved in an institution which allows them to exert influence.

While the literature is unclear as to whether a feeling of powerlessness decreases participation, it does present an argument explaining why citizens have lost power – and thus may feel more powerless and less willing to participate – over recent years. This argument identifies a growing imbalance in the relative influence of citizens and other individuals and groups. Many studies suggest that business interests, transnational corporations and global institutions have more influence over the government today than they may have had in the past. This has meant that British citizens, who in theory are sovereign, have seen their influence wane.

For some, national governments now largely serve the interests of transnational corporations who have massively enhanced their freedoms, wealth and power over the last forty years. This has led to a situation where all governments, no matter what their supposed party or ideological colour, must meet the demands of corporations for lower taxes, less business regulation, less control over the flow of money across national borders, flexible labour markets (i.e. less employment law, welfare provision and trade union power), and more freedom for business to pursue its interests in any part of the economy including the public sector. The result is a national citizenry increasingly aware that their interests count for little alongside the power of business and the global bodies which they control. Inevitably, this leads to a withdrawal from structures and processes which seem increasingly unable to meet citizens' concerns.⁶¹

A slightly different and more nuanced version of this argument has been developed by the well-known social and political theorist, Manuel Castells.⁶² For Castells, national governments have been transformed from sovereign bodies into strategic actors attempting to ensure their interests in a complex global network of shared sovereignty and competing bodies. Despite this change popular identities and political structures have remained firmly rooted in the notion of sovereign and distinct national communities.

As a result, politics within nations is conducted as though national sovereignty and identity still existed or mattered while, in reality, governments are constantly competing, negotiating, and compromising in the very different environment of the global polity and economy. The result is that national publics are engaging in politics through increasingly powerless structures and are being asked to participate in public debates defined in misleading terms. Inevitably, this means that successive governments are unable to deliver the clear-cut benefits national publics are led to believe they will receive. This leads ultimately to electoral volatility, withdrawal from the political system and the use of alternative methods to effect political change.

There is some survey research supporting these analyses. Studies have found that:

- one-third of respondents surveyed in 2004 believed that transnational corporations had more influence on their daily life than the Government,⁶³
- another survey in 2004 found that 79% of respondents felt corporations had a great deal or fair amount of power, compared to 35% who felt they should have this power.⁶⁴

Problems of state structures: the accountability of the state has been reduced

The argument that the accountability of the state and state agencies has been weakened over the last twenty years is common in academic literature and in public debate. A number of authors surveyed in this paper link this to the decline in political participation.

The main arguments for the decline in accountability are as follows.

- Over the last twenty years, the power of Cabinet over Parliament has been gradually strengthened and the power of Prime Minister over Cabinet has also been strengthened. In effect, this means that key decisions are now taken by the

Prime Minister and his staff with decreasing debate amongst the state's most senior elected representatives and without effective scrutiny by the country's sovereign elected body. The research carried out on this shift and the debate surrounding it is extensive and cannot be covered here. However, common points of concern include the strict control which is exerted over MPs voting by the executive; the by-passing of Parliament for the announcement and discussion of policies and decisions; the increasing informality of decision-making processes in government; and the taking of key decisions outside full Cabinet.⁶⁵

- Over the last two decades there has been an explosion in the number of public agencies established to control the development, implementation and monitoring of public policy. A twin fear is regularly expressed: these bodies are unaccountable by virtue of the fact that their memberships are appointed rather than elected; and their sheer number and specialist activity means they are not clearly accountable to the elected politicians themselves.⁶⁶ One study has calculated that there are: 138 executive agencies, 187 national executive quangoes, 414 advisory quangoes and 300 'task forces'.⁶⁷ These deal with a very wide range of issues ranging from the safety of food to the regulation of housing associations.
- The long-term shrinkage in the powers and remit of local councils relative to the power of central government and unelected local quangoes is often identified as another cause of weakening accountability. One highly respected academic has put this concern well:

