

TURNING ROUND TURN-OUT.

Turnout – the reasons why it's falling and the potential solutions

by Jason Kitcat

Turnout slips away

In the 1999 European elections the UK recorded a turnout of 23% - a lower figure than in any other EU country. It must be said that all European nations saw a drop in turnout from the 1994 elections but the range of turnouts, excluding the UK, was 29.9% (Netherlands) to 90% (Belgium). Clearly the UK came a very poor last and the trend of low British turnouts continued in the 2001 General Election where 59.2% of the British people voted. This was one of the lowest turnouts on record for the mother of democracies (the lowest ever recorded turnout is 58.9% in 1918). Thus the fall in turnout isn't restricted to one type of election, council elections mirror these falls, nor is it a new phenomenon as Figure 1 shows.

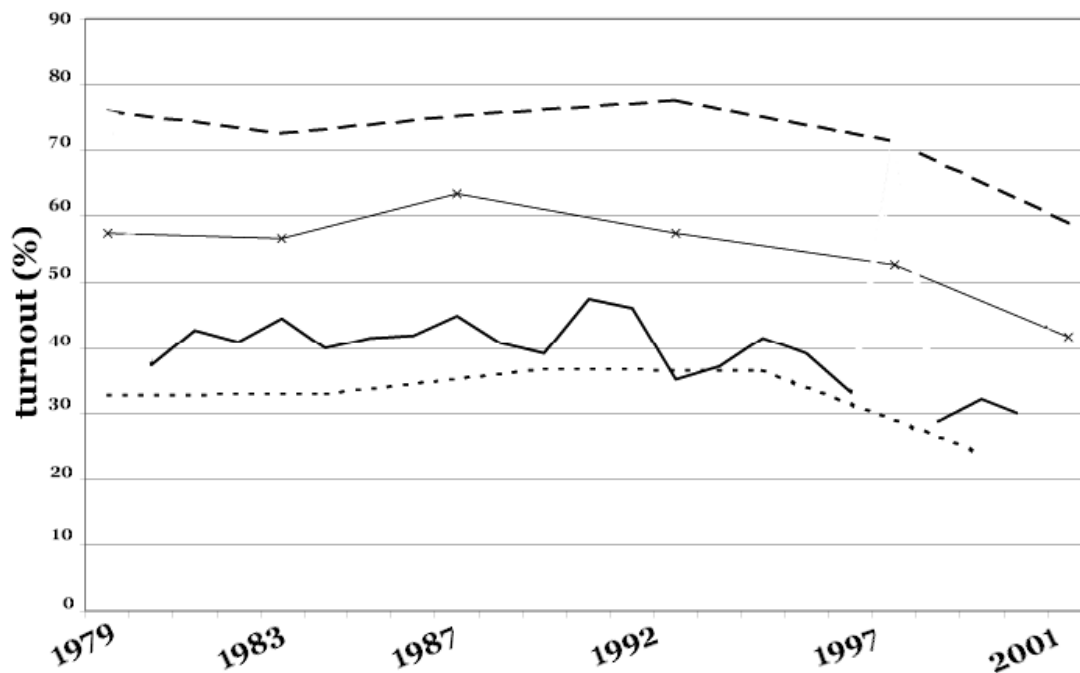
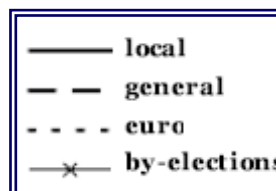


Figure 1: Turnout over time of British elections.
Source: Professor Thrasher, University of Plymouth



This isn't a uniquely British problem either, as Figure 2 shows, turnout is falling globally, in democracies old and new. But each democracy must address these issues on its own terms and it is time the British Government took this challenge seriously. It was facile for Labour spokesmen on election night 2001 to write off the fall in turnout as being due to widespread 'satisfaction with the Labour government.' There was a small grain of truth to this otherwise careless brush-off, as Figure 3 and Figure 4 show, the closeness of an election result does have an impact on turnout. But the Commons Public Administration Select Committee rightly accused the Government of being "extremely complacent" about the impending civic crisis of voter disconnect. They wrote "We find it extraordinary that this collapse in electoral participation, put alongside other evidence of civic disengagement, has not been treated as a civic crisis demanding an immediate response."

