The
Electoral
Commission

Voter engagement and young people

Research team:

Dr Andrew Russell,[1] Dr Edward Fieldhouse,[2]
Dr Kingsley Purdam,[2] Dr Virinder Kalra[3]

The Department of Government, [2]The Cathie Marsh Centre
for Census and Survey Research [3]The Department of
Sociology, University of Manchester.

Contact: andrew.russell@man.ac.uk.
Telephone 0161–275–4250

03

Contents

Preface

The 2001 general election saw voter turnout drop to its lowest level since the advent of universal adult suffrage, with just 59.4% of eligible voters choosing to exercise that right. Research by the MORI Social Research Institute at the time of the election suggested that low turnout was particularly pronounced among young people, with an estimated 39% of 18–24 year olds casting a vote. More encouragingly, the surveys revealed that young people were just as likely as others to see voting as important and something which can make a difference.

In its report on the general election, *Election 2001: The Official Results*, The Commission made clear its intention to create a programme of research that would focus on the reasons for low turnout within particular communities. The aim was to create a body of research that would assist The Commission, and other key stakeholders, in developing targeted programmes of voter education.

This first research report presents the findings of a project, undertaken by a team based at the Department of Government, the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research, and the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester, which focused on voter engagement and young people. Overall responsibility for the report rests with Dr Andrew Russell, with contributions from Dr Edward Fieldhouse, Dr Kingsley Purdam and Dr Virinder Kalra. It should be noted that the suggestions and recommendations contained within are those of the authors and not of The Electoral Commission.

The report focuses on a number of key issues, including turnout and registration; reasons for voting and not voting; young people's attitudes towards elections, parties and politics; and youth communication strategies. The report also identifies key research priorities and a number of innovations that could be considered in order to increase voter engagement among young people. I am delighted to introduce this report, which I hope will be of interest to all those concerned about levels of voter participation in the UK.

Sam Younger
Chairman, The Electoral Commission
July 2002

06
Executive summary

Turnout

- Official turnout records of 59.4% in the 2001 general election were the lowest since 1918, and the lowest ever under the full democratic franchise.

- This marked a dramatic fall since 1997 (71.6%) and 1992 (77.7%) and followed a period during which there was an underlying downward trend since turnout peaked in 1950 at 84%. Five million fewer electors voted in the 2001 election than in the 1997 contest.

- Levels of turnout in local, European and some parliamentary by-elections have been a cause for concern since the 1997 general election. This led to much talk of a crisis of democracy in general and turnout in particular. The increase in turnout levels at the May 2002 local elections has not masked a general decline in levels of electoral participation over recent years.

- Certain types of people are more likely to vote than others. In Britain, turnout has been shown to vary by area, age, gender, ethnicity, social class and education. For example, in general, the affluent and the more educated middle classes are observed to have higher levels of electoral registration and turnout. Turnout is also likely to vary according to whether the election is first or second order and the closeness of the election.

- Young people are some of the people least likely to turn out and vote. In 2001 MORI estimates that only 39% of 18 – 24 year olds voted, compared to 70% of those aged 65.

- Within the sharp drop in turnout in 2001, there were marked disparities. Turnout rates in Northern Ireland were higher than in the rest of the United Kingdom. In Britain the constituency with the highest turnout was Winchester (72%); the lowest was Liverpool Riverside (33%).

Registration

- The turnout rates of young people are likely to be an under-recording of the number of people not voting in the UK since reported figures do not usually take account of people who are not registered to vote.

- Registration can vary by age, sex, ethnicity or geography and may vary due to 'political' factors. Young people are the most likely of all age groups not to be registered to vote.

- The numbers of unregistered voters may be as high as 15% of the eligible electorate in some constituencies and higher among certain age groups.

- Reasons for not registering to vote include: ignorance, administrative inefficiency, having recently moved, alienation from the political system and deliberate avoidance of registration in relation to the secondary uses of the register.

Reasons for not voting

- Not voting can be the result of:
  – disillusion (the view that it makes no difference who wins);
  – apathy (the lack of interest in politics);
  – impact (the view that an individual vote won't make a difference);
  – alienation (the view that politics is 'not for young people');
  – knowledge (not knowing enough about politics to cast a vote);
  – inconvenience (voting is too time consuming).

- These factors all seem to affect disproportionately the youngest sections of the electorate.

- The MORI 2001 survey data suggest that young people were the most likely to say that 'no one party stands for me' and to claim that they felt 'powerless' in the electoral process. British Social Attitude survey data suggest that only one in ten of 18 – 25 year olds were very interested or interested in politics.