Central government's dominion over nearly every aspect of local authority finance and activity, and the existence of the parallel local quango state, also confuses the issue of local accountability. Who is properly to be held to account when the centre so closely controls policies and resources? Who will vote or seek to influence local government when the real masters of local affairs sit in Westminster and Whitehall, in a regional government office, or in a national quango HQ? Local elections that are too often proxies for the 'real thing' further diminish the accountability of local government along with its legitimacy.⁶⁸
- The very wide and increasing use of private contractors to carry out government functions is also often cited as challenging accountability. There is a fear that the widespread use of contracted firms has removed accountability for public service delivery away from service users and their communities and instead has made it a matter for government and local authority officials and ultimately the lawyers who draw up the contracts. There is also a concern that information about service delivery which was once in the public realm is now often withheld by private contractors and their public sector partners on the basis of 'commercial confidentiality'.⁶⁹

A number of authors link this weakening of accountability to the decline in electoral activity. However, detailed and precise research on the link is limited.

- One study reported a fall from 70% in 1965 to 51% in 1999, in the number of people agreeing with the statement: 'the way that people decide to vote in local elections is the main thing that decides how things are run in this area'.⁷⁰
- Another study compared the low status, limited powers and small size of British local government when compared to local government in most European countries. France, for example has close to 200,000 local councillors while England and Wales has only 21,000 (excluding Parish Councillors). The study asserted that turnout for local elections varies across Europe in line with the standing and influence of local government. It is thus unsurprising that local election turnout in Britain is so low and has decreased alongside the decline in powers of local

authorities.⁷¹ This is upheld by a separate study which argued that the countries with the best local election turnout – leaving aside those with some element of compulsory voting – are Denmark, Austria and Germany, all of which have powerful local authorities.⁷²

- Some have argued that the fragmentation of state power to a plethora of unelected bodies and private organisations undermines the *raison d'être* of political parties, whose aim is to control the state. This fragmentation facilitates the rise of single-issue campaigns which target a wide variety of organisations but only to achieve change in very specific policy areas. This may help explain the decline in electoral activity alongside the rise in pressure activity.⁷³

Given the widespread concern about the decline in accountability and the strong logical case that can be made for its impact on political participation, it is unfortunate that there is not a larger amount of focused research. This may be something the Commission will want to explore further, therefore, through its own research programme.

Problems of state structures: the modes of participation offered to citizens are 'out-dated'

The second cause under this heading relates to changes in the expectations of citizens themselves. This is based upon the observation that the post-war period in Britain has seen a significant shift away from the deference to authority and acceptance of social position that characterised the Victorian period and the first half of the twentieth century. In its place, we now have a highly individualistic society in which self-worth and personal advancement are highly prized – a process driven by better education, increased affluence and consumerism.

This change poses a problem for Britain's political structures because they are still fundamentally based on the older values: citizens are expected to delegate decision-making powers to MPs and governments between elections; MPs and governments are elected upon a rather simplistic appeal for simple majority support; individuals have to choose between broad policy platforms and it is difficult for them to influence policies on specific issues. In the latter respect, politics lags far behind other areas of life – such as healthcare, education, private commercial services, and even light-entertainment shows such as *Big Brother* – where citizens can now expect a significant input into individual decisions.⁷⁴

There is certainly evidence which shows that citizens both find the choices available at election time limited and, partly as a result of this, feel they get little chance to have their real views heard.⁷⁵ Further evidence also suggests that citizens have a preference for a more deliberative approach to policy-making: they favour an open discussion, designed to reach an informed consensus on specific issues, in which all voices can be heard equally well.⁷⁶

Some analysts have suggested that this shift in attitudes is particularly strong amongst younger people. Young people, they argue, are less likely to participate in the formal political system and more likely to incline to 'pressure activity' (as defined in *An introduction to the decline in political participation and involvement in Britain*). The advantage of pressure activity in this context is its issue-based nature. As two researchers put it, following qualitative research amongst young people:

The overwhelming feeling was that current frameworks and formats did not organise [...] political choices [...] in ways which they felt they could engage.⁷⁷

Problems of state structures: the process of voting is inconvenient

Since the low turnout in 2001, the Government has launched pilot schemes and implemented changes designed to make voting easier and more convenient. Most notably, all-postal voting was introduced for certain regions of Britain during the local and European elections of 2004.