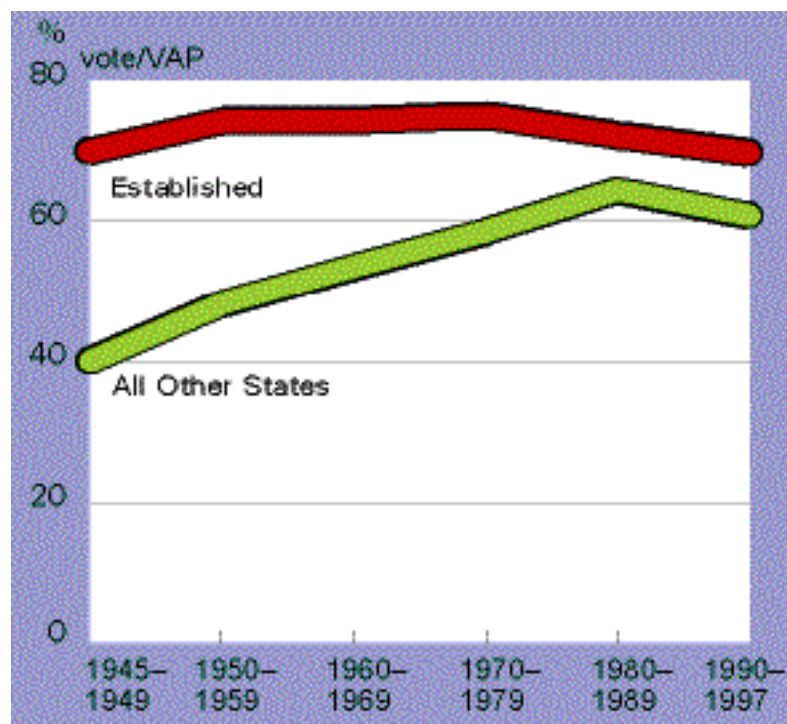


Figure 2: Differences in turnout between established democracies and other states over time. (VAP = Voting Age Population)
Source: International IDEA Voter Turnout Global Survey

Some don't see this trend as a problem; in an article for *The Telegraph*, Anthony King, a professor of government at Essex stated that falling turnout should be regarded as being healthy. He argues that because there is less tribalism and the extremes of party politics have died down we are happier, and contented people don't feel as compelled to vote. There is no denying that happiness can reduce people's motivation to stand up for a cause, but a brief examination of current

events would show that many people *aren't* happy with the way things are, be they asylum policy, the health service or fuel taxes. Furthermore MORI polls show that voters were dissatisfied with the Government by January 2000, not too contented then.

