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Will anyone vote? Prospects for turnout in the general election

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One of the most notable features of the last two general elections was the low level of turnout. Before 2001 turnout at general elections was always at least 70% (and often far higher). But in 2001 it fell to just 59% and, at 61%, the figure in 2005 was little better. Over 17 million people eligible to vote that year chose not to do so, seven million more than voted for the winning Labour party. Britain found itself almost at the bottom of the turnout league among established European democracies. The failure of large sections of the public to go to the polls has led to considerable concern about the health of Britain's democracy and stimulated many a suggestion as to how the country's politicians might be able to reconnect with the electorate.

The results of the 2008 British Social Attitudes survey gave rise to further reason for concern.¹ We found that there had been a sharp drop in the proportion of people who said they felt they had a duty to vote. At the beginning of the 1990s, just over two-thirds claimed they felt such a duty, and the figure was still as high as 64% at the time of the last election in 2005. However, according to the 2008 survey, the proportion falling into that category had dropped to just 56%. Given that those who feel a duty to vote are much more likely to vote than those who do not, this development suggested that turnout in the forthcoming election would once again be low.

Events since the 2008 survey was conducted hardly seem likely to have improved matters. In particular, during the summer of 2009 the House of Commons became embroiled in what has become known as the 'MPs' expenses scandal'. Following publication of the details of the claims that MPs had made in respect of their Additional Costs Allowance, many MPs were widely criticised for making claims that appeared at best excessive and at worse suggested a deliberate attempt to maximise personal financial advantage; a few were even accused of fraudulent behaviour. The resulting furore seemed guaranteed to undermine public trust and confidence in politicians and the political system, a development that would appear unlikely to enhance election turnout.

In view of these developments, this briefing reports key findings from the latest British Social Attitudes survey, conducted between June and September last year. It focuses on two questions. First, what immediate impact has the scandal had on people's levels of trust in the political system? Second, do more recent figures

¹ S. Butt and J. Curtice, 'Duty in decline? Trends in attitudes towards voting', in A. Park et al. (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: the 26th report*, London: Sage, 2010,

confirm that that fewer people now feel they have a duty to vote? In both cases we focus in particular on the implications of our findings for the prospects for turnout in the forthcoming general election.

Trust in the political system

The British Social Attitudes survey has been charting levels of trust in the political system for much of the last twenty years or so. In Table 1 we show the answers to the two questions about political trust that have been asked on a regular basis on the survey.

How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?

Just about always

Most of the time

Only some of the time

Almost never

And how much do you trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner?

Just about always

Most of the time

Only some of the time

Almost never

As Table 1 shows, distrust of the motives of government and politicians has long been commonplace in Britain. Even in the early 1990s no more than a third reckoned that governments could be trusted to put the needs of the nation first. However, in the wake of the allegations about 'sleaze' that embroiled John Major's administration after 1992, that proportion fell to around a quarter or so, and failed to stage a sustained recovery after Labour came to power. Meanwhile, it seems that few have ever been willing to trust politicians to tell the truth; typically less than one in ten have said they could be trusted to do so at least 'most of the time'.

Table 1 Trends in political trust, 1987–2009

| | 87 (1) | 87+ (2) | 91 | 94 | 96 | 97 (1) | 97+ (2) | 98 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 09 |
|------------------------------------|-----------|------------|------|------|------|-----------|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|
| Trust government | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Just about always/most of the time | 37 | 47 | 33 | 24 | 22 | 25 | 33 | 28 | 16 | 28 | 26 | 18 | 26 | 19 | 29 | 16 |
| Some of the time | 46 | 43 | 50 | 53 | 53 | 48 | 52 | 52 | 58 | 50 | 47 | 49 | 47 | 46 | 45 | 42 |
| Almost never | 11 | 9 | 14 | 21 | 23 | 23 | 12 | 17 | 24 | 20 | 24 | 31 | 26 | 34 | 23 | 40 |
| | 87 (1) | 87+ (2) | 91 | 94 | 96 | 97 (1) | 97+ (2) | 98 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 09 |
| Trust politicians | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Just about always/most of the time | na | na | na | 9 | 9 | 8 | na | 9 | 11 | na | 7 | 6 | 8 | 7 | 9 | 6 |
| Some of the time | na | na | na | 40 | 38 | 40 | na | 43 | 42 | na | 37 | 39 | 39 | 35 | 39 | 39 |
| Almost never | na | na | na | 49 | 49 | 50 | na | 46 | 46 | na | 55 | 54 | 52 | 57 | 49 | 60 |
| <i>Base</i> | 1410 | 3413 | 1445 | 1137 | 1180 | 1355 | 3615 | 2071 | 2293 | 1099 | 2287 | 3299 | 3167 | 1077 | 992 | 1143 |