The literature, however, is reasonably clear that the inconvenience of voting is unlikely to be a significant cause of decline in electoral activity and that changes to the way voting is conducted play little or no part in increasing participation.⁷⁸ One study which compared average turnout in parliamentary elections in 29 countries between 1960 and 1995 concluded that the nature of voting facilities explained far less variance in turnout than the nature of the electoral system and the role of key democratic institutions.⁷⁹

Indeed, even the Electoral Commission, the body charged by the Government with helping 'modernise' electoral law states:

We recognise that it is unlikely that changing the *method* of voting can achieve major increases in voter turnout unless voters also feel that the election is relevant to them and that their vote matters.⁸⁰

From our survey of the literature it is fair to conclude that a majority of citizens feel powerless in relation to the political decisions that affect their lives and alienated from the processes that produce those decisions. It must be assumed that this is not conducive to encouraging political participation. However, as to whether this powerlessness is primarily a cause, an effect or both of lower participation cannot be easily judged without further consideration.

In addition, the role that major social and political change, such as globalisation and the rise of corporate influence, has had on the perceived power or role of the state seems significant in explaining declining participation. However, these are far from simple processes and their assessment has occurred largely at the level of theoretical or impressionistic analysis. Their precise role and impact remains a matter of judgement and possibly a subject for further investigation.

6. Problems of mobilising agencies

The two main causes which emerge from literature surveyed under this heading are:

- the decline of traditional working-class networks;
- the replacement of traditional middle-class networks by leisure-based advocacy networks and single issue networks.

However, since the explanations given for these causes are complex and closely interwoven with a number of common factors, they will not be treated separately in this section.

Put simply, political mobilisation is the process by which one person asks or persuades one or more others to take part in a political activity either face-to-face or through various media. There is a strong sense in a fair amount of the literature surveyed that this simple activity has declined considerably in the last three to four decades – certainly with regards to mobilising for electoral activity: voting, party membership and activism, and candidacy for elected office. The reason for this decline is that the key organisations which encouraged such asking and provided a context within which it could be effectively done have themselves gone into serious decline.

The organisations which fulfilled this role were the political parties, trade unions and civic associations. While the first two need no definition, the third may need further explanation. Civic associations are those organisations which brought people together for a non-political purpose but in a context where they were more amenable to mobilisation or to being persuaded to join the other two types of organisation. Examples of such organisations included faith communities, working-men's clubs, and rotary clubs.

These three types of mobilising agencies have faced an increasingly severe loss of membership and allegiance amongst the wider public since the 1960s. Studies have found the following:

- membership of the three main parties is less than one quarter of 1964 levels;⁸¹
- in 1964, 44% of electors described themselves as identifying "very strongly" with a political party; this had dropped to 14% in 2001;
- a cross-national study found identification with a political party had dropped across the advanced democracies but had seen a particularly strong fall in Britain;⁸²
- two separate studies found significant aggregate falls in party membership across thirteen and sixteen established democracies respectively since the 1950s;⁸³
- in 1983, half of the British workforce belonged to a union, this dropped to one third by 2001;⁸⁴
- in 1972, 27.6% of the male population belonged to working men's or social clubs, this dropped to 17.9% by 1999;⁸⁵
- membership of the National Federation of Women's Institutes has dropped by 46% from 442,000 in 1972 to 240,000 in 2002.⁸⁶