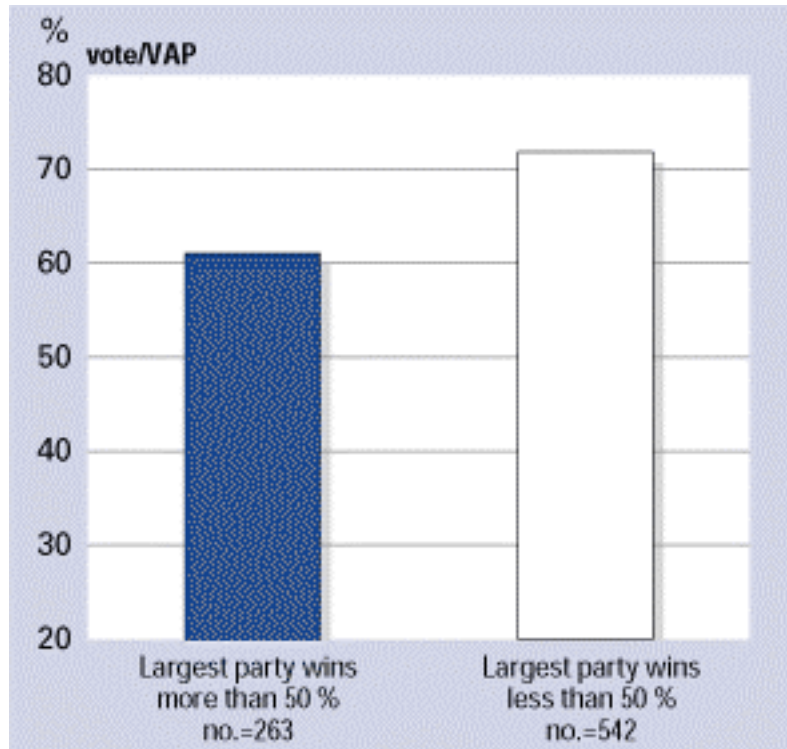


Figure 3: Competitiveness of the system, impact on turnout (VAP = Voting Age Population)

Source: International IDEA Voter Turnout Global Survey

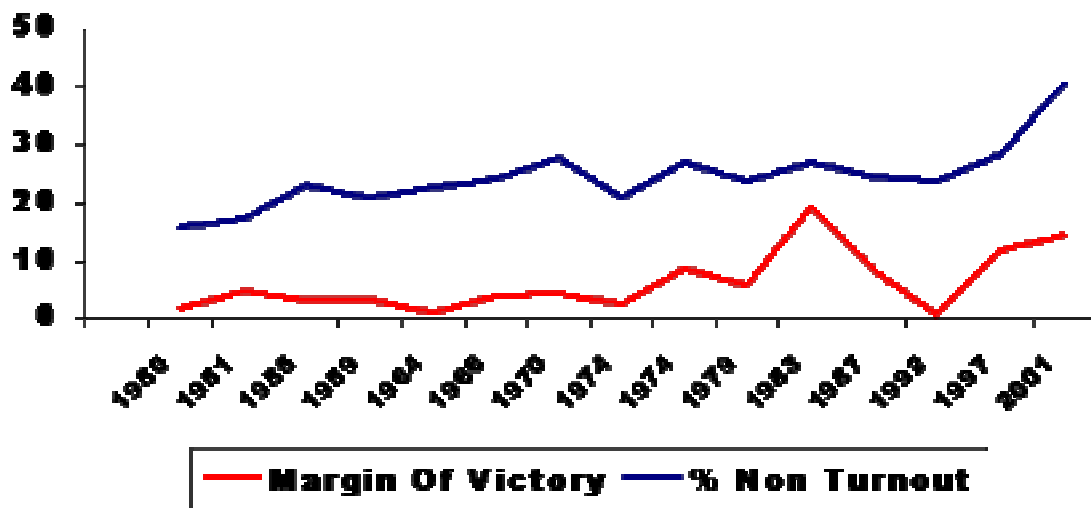


Figure 4: Margin of victory in the final poll and percentage of voters who did not vote.
Source: ICM

Understanding why

On election night 2001 the BBC polled people who had decided not to vote on their reasons why they abstained. The reasons were extremely interesting and tie with what other evidence has been leading to...

Some 77% said there was no point in voting because it would not change a thing, while 65% said they did not trust politicians. Just over half said it was obvious that Labour would win anyway.

In *The Guardian*, shortly after the second Labour victory, Noreena Hertz reported that 67% of the population now believe that big international companies have more influence in their daily lives than their own government; and more worryingly 71% of 16- to 21-year-olds feel that, whoever they vote for, it will make no difference to their lives.

This is particularly acute for the European elections where not only do voters not understand what the MEPs do (and thus what difference they could make) but a MORI pole indicated that only 10% could recognise their MEP whereas 50% of those interviewed could identify their MP.