- The context of an election has a substantial impact on turnout, and the 2001 general election was not a close contest, making voting seem devalued. The parties were not perceived as very distinct from each other, reducing the incentive to vote. Constituency context was important particularly the level of marginality.

- Low turnout may be a reflection of a deepening crisis of democracy. Evidence suggests that young people in Britain have developed a more negative attitude to the process of elections and politics over the past decade or so. It is possible that there has been a cohort effect at work and that young people in the first decade of the twenty-first century are more cynical and less supportive of the political process than young people were in the 1990s. Unless this generation of young people becomes more civic-minded as they age, the nature of British democracy is likely to become increasingly passive.

Young people's attitudes towards elections, parties and politics

- Young voters are particularly keen to note the sense of participation, of 'having a say'; the rest of the electorate at large is likely to cite a sense of civic duty or responsibility to vote.

- There is some evidence to suggest that the cynicism expressed by young people about politics is usually directed at established party politics rather than political issues.

- Politicians are widely seen as unrepresentative of the wider population in Britain in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and social class. Only one in every eight MPs is a woman (there were 118 female MPs in 2001), and only 12 MPs are from black and minority ethnic communities. After the 2001 general election, only five of the 659 MPs in the Commons were under 30; while the average age of MPs was 49.

- Young people seem to hold new institutions such as the European Union, Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales in higher regard than their older counterparts.

- Young people were reported as the most likely of all groups to talk to family and friends about politics during the 2001 election campaign – but the least likely of all groups to vote. They were the most likely of all groups to complain that the election gave them too little information about candidates, policies and the parties'

campaigns. This may be the result of poor lines of transmission and communication between the parties, the media and youth in Britain.

- First-time voters might have cause to be dissatisfied with their first electoral experience. We suspect that young people may expect to be canvassed by the political parties during an election. Unless young people happen to live in a highly contestable constituency, young voters – the slice of the electorate that might require the most information – may receive less campaign contact than they anticipated.

- A person's first electoral experience might colour their entire career as a voter (or non-voter). The worry for British democracy here is that large sections of the electorate have learnt that non-voting does not produce outcomes that are significantly different from voting. As a consequence the state of the government's mandate is often questioned and politics in general appears to fall further into disrepute.

- Falling electoral turnout is probably the most tangible evidence of a continuing crisis in democracy but, in terms of youth engagement, it is only one aspect of a failure to fully include the youngest sections of the electorate in the political process.

Communicating politics

- Young people appear to get most of their political information from the media, especially from television. They are more likely than the electorate at large to use new media for political communications. On the other hand, they are also in the vanguard of that section of the electorate that eschews television news, political stories in newspapers and use of the internet for politics.

- Young people tend to be the most sophisticated consumers of media, being more likely to use new forms of media – especially the most technologically advanced types – of all electors. However, they are not especially disposed to using these new media for the digestion of politics. There was a notable lack of election coverage in the most popular youth magazines.

08

- Attempts by political parties to engage young voters appear to have been inadequate. Partly these plans may have been poorly conceived, but partly they suffer from a strategic weakness – being tarred with the same brush as the 'party politics' that seemingly repels some young voters in the first place. Many forms of dialogue with young people attempted by government and political parties are readily dismissed as crude attempts at electioneering by this most media- and technology-conscious section of the population. For example the use of celebrity endorsements is not considered to have had a positive impact in 2001.

- Analysis of the existing literature has produced mixed signals about younger people's views of the role of an active citizenry in the twenty-first century. Politics is often taken to mean 'party politics' or life in Westminster, but at the same time there appears to be a real interest in, and knowledge of, a wider set of political themes. There are signs of undoubted alienation but also a desire for much more 'information'.

Implications

- The apparent disinterest in election politics exhibited by many 18 – 24 year-old abstainers signals a direct challenge to the citizenship project over the coming years.

- Non-registration constitutes a significant barrier to improving turnout. It is therefore essential to improve registration procedures and increase levels of registration.

- In order to tackle low levels of participation in elections among young people it is necessary to take into account and address issues of social, political and economic exclusion.

- Voter information and awareness campaigns could play an important role in increasing turnout but need to reflect the different needs and interests of young people. First-time voters need extra attention from the parties in order to draw them into the electoral process.