For the literature that studies the role of these mobilising agencies there is practical unanimity that this decline has a major negative impact on electoral activity. A number of studies have concluded that face-to-face contact between citizens and candidates or activists is the most effective way of ensuring an individual votes.⁸⁷ This is also found to be particularly true for less affluent communities where individuals are less likely to be part of social networks where voting is the norm or where relatives and friends encourage others to vote.⁸⁸

Clearly, in a situation where political parties have fewer members and activists, the face-to-face contact between one individual encouraging another to vote will decline leading to a consequent decline in turnout particularly amongst 'hard-to-reach' groups such as less affluent classes, young people and members of ethnic communities. In addition, the decline of collective bodies such as trade unions and civic associations limits the forums within which candidates and activists can meet large numbers of potential voters in appropriate contexts at one time.

This analysis is upheld by research which has shown clearly that turnout has been higher in constituencies in the past three General Elections, where individual parties campaigned more vigorously.⁸⁹

This, however, begs the question as to why political parties have themselves undergone such a severe decline in membership and popular allegiance. The answer to this is undoubtedly complex and the reasons lie amongst some or all of the causes outlined elsewhere in this paper.

However, one explanation directly relevant to this section is the decline of the other organisations mentioned above – trade unions and civic associations. These bodies are important in this context because they provided networks within which new party members could be recruited. Often individuals got involved in these organisations for a wide variety of non-political reasons – ranging from the chance to socialise with like-minded people to the wish to take part in acts of collective worship. However, the cultures of these organisations which might lean subtly to one or other shade in the political spectrum socialised individuals into a set of beliefs and simultaneously brought them into contact with party members who were involved in the non-political body.⁹⁰

Under such conditions, while trade unions and civic associations had large memberships under constant renewal, the political parties benefited by finding the more politically inclined of those members and encouraging them to join one or other of the parties. However, as these organisations have found it increasingly difficult to find new participants, the political parties have been left with a shrinking arena within which to imbue their values into new cohorts of potential members.

This analysis is upheld by empirical studies of current political participation. These generally find that those individuals involved in trade unions or civic associations are more likely to participate politically, and those communities with a more vibrant associational life are more likely to have higher levels of political participation.⁹¹ Indeed, the classic study of political participation in Britain, carried out in 1984-5 by Parry, Moyser and Day, concluded that links to such associations was the single most critical factor in distinguishing active from passive citizens.⁹² They also established that once an individual is active in three or more associations, their political participation rises very significantly above citizens without such links or with fewer links. Summarising their conclusions, Parry, Moyser and Day simply stated: “who says organisation, says participation.”⁹³

This, of course, begs another question as to why the trade unions and civic associations should have gone into decline themselves. Some analysts, in particular in America, have identified the decline in parties, unions and civic associations as part of a wider decline in ‘social capital’.⁹⁴ Social capital refers to the networks of inter-personal relationships developed to pursue a wide variety of collective activities ranging from sport to charity work. Despite some strong initial interest in the applicability of this approach to Britain, a recent major study of social capital has concluded that Britain has not experienced the very steep decline that it has in America since the 1950s.⁹⁵

The emerging consensus in Britain on social capital is that the experience of social capital varies between classes and types of organisations. Put briefly, the general view can be summarised as follows.

- Voluntary activities such as charity, sporting and community work has remained stable and reasonably strong in Britain.
- Traditional working-class organisations such as working men’s clubs, co-operative societies, trade unions and local labour parties have lost significant members, have experienced a decline in activity and have not been replaced by any associations of equal significance or vibrancy.
- Traditional middle class associations such as the Rotary Club, Women’s Institute, Church of England and local Conservative Associations have also seen a significant decline but are increasingly replaced by bodies which combine leisure interests with advocacy such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the National Trust.
- There has been a growth of single-issue and environmental campaigns such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth amongst the middle class and educated young.
- Some of these leisure, advocacy and single-issue groups have experienced very strong growths in membership: the National Trust has gone from 278,000 members

in 1971 to 3,000,000 in 2002; the RSPB has risen from 98,000 to 1,200,000 in the same period; Friends of the Earth has gone from 1,000 to 119,000 over the same period; and Greenpeace has enjoyed a rise of members from 30,000 in 1981 to 221,000 in 2002.⁹⁶