Furthermore research from Ohio State University showed that voters were less likely to vote if they disliked both candidates, because neither would make them happy. All other things being equal the highest turnout would be when one candidate was seen as being 'heroic' while the other was particularly disliked.

This would seem to indicate that once again, the perception of there being no difference between the potential candidates, is an important factor in turnout.

Many have written off these figures and the turnout problem as being due to apathy. However apathy is defined as 'indolence or a state of indifference' which clearly isn't the case. People care more than ever about environmental issues such as GM food and nuclear power; about international policies such as Bush's "Son of Star Wars", the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court. But instead of using party political structures to make these points heard, citizens are using NGOs and coalitions of NGOs to campaign against governments and corporations. Figures from the Electoral Commission also support the view that apathy is not the leading problem : 58% of those surveyed were very or fairly interested in the election, 6% higher than in 1997!

Not only is this increasing prominence of campaigning NGOs sidelining MPs and other representatives, but so is the growing power of the executive and the decreasing relevance of Parliament. A small example is described in John Major's autobiography where expresses his amazement that MPs allowed Tony Blair to reschedule Prime Minister's questions to one session on Wednesdays without a hint of a fight. We have seen a small resurgence in Parliamentary pride since Labour's re-election with the reforming Robin Cook as Leader of the House. But reporting of Parliamentary process is continuing to decline and the accountability of the executive is at an all-time low. Committees are delivering reports which are immediately sidelined and the Chairs are being 'cajoled' into following the Government line. This process did not start with the Labour government, but with their large majority they do have the power to rectify the situation, or worsen it. But they seem to have no inclination to make improvements, announcing almost every major policy outside of Parliament.

So why aren't people voting? There are no easy answers but I think the evidence points to several leading factors:

- **A lack of compelling choices being presented to the voter.**
Career politicians selected centrally or 'parachuted' into safe seats reinforce the view that they don't really represent their constituency and will just follow the party line – 'just like the rest of them'. It would seem that many voters miss the 'Gentleman Parliamentarian' for whom becoming an MP was the logical conclusion of their local involvement as opposed to being a stepping stone to greater things.
- **The closeness of the result (or lack thereof).**
The results of recent elections have been seen as foregone conclusions thus reducing the motivation for 'floating' and reluctant voters to get out to the polling station. This is reinforced by the constituency First Past the Post voting system which distorts the will of the voter and thus encourages tactical voting which can often make defeats look worse than they really

were. Also minority views are less likely to win through to get representation – the result is that voters with those minority views choose not to bother voting as they know their chosen party won't win.

- **The decreasing importance of Parliament**

Partly due to the scale of the Labour majority, partly due to their style of government and also due to increasing decentralisation to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland as well as Europe; our great Parliament is losing its importance and its power. Some of these losses are worthwhile and have brought gains – certainly many facets of the EU are worthwhile, as are the results of devolution (even if the West Lothian question remains unresolved). However Parliament is punching below its weight by a significant margin and important reforms need to be made to it, and the House of Lords, to rebuild its importance, relevance and powers.

- **Death by a million cuts**

A US citizen can be presented with up to 22 different positions to vote for and the US has one of the lowest levels of turnout (though I wouldn't claim that this is the only reason for that). Citizens can be asked to vote *too* often, especially if they feel it makes no difference. The current round of referenda on mayors is an excellent example. After having watched the debacle of the London mayoral race and the slow realisation that Ken Livingstone has no real power – he can't deliver the policies he was voted for without the acquiescence of the Government – voters fail to see the relevance of mayors as currently proposed. Then with regional assemblies Welsh and Scots voters are being asked to vote for representatives whose powers, to say the least, are unclear while still voting for MPs. All these elections can be too much of a good thing.

- **Education & Publicity**

BBC News reported on a survey after the last European Elections which showed that one of the primary reason for citizens not voting was that they felt that they didn't know enough about the issues to make a responsible choice. Evidence from recent mayoral referenda and going as far back as a mid-1970s referendum in Sweden on the use of nuclear power shows that concerted campaigns providing publicity (making the vote an event) and delivering free, unbiased, education on the issues has a very positive impact on turnout.