na: not asked

* Source: *British Election Study*

That distrust of politicians was apparently so widespread before the MPs expenses scandal broke in mid 2009 helps explain why that scandal had considerable resonance for the public. People were already inclined to believe that politicians were more concerned to protect their own interests than those of the country as a whole. So suggestions that MPs had been exploiting the allowances system for their own personal advantage were readily believed.

Of course, if that were all that the scandal did, it might simply have reinforced existing views rather than changed them. But it is clear that between 2007 and 2009 there was a sharp increase in the proportion of people saying they 'almost never' trust governments or politicians. Now 40% say that they almost never trust governments to put the nation's needs first; previously the figure had never been higher than 31% (in 2003). Similarly, three in five (60%) now say that they almost never trust politicians to tell the truth, when the previous all-time high had been 55% (in 2002).

At the same time, though, we should take note of a second pattern - the public tend to express rather greater levels of trust and confidence in their political system in the immediate wake of a general election. Consider for example, what happened on the occasion of the 1987 election. The first measure shown for that year is from the British Social Attitudes survey, conducted shortly before the election. The second is from the British Election Study survey, which asked exactly the same question in the weeks immediately afterwards. On the second occasion, the proportion of people who trusted governments to put the needs of the country first was ten points higher than it had been previously. There were equally relatively high levels of trust professed in surveys conducted after the 1997, 2001 and 2005 general elections. (Incidentally, it seems that the replacement of Tony Blair as Prime Minister by Gordon Brown may also have had a similar effect in the summer of 2007.) However, what also seems to be the case is that the impact of elections on levels of trust soon wanes away once more.

So it appears that political trust in Britain has hit a new all time low in the immediate wake of the expenses scandal. An already sceptical public has become yet more sceptical. It would seem the scandal has indeed help fracture the already tenuous relationship between the country's politicians and its voters. True, the forthcoming election itself can be expected to help restore some of the public's faith in the political process, but this boost is only likely to be a temporary one.

What are the apparent implications of the latest decline in trust for turnout in the general election? Table 2 gives us an initial clue by showing the level of reported turnout at each of the last three elections broken down by respondents' levels of trust in government. It shows that, contrary to widespread assumption, the link between turnout and political trust is not necessarily particularly strong. In particular, the most trusting (those who trust government 'most of the time' or 'just about always') are only slightly more likely to vote than those who trust governments 'only some of the time'. Meanwhile, given that the level of trust was much the same in 2001 and 2005 as it had been in 1997 (when turnout was far higher), it is in any event highly doubtful that the low level of turnout in the two most recent elections can be accounted for by the public's scepticism.

However, Table 2 also shows that those who 'almost never' trust governments are noticeably less likely to turn out than those in the other two categories; they are at minimum ten percentage points less likely to vote than those who at least trust governments 'some of the time'. And this is the group that has grown notably in size

in the wake of the MPs expenses scandal. So perhaps the expenses scandal could well have a deleterious impact on turnout after all?

Table 2 Trust in government and electoral participation, 1997-2005

| Trust government to place needs of the nation above those of party ... | % voted 1997 | Base | % voted 2001 | Base | % voted 2005 | Base |
|--|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|
| ... just about always/ most of the time | 85 | 961 | 74 | 304 | 74 | 770 |
| ... only some of the time | 78 | 1518 | 69 | 552 | 71 | 1509 |
| ... almost never | 67 | 356 | 51 | 220 | 61 | 826 |

Just what that impact might be can be seen if we calculate what would happen if the relationship between trust in governments and turnout were to be the same as in 2005, but that the proportions of people who profess each level of trust stay at the levels they were in 2009. In that event, the level of turnout would be four points lower than it was in 2005 (when it was 61%), representing a loss of nearly two million voters. Even if the level of trust recovers in the wake of the election campaign (along the lines of what happened between 2003 and 2005), there would still be a drop in turnout of two points, or nearly a million fewer voters. This might not be regarded as a catastrophic fall but it is certainly a trend that will only make it harder for turnout to return to the levels routinely experienced before 2001.