The major study on social capital in Britain mentioned above summarised by stating that the most current data shows:

A constant fluidity for the service class and a sharp decline for the working class.⁹⁷

This observation is deepened by a recent study of trade unions which concluded that middle class members were now more actively involved and influential within the union movement than those working in manual jobs. A suggestion that the new middle class are not only more active in associations than the working class but are now actually extending that activity into traditional working class organisations.⁹⁸

This pattern suggests that the associations which used to draw people into electoral activity have undergone a decline either to be replaced by no similar organisations amongst some communities or by single-issue and professional advocacy groups. Obviously the failure to replace a key civic association with anything new will damage electoral involvement but why the rise of professional advocacy and single-issue groups should have a similar effect is less clear. An explanation given by one author is that :

these organisations do not tend to stimulate intensive, deliberative engagement among their members in the way the older civic organisations often did [...]. They rely mainly on their members' cheque books, rather than their time or their political judgement [...]⁹⁹

This observation is strongly supported by a major quantitative study known as the Citizen's Audit which divided political participation into three forms: 'individual actions' such as donating money to a campaign or taking part in a consumer boycott; 'contact actions' such as writing to an MP or the media; and 'collective actions', the traditional mode of participation such as attending a demonstration or taking part in a strike. The Citizen's Audit concluded that while there was still a considerable amount of political activity in Britain, it was overwhelmingly made up of 'individual actions' with 'contact actions' in second place and 'collective actions' a very distant third amongst all social classes and groups.¹⁰⁰

There is a great deal of literature on formal political participation that does not investigate the role of mobilising agencies but amongst those that do, there is strong support for the view that the decline and change in the nature of these agencies has had a major impact on political participation. Interestingly, however, it is one of the least acknowledged factors in the development of Government policy designed to respond to the decline in electoral activity. This is a dichotomy the Commission may wish to explore further.

7. Problems of social and economic change

The causes identified can be grouped under two headings which are closely linked with each other:

- the shift to a post-industrial economy
- the emergence of a socially excluded class

Problems of Social and Economic Change: the shift to a post-industrial economy

It is possible to understand the decline in electoral activity as the result of a significant shift in the fundamental nature of advanced democratic and capitalist societies. This shift is often described as the emergence of the 'post-industrial' economy and society.

It is now extremely well-established in the academic social sciences that advanced economies have undergone significant change in the post-war period. While the precise nature and the extent of that change is still hotly debated, it is also widely accepted that it has radically altered the nature of society, culture and politics.

The fundamental premise of this approach is the observation that, whereas in the past the advanced economies largely relied on the manufacturing industries, and to a lesser extent agriculture, this has changed since 1945, and particularly since the 1960s. Today, such countries tend towards the creation of wealth through the provision of services such as banking, retail and information technology.

This analysis is clearly upheld by the figures:

- in the 1940s manufacturing accounted for almost 40% of UK economy; today it accounts for around 20%;
- at the end of the 1970s around seven million were employed in the manufacturing sector (around 33% of the workforce); today, the figure is around 3.4 million (about 14% of the work force) and falling;¹⁰¹
- by contrast all service industry sectors have seen their share of the economy and their number of employees rise in the same periods.¹⁰²

This establishment of these 'post-industrial' societies across Western Europe, America, Australasia and, increasingly, Japan and South East Asia has vast implications for a wide range of areas of human life. Clearly, this paper and this Commission need not consider all or even many of these. However, some of the most significant are as follows:

- the expansion of professional classes and the shrinkage of the manual working classes – the factory worker has given way to the office worker;
- higher proportions of society are affluent with greater disposable income, rising living standards and more leisure time;
- education, expertise and intellectual skills have become more significant for successful employment than physical capacity and manual skills;
- greater social, occupational and geographic mobility;
- advanced economies have become much more tied into global networks as the post-industrial nations rely on the import of manufactured goods and raw materials and on the complex production networks established by transnational corporations where different aspects of a single production process are carried out in many different countries;
- the material concerns for individuals, families and their communities in the industrial era – securing decent and sufficient food, housing, and healthcare – have become less significant, while 'post-material' concerns – securing personal freedoms and rights, satisfactory leisure-time pursuits, access to luxury goods and environmental security – have grown in significance.