- **The difficulty of voting**

There is no doubt that people are busier than ever with both parents in a family often working. There is little evidence that this is a major factor in turnout, but it cannot be denied as being a factor *in combination* with the above factors. If you feel your vote is going to make little or no difference and you are very busy then you are even less likely to vote.

Professor Michael Thrasher from the University of Plymouth Elections Centre summarises these issues into three categories:

- **Resources**
Do I have the time and resources to figure out who or what to vote for?
- **Motivation**
Do I feel a civic or party obligation to vote? Is it in my interest? Is it worth the effort?
- **Mobilisation**
Does my vote make a difference? Do I really dislike a certain party?

Political scientist Dr Michael Cornfield explains these issues from a different perspective, as two transitions which must occur before the voter comes to the ballot box: The voter must be moved from apathy to an interest in politics and then the interest must be converted into action i.e. voting. As previously stated, apathy is a misnomer, by 'apathy to an interest in politics' I read moving voters from a lack of faith in the effectiveness of the electoral process to a faith in the system and the representatives it produces.

Potential solutions

We must recognise that there are no quick fixes, this is a long-term problem which will have long-term solutions. The previous section briefly highlighted the complexity of the reasons behind falling voter turnout and the solutions will probably need to mirror this complexity. A wide variety of solutions have been proposed, and it is likely that a combination of those presented below will be required before any major turnaround in the current trends can be seen.

Opening the channels of voting

In many circles it has been taken as an article of faith that making it easier to vote by increasing the number of channels available to voters will result in significant improvements to turnout. I am heavily involved in Internet voting and technology in general but I have never once suggested that such technologies will help turnout, and have encouraged others not to do so either. Returning to Dr Cornfield's transitional model, voting technologies may ease the move from interest to action, but without any change in the lack of movement from apathy to interest then this makes no difference – the voter is stuck on transition one. At this point, a lengthy quote from an article taken from *The Guardian* written by Nick Sparrow, Managing Director of ICM after the 2001 election will help to clarify the issues muddied by post-election reporting:

An Electoral Commission survey conducted during the summer ...
[suggests]... that 66% of non voters would have been more likely to vote if

they could have done so by phone and 51% would have voted by post if they had known it was possible to do so and got themselves organised. A neat research outcome for the Commission, whose statutory duties include “participation in pilot schemes for innovative electoral procedures”.

The Electoral Commission results were based on re-interviews with people previously asked political questions at the start of the campaign. Only 20% of them said they hadn't been to vote, half the proportion that ought to have been found. The technical details explain that there were some differences between the original sample and those they managed to get back to. In particular re-interviews were with people “more likely to say that they are interested in politics and always vote at general elections”. It seems some who found the subject of the original interview boring were not going to get caught twice.

Nevertheless the results from the 208 non-voters re-interviewed after the election have been reported widely. The survey found that a fifth of non-voters couldn't get to the polling station because it was “too inconvenient”, 16% were “away”, 15% claimed they were not registered and 11% hadn't received a polling card. According to this research voter apathy is the least important reason for not voting; only 10% of the Electoral Commission sample of non-voters replied that the reason they hadn't voted was because they were “not interested”. Music to those eager to spend lots of taxpayers' money on “schemes for innovative electoral procedures”. But the real answer lies with the people the Electoral Commission didn't interview, not with those who decided to participate in the poll.

Postal voting has been regarded as a popular channel for broadening and was used for the recent mayoral referenda wherever possible. But in correspondence, Professor Thrasher told me that by “my latest reading of research from abroad even all-postal ballots (the biggest impact upon turnout) tend to fall away after the initial burst of enthusiasm. In other words the effects don't last that long... the parsimonious model suggests that it's to do with novelty value.” Add to this the comments by Anthony Painter in *The Guardian* “Technical changes don't have much effect on voting levels. Changes to postal voting procedures meant that half a million more people voted by post than in 1997. But these weren't new votes. The vast majority were simply regular voters taking advantage of an alternative and convenient voting method.” These views would appear to confirm that such innovations are not treating the root causes of the turnout problem – no quick fixes.