Duty and engagement

What, however, of our finding in 2008 that there had apparently been a decline in duty to vote? Is that result confirmed by our 2009 survey? Has the feeling that people have an obligation to vote been eroded further by the fallout from the MPS expenses scandal?

To tap whether people do feel such an obligation we ask:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view about general elections?

In a general election:

...It's not really worth voting

...People should vote only if they care who wins

...It's everyone's duty to vote

Table 3 shows how this question been answered since it was first asked (on the British Election Study) in 1987. It indicates that the decline in duty to vote revealed quite clearly by the 2008 survey has largely been sustained. At 58%, the latest reading is below any previous reading obtained in 2005 or earlier. However, it is also apparent that the MPs expenses scandal has not brought about a further decline. Indeed, the latest reading is slightly (though not significantly) above what it was in 2008.

Table 3 Civic duty, 1991–2009

| | 1987 ⁺ | 1991 | 1994 | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 | 2001 | 2004 | 2005 | 2008 | 2009 |
|---|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| It is not really worth voting | 3 | 8 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 11 | 11 | 12 | 12 | 18 | 17 |
| People should only vote if they care who wins | 21 | 24 | 21 | 26 | 26 | 24 | 23 | 27 | 23 | 23 | 23 |
| It is everyone's duty to vote | 76 | 68 | 68 | 64 | 65 | 64 | 65 | 60 | 64 | 56 | 58 |
| Base | 3413 | 1224 | 970 | 989 | 1654 | 2008 | 2795 | 2609 | 1732 | 990 | 1017 |

⁺ Source: *British Election Study*

That there is little link between the decline in political trust and civic duty is in fact clear if we compare the trend in political trust since 2005 amongst those who feel a duty to vote with that amongst those who do not. Table 4 shows that those who trust governments and politicians are, as we might expect, more likely than those who do not to feel they have a duty to vote. But the decline in perceived duty to vote since 2005 has been much the same amongst those who are most trusting as it has been amongst the most sceptical. So far at least, the loss of trust has evidently not contributed to the decline in duty to vote.

Table 4 Duty to vote by Political Trust, 2005 and 2009.

| % feel duty to vote | Trust governments | | | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|------|-----------------------|------|--------------|------|
| | Just about always/most of the time | Base | Only some of the time | Base | Almost never | Base |
| 2005 | 75 | 433 | 61 | 847 | 47 | 431 |
| 2009 | 70 | 156 | 67 | 430 | 53 | 410 |
| Change 2005-9 | -5 | | -6 | | -6 | |

| % feel duty to vote | Trust politicians | | | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|--------------|-----|
| | Just about always/most of the time | | Only some of the time | | Almost never | |
| 2005 | 74 | 120 | 68 | 687 | 60 | 915 |
| 2009 | 69 | 55 | 64 | 332 | 53 | 619 |
| Change 2005-9 | -5 | | -4 | | -7 | |

We might, however, wonder whether there is a relationship between duty to vote and age. After all, turnout has been particularly low amongst younger people at recent elections. Perhaps parents and schools are less successful these days in passing on to their children the idea that voting matters? To assess this possibility, Table 5 shows what proportion in each of three age groups reported feeling a duty to vote when interviewed in either 2008 or 2009, and compares that with the position nearly twenty years previously, using the data from the 1991 and 1994 British Social Attitudes surveys combined. (Bringing surveys for two different years together ensures that we have a substantial number of people in each age group.) As the two sets of readings are nearly 20 years apart and our age groups span 20 years or so, this means we can in effect also track how the views of each generation of voters have changed during the course of the last two decades – those aged 35-54 in 2008/9 are, for example, largely the same group of people as those who were aged 18-34 in 1991/4.