The impact of a shift as complex and profound as post-industrialism on political participation in general and electoral activity in particular is never going to be straightforward. However, a number of authors have tried to set the changes in participation explored in this paper in the wider post-industrial context.¹⁰³ Their conclusions and debates can be summarised as follows.

- The shrinkage of the manual working class and the expansion of the professional class has significantly weakened clear class divisions and clear class identities. This has removed the social and ideological base for party systems divided along lines of middle class and working class interest representation. This could explain why political parties in Britain and elsewhere have seen such significant declines in membership and allegiance.
- The grand ideologies of the twentieth century which were based upon broad-brush approaches to traditional class interests and material concerns have been replaced by a diverse agenda of post-material concerns which lend themselves better to a plurality of single-issue campaigns rather than 'umbrella' organisations such as political parties.
- The rise of a better educated and more socially and geographically mobile population creates citizens who expect more control, consultation and participation over and in the decisions that affect their lives. These citizens are far less willing to allow decisions to be taken on their behalf by social or intellectual 'superiors'.

Post-industrial analysts are broadly in agreement on these points. However there is some dispute over the impact post-industrialisation should have on voter turnout. Some argue that, since the better educated are more likely to vote, turnout should rise as secondary, further and higher education qualifications become more commonplace. At the point where high standards of education and literacy become universal, there should be a plateau effect where turnout neither rises nor falls to any significant degree. It has been argued that the largely trendless turnouts of advanced democracies since 1945 uphold this 'ceiling effect' theory.¹⁰⁴

Others argue that turnout will, in fact, gradually decline as post-industrial populations give more energy and time to newer forms of participation particularly pressure activities. The more recent declines in turnout across Western Europe since the early 1990s offers some evidence to support this 'displacement' theory.¹⁰⁵

Problems of social and economic change: the rise of a socially excluded class

One further aspect of post-industrialisation which should be mentioned as some argue it has particular significance for Britain is the rise of a section of the population which is more or less permanently socially excluded. This group live in communities which seem not to have recovered from the collapse of manufacturing industry in Britain from the 1970s onwards. As a result, they suffer from 'multiple deprivation'; "a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown".¹⁰⁶ The result of this is not just their immediate negative effects but also an unwillingness, inability or prevention from taking part in the normal social, economic, cultural and, most relevantly here, political life of the nation.

It has been argued that 'social exclusion' is worse in Britain than in most of the rest of Western Europe and that this situation has deteriorated further in recent years. Studies have found that:

- the percentage of individuals living in households in income poverty in the UK rose from 15% in 1981 to 24% in 1993/4 and 22% in 2002/3;¹⁰⁷
- child poverty has fallen roughly in line with government targets, but is still high by international standards – in 2002/3, 23% of children in Britain lived in households earning below 60% of the median income;¹⁰⁸
- the number of households in temporary accommodation has continued to rise since 1997; in 2002/3, 129,000 applications for social housing were accepted as being homeless and in 'priority need', an increase of 10% on 2001/2;¹⁰⁹
- persistent poverty (defined as living at least three years out of the last four in poverty) is high in Britain compared to the rest of Europe; between 1998 and 2001, 11% of UK citizens lived in persistent poverty. This compares to 5% in the Netherlands, 6% in Germany 9% across Europe as a whole¹¹⁰.