Furthermore a MORI poll for the Institute of Citizenship found that, at most, 2% more British citizens would vote when informed that they could vote by post, compared to recording their intention to vote without the knowing about the postal option. New channels are clearly not a solution to turnout problems, but

that is not to say that they shouldn't be pursued – they offer other benefits which can't be measured in turnout.

Making the vote count

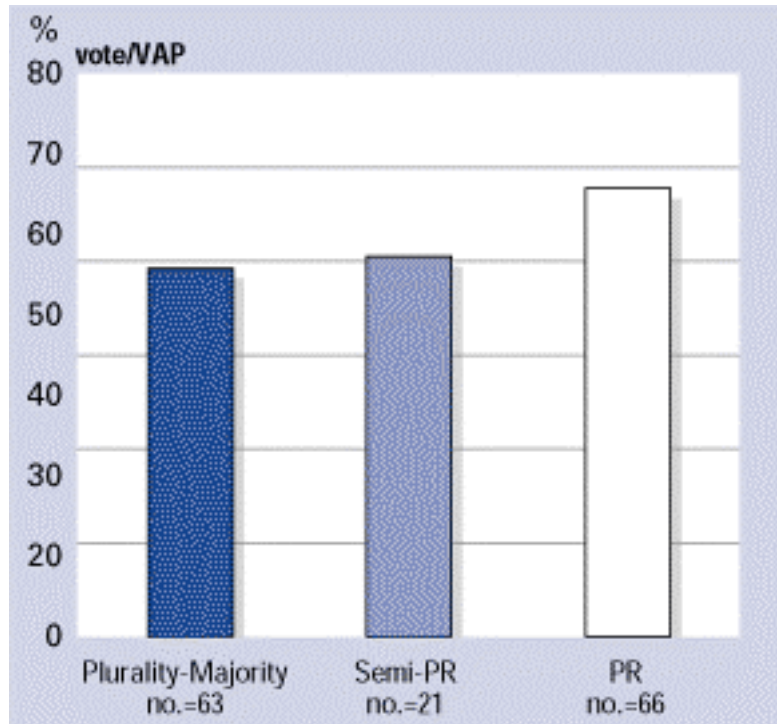


Figure 5: Turnout for Electoral System Families
(VAP = Voting Age Population, no. = number of elections)
Source: International IDEA Voter Turnout Global Survey

Figure 5 clearly show the correlation between the proportionality of a voting system and the turnout. The European elections had a form of PR and we know they had a low turnout, but other factors such as the lack of any effective campaigning have been evidently attributed to the specific problems of that election. Figure 5, referring to national elections only, shows that if the British Parliamentary elections were more proportional a greater number of voters would not only feel that their views would be represented in Parliament but also would feel that their vote would make a difference. Tactical voting would no longer be necessary.