- Innovations need to be introduced to reduce the distance between young people, politicians and the electoral process. Often it is not the lack of information between electors and elected that is problematic but the quality of such information. More research is necessary to ascertain the nature of the relationship young people have with politics. For example, the role of the media and family structures in creating, changing or reinforcing the attitudes of young people is currently under-researched.

- Evidence suggests that voter engagement can be influenced by the electoral system. Under the current system, it is important that political parties attempt to engage young voters in all parts of the country and not just those who reside in marginal constituencies.

- Innovations aimed at making voting easier may bring about small improvements in levels of turnout but cannot resolve the more fundamental problems of disengagement among young people.

- There is a lack of reliable and compelling survey evidence regarding the turnout of young people and what would improve it. Further research is needed to investigate the difference between cohort and generational effects, the relationship between civic duty, wanting a say and voting, and the different levels of participation in a modern society. Poll data are instructive but must be improved in order to provide firmer conclusions. In particular longitudinal data and booster samples for young people are essential for a future research agenda. In order to target voter information resources and policies effectively there is a need to conduct further research in a number of these key areas. However, this should not be at the cost of the development of policy in areas where it is clear what needs to change.

- International comparative research would be valuable. Research is required on what voter engagement campaigns in the UK can learn from other countries.

Terms of reference

The Electoral Commission contracted the Department of Government, the Centre for Census and Survey Research (CCSR) and the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester to undertake a review of existing research on voter engagement among young people in the UK.

The research team comprised:
– Dr Andrew Russell (Department of Government);
– Dr Edward Fieldhouse (CCSR);
– Dr Kingsley Purdam (CCSR); and
– Dr Virinder Kalra (Department of Sociology).

The project had three key aims:

1 to provide a literature review of recent research studies that have been conducted into voter engagement among young people in the UK;

2 to provide secondary analysis of two MORI surveys which were conducted during May and June 2001 (http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/elec_comm.shtml) and to identify and review any other recent surveys examining voter engagement among young people;

3 to identify key research priorities and make recommendations to inform the ongoing research and voter education programmes of The Electoral Commission and other organisations.

Research steering committee and independent evaluation

The project was supervised by a steering committee convened by The Electoral Commission. The steering committee included:
– Sam Younger, Chairman, The Electoral Commission;
– Dr Mark Williams, Assistant Policy Manager, The Electoral Commission;
– Rachael Davies, Children and Young People's Unit;
– Lynne Evans, National Youth Council.

In addition, the literature review and secondary data analysis were guided by input from an independent referee: Professor Patrick Seyd, Department of Politics, University of Sheffield.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the following for their assistance in the completion of this report:
– Dr Jackie Carter, Tom Chippendale and Liz Kundi.

Introduction: the context of the research

1.1 Voter engagement and social capital

In the last two general elections in Britain, the most identifiable feature of participation – electoral turnout – declined sharply, and the participation rates of those from the youngest sections of the electorate fell even more. In 2001 the low levels of turnout might be seen as a crisis in democracy: in total, less than 60% of all registered voters actually cast a vote. Among 18 – 24 year olds fewer than 40% are believed to have voted in the general election. This research represents an attempt to investigate the causes and consequences of such declines in turnout.

A central worry for those concerned with the state of democracy in Britain is that young voters might be suffering from what Eliasoph (1998) has termed 'the shrinking circle of concern'; that widespread indifference to and ignorance of politics is causing an evaporation of the concepts of citizenship and participation.

1.1.1 Social capital

In recent years a developing set of literature has focused on the effect of social capital upon participatory politics. Sociologist James Coleman used the concept of 'social capital' to illustrate the ways in which economic norms could be applied to social matters (Coleman, 1990). Robert Putnam incorporated the notion of social capital into his work on voluntary associations, finding that social capital was highly variable in Italy due to historical and cultural differences and was in sharp decline in the United States (Putnam, 1993, 1995; see Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999, for a review). Putnam's subsequent work spells out the extent of the fall in community activities in the USA and its transformation from a highly participant culture to a much less active set of communities (Putnam, 2000). Elements of Putnam's thesis – particularly the focus on the erosion of social capital by television – have attracted criticism (see in particular Norris, 1995), while others have attempted to widen the concept to political knowledge (for example Milner, 2001) or even apply it to other countries such as Britain (see for instance Hall, 1999; Pattie *et al*, 2002).