These findings are significant because data from the 1997 and 2001 General Elections showed that less affluent social classes are less likely to vote and there is a strong view in the literature surveyed that members of the least affluent groups are particularly unlikely to vote or participate politically in other ways. Given that disenfranchisement and isolation are defining characteristics of the socially excluded, this lack of political engagement is unsurprising. Those who have studied political attitudes and behaviour amongst those suffering from multiple disadvantage are unanimous in their view that these individuals may feel angry, frustrated and disgusted by their situation but do not translate this into political action of any sort either electoral or pressure activity.¹¹¹

Some of the same analysts contrast this with the "well-established fact"¹¹² that better-off citizens have a much higher tendency to participate not just in electoral activity but also in pressure activity and other collective endeavours such as the civic associations described above.¹¹³

On initial consideration, it might seem strange that the section of society with the most to complain about is the least likely to engage politically. However, authors who have studied the socially excluded have suggested a number of reasons for this finding:

- the daily struggle to survive endured by the least affluent leaves little time or inclination to become involved in any collective or political activity;¹¹⁴
- socially excluded groups are "denied the opportunities and capacities they need to participate in the democratic process on an equal footing";¹¹⁵
- politicians and parties have little interest in the views or even the support of the poorest leading to reciprocation of that attitude on the part of the poor;¹¹⁶
- the fact that the socially excluded are far less likely to be involved in trade unions and civic associations – largely as a result of the loss of regular employment – reduces opportunities for them to articulate their political interests and to get involved in politics.¹¹⁷

Clearly, there is little if any dissension in the literature that the growth of a substantial social class characterised by multiple deprivation and social and political disenfranchisement has done anything other than limit electoral activity amongst the less affluent members of British society.

Conclusion

The full range of causes identified here may seem baffling. The attempt to introduce some order to such important considerations for a Commission on political participation is daunting. The very first step, however, is to list those causes which can be gleaned from the literature and which either do or do not maintain some degree of credibility.

Two causes identified in this paper can be dropped on the basis that there is no serious support in the literature for their validity when explaining a decline in electoral activity. These are:

- the lack of popular grievances resulting from widespread satisfaction with political and economic circumstance;
- the process of voting is inconvenient.

Two further causes of decline in electoral activity which may have more credibility than the above two but may be rejected on the grounds that this evidence is either very limited or weak. These are:

- low levels of trust in the probity and competence of politicians;
- the media promotes political distrust.

There are two other causes which on the face of it seem like reasonable possibilities but about which it is difficult to draw firm conclusions due to the lack of detailed research. These are:

- the media weakens political knowledge;
- lack of time available for political engagement.

This leaves the following causes as still maintaining a reasonably strong degree of evidence for their significance within the literature on the decline in electoral activity.

Problems of current political climate

- the lack of competitive elections
- the similarity of the main political parties

Problems of political culture and public attitudes

- a weak or changing sense of civic duty amongst citizens
- a sense of disconnection from the political system on the part of citizens

Problems of individual resources

- lack of information and/or knowledge of politics
- lack of financial resources

Problems of state structures

- citizens lack significant influence over political decisions
- the accountability of the state has been reduced
- the modes of participation offered to citizens are 'out-dated'

Problems of mobilising agencies

- the decline of traditional working-class networks
- the replacement of traditional middle-class networks by leisure-based advocacy networks and single issue networks

Problems of social and economic change

- the shift to a post-industrial economy
- the emergence of a socially excluded class

It is extremely important that Commissioners keep in mind that the identification of these causes is based strictly on what is present in the existing literature. It may be that the Commission itself feels there are other causes worthy of further research which may arise out of their own deliberations and investigation. They may feel that causes rejected here may, in fact, be more valid than the evidence presented in the literature allows for.

This list of causes presented in this way does not offer a framework around which a programme of investigation can be built. Clearly not every one of these causes can be investigated equally and in full in the time and capacity available to the Inquiry. Thus *Analytical Approach and Research Programme (Initial Proposal)* proposes ways of ordering or approaching these causes to better enable further investigation.

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