Table 5 Duty to vote in 1991/4 and 2008/9 by age and generation²

| Age in 1991/4 | Age in 2008/9 | Generation | % feel duty to vote in | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| | | | 1991/4 | 2008/9 |
| - | 18-34 | Post-Wilson | - | 44 |
| 18-34 | 35-54 | Affluence | 56 | 54 |
| 35-54 | 55+ | Austerity | 70 | 70 |
| 55+ | - | Pre-War | 79 | - |
| All | | | 68 | 57 |

Four key points arise from this analysis. First, younger people are less likely than older people to feel they have a duty to vote. Less than half of those aged under 35 in 2008/9 believe they have such an obligation, compared with 70% of those aged 55 and over. Second, however, a very similar age gap was also apparent in 1991/4. This similarity would appear to imply that a sense of duty comes with growing maturity. Third, though, there is no evidence that our 'affluence' generation, those who were 18-34 in the early 1990s, have developed more of a feeling of civic obligation as they have aged; in 2008/9 just over a half (54%) believed they had a duty to vote, little different to the 56% who took this view back in 1991/4. Rather, fourth, both this generation and the 'austerity' generation that was born under the shadow of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath are less likely to feel a sense of duty than the previous generation were at the same age. Indeed, the same is true of today's youngest generation, born in the years after Harold Wilson was Prime Minister. The existence of such consistent pattern across the generations suggests that the decline in duty to vote is not simply the result of developments amongst the youngest generation.

So, while only a minority of younger voters now accept that they might have a duty to vote, it seems the decline in duty to vote is not simply the product of the views of this youngest generation. Their elders too are less likely to feel that sense of duty than previous generations have done in the past at the same age. To that extent the decline in the sense that people have a duty to vote is something that is apparent among all age groups and not just young people in particular.

In any event, the potential impact of the decline in duty to vote on turnout is quite clear. In Table 6 we show the strong link that has existed at previous elections between feeling a duty to vote and actually turning out to do so. Most of those who feel such a duty do vote; most of those who do not feel it is really worth voting do not actually do so, while those who say that people should only vote 'if they care who wins' fall somewhere in between. Thus any decline in duty in vote can be expected to affect turnout adversely.

² The bases for this table are as follows:

| Age in 1991/4 | Age in 2008/9 | Generation | % feel duty to vote in | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| | | | 1991/4 | 2008/9 |
| - | 18-34 | Post-Wilson | - | 441 |
| 18-34 | 35-54 | Affluence | 677 | 784 |
| 35-54 | 55+ | Austerity | 736 | 800 |
| 55+ | - | Pre-War | 774 | - |
| All | | | 2194 | 2007 |

Table 6 Turnout, by civic duty 1987–2005

| % who voted | 1987+ | <i>Base</i> | 2001 | <i>Base</i> | 2005 | <i>Base</i> |
|---|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| It's not really worth voting | 37 | 109 | 24 | 317 | 24 | 210 |
| People should only vote if they care who wins | 75 | 697 | 49 | 644 | 50 | 379 |
| It's everyone's duty to vote | 92 | 2586 | 85 | 1798 | 85 | 1122 |

* Source: British Election Study

We can demonstrate the potential impact of the decline in civic duty since the last election by assuming that the link between turnout and perceived duty to vote is the same as it was in 2005, while at the same time taking into account the decline in the proportion who feel they have this obligation. Under those circumstances, turnout would be no less than four points – or nearly two million – lower than it was in 2005. Here too, it seems, there will be downward pressure on the likely level of turnout in the 2010 election.

Conclusion

Whether they win or lose, politicians of all parties will be hoping that voters will consider it worthwhile to cast their ballot one way or the other at the election in May. After all, the fewer people who vote, the more difficult it will be for the new government to claim a 'mandate' for the policies that they wish to implement. There are, perhaps, some reasons why people might be more willing to go to the polls this time around – unlike 2001 and 2005, the outcome of the election appears to be uncertain while voters might conclude that this time around there are bigger differences between the parties on such issues and taxation and spending. Nevertheless, it seems as though those who hope to be members of the next House of Commons will have plenty of persuading and cajoling to do if turnout is indeed to return to levels approaching what they were before 1997.

For the mood of the British public is now one that suggests that even fewer people are keen to vote than was the case in 2005. Although the MPs expenses scandal may not have undermined people's sense of civic duty, it does appear to have eroded their trust in politicians and the political system. Meanwhile, fewer people now feel a sense of duty to vote, a gradual change that seems to have occurred amongst voters of all ages. The two developments may not have much to do with each other but in combination they have created an electorate that is apparently even less inclined to vote than before. It seems the election is going to present the country's political class with a formidable challenge.