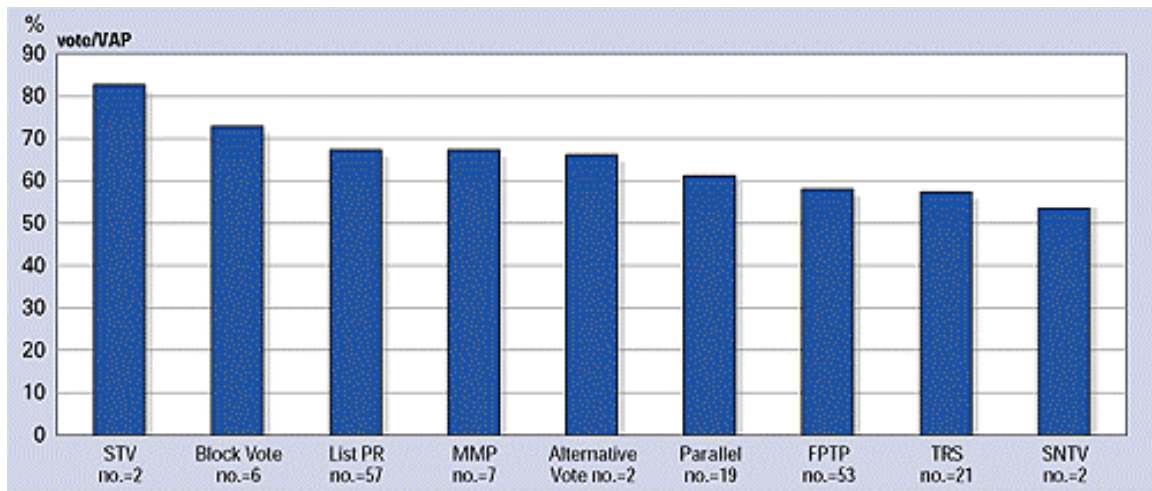


Figure 6: Turnout for Electoral Systems
(VAP = Voting Age Population, no. = number of elections)
Source: International IDEA Voter Turnout Global Survey

Figure 6 furthers the argument for proportional representation by showing the direct correlation between the proportionality of a voting system and turnout. The most proportional system, Single Transferable Vote (STV) has the highest turnout. This is the system advocated by, among others, the Electoral Reform Society, Make Votes Count, Fairshare, Charter88, the Liberal Democrats and the more liberal members of both the Labour (the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform is the largest single issue organisation in the party) and Tory parties. Interestingly this was the system used by the majority of European regions except England, Scotland and Wales who used a closed list system. Could this have contributed to the lower turnout?

Making a fuss

One of the clear problems with not only the European elections but local council elections and referenda on local Mayors is a lack of publicity. A large number of the potential electorate are unaware that a competition is underway. The same problem plagues by-elections, which was highlighted recently by Newsnight when more voters in a constituency knew about a football match than the by-election.

A considerable amount of work needs to be done to raise awareness of each individual election, independent public bodies need to educate the public on the relevant issues. Two objectives then, education on the issues and candidates as well as promotion of the election itself.

Parliamentary Reform

As mentioned previously, Parliament is regarded as becoming less relevant. Recent examples include the failure of Stephen Byers to appear in Parliament for a debate specifically about his conduct, choosing instead to visit a new bridge. Other examples include the continued fudging of proposed reforms of both Houses by the Government and their whips.

It isn't the role of this article to discuss the wide range of proposed and potential reforms that should be considered by the Houses. But it must be made clear that unless Government is made more accountable and the Houses, particularly the House of Commons, are made more relevant to the public then the disconnect will continue. This goes to not only the institution and its rules, but to the make-up, attitudes and presentation of its members. Lords are regarded as 'fuddy-duddies' who have no real relevance to modern society. MPs fare little better, most being viewed as career politicians on the make, taking donations from corporate interests while clambering the slippery stairs to power. Representation and deference to the electors seem to emerge from politicians only on election day. Thus, as many columnists have noted, there needs to be a cultural shift in the whole political way of life. And it is in the politicians' interests, party membership is falling dramatically, raising into question the viability of their funding.

Conclusions

I have examined the web of reasons behind falling turnout and explored a range of solutions, which I suggest will need to be taken in combination. Turnout is a widespread problem and every nation will need to address their issues. But the UK seems to be coming under a relatively unique number of simultaneous pressures from multiple directions. Thus decision makers must steel themselves for a long march back to vibrant democracy.

What is clear, as I have repeated several times, is that there are no quick fixes and technological solutions such as Internet voting, will have a negligible impact on turnout. The challenging soft problems of motivation, culture and organisational change are ones we would probably rather not face, but which our continued success as a democracy requires that we do.

About the Author

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Production at Swing Digital (<http://www.swingdigital.com>), an Internet consultancy specialising in building online communities.

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