Putnam's Bowling Alone thesis (2000) has noted a new feature of American society, as individuals are less inclined to join political and community groups. Although Putnam records that Americans are still likely to 'talk politics', his findings are telling. In particular, he identifies 12 activities in a kind of acid test of the state of American political and community life. Such activities include serving as an officer of a club or organisation, working for a political party, serving on a committee, attending a public meeting, attending a rally, making a speech, writing to a politician, signing a petition, running for office, and writing to or for a newspaper. From the period 1973 – 4 to 20 years on, all 12 activities had declined in absolute terms. In the 1970s Putnam reports that most Americans participated in at least one of these activities; by the 1990s most US citizens did none of them (Putnam, 2000, p. 45).

As well as the active forms of citizenship such as political and public life, there has been much scrutiny on the extent of respect for or trust in individuals and institutions. Both are seen as a necessary precursor for an active citizenry. Several authors have attempted to measure 'trust' in the political system (for example, Curtice and Jowell, 1997) and the youth aspect of political and popular culture (Heath and Topf, 1987; Martin and Street, 1997). Bhavnani (1994) has explored the realm in which young people discuss politics, while Bynner and Ashford (1994), Roker and Player (1997) and Wring *et al* (1998, 1999) investigated youth attitudes to the political system and political activity. The cumulative impression from these studies is that young people have become increasingly remote from the political process.

1.2 Young people: attitudes and voting

Young people have been found to be particularly lacking in social capital, and their lack of investment in the political system has had deteriorating effects upon their citizenship. The main thrust of the American literature is that young people's lack of social capital has resulted in their tendency to drop out of participatory politics altogether. Huggins (2001) used low turnout rates among first-time voters in the 1996 US presidential election to claim that 15 – 24 year olds

were becoming 'increasingly alienated from the political process'. Dionne (1991) commented on the 'hatred' for politics exhibited by American youth, and Nye (1997) asserted that young electors were the most likely to have a deep mistrust of government and government structures. As noted above, Eliasoph (1998) identified a phenomenon she termed the 'shrinking circle of concern', as Americans increasingly attempt to 'avoid politics' in everyday life as well as in electoral contests.

These findings tap into the classic literature on young people and politics which tends to stress that young people often play a dual role in elections, either supporting the most radical parties and youth organisations or opting out of voting choice altogether (Harrop and Miller, 1987; Leonard and Mortimore, 2001). In the British case, the younger sections of the electorate have disproportionately supported the Labour Party, but have also been more likely than all other sections of the electorate to abstain from voting (Brown, 1992).

The connection between young people and the democratic state is more fragile than in the rest of the electorate. In terms of attitudes, some have found evidence to suggest that young people are likely to hold a set of beliefs that are specific to their life experiences and pre-adult socialisation (Russell *et al*, 1992). If this is the case, a person's very first electoral experience might colour their career as a voter (or indeed a non-voter).

The longer-term electoral effects of the attitudes of the young are harder to measure. In particular, it is difficult to determine whether the attitudes of the young are age related or specific to some form of socialisation that will 'stick' through the ageing process. There are two distinct possibilities: either young people have a set of attitudes and political behaviours that are generational, or young people's attitudes come from cohort effects.

Generational effects can be overcome with the passage of time. Young people are likely to have specific frames of reference that may make certain issues (unemployment

and globalisation, for example) more pertinent than some of the other issues that tend to exercise great concern in the rest of the electorate (say interest rates, fuel prices, the NHS or inflation). They are also likely to hold more general or idealistic views about the world that may be marginalised with the passage of time. Generational effects are thus renewed as young people tend to become more like their older counterparts, with mortgages, families and tax concerns, and change their views accordingly, only to be replaced by a new generation of young people.

Cohort effects are more 'complex'. Certain experiences can be life-changing and affect attitudinal outlook permanently. Some authors have tried to make the case that growing up after the Second World War, with the experience of rationing and the newly formed National Health Service, gave a generation of voters a view about the provision of welfare that persisted as they grew older (see, for example, Fielding *et al*, 1995, Morgan, 1990). Others have tested the notion that socialisation in the late 1970s, with the 'winter of discontent' and the birth of Thatcherism, gave young voters a distinctly neo-liberal economic outlook compared to the usual age-related attitudinal structure (Russell *et al*, 1992; Brown, 1992).

Park (2000) has used the British Social Attitudes surveys to demonstrate that there has been a qualitative change in the outlooks of young people in recent times. In 1986, over one-fifth of 18–25 year olds claimed they were 'quite' or 'very' interested in politics; in 1999 this figure had halved to one-tenth. Moreover the gap between the generations had also grown from a 10-point gap to a 25-point gap between the most and least interested age groups (Park, 2000, pp. 10–11). Park offers a tentative conclusion that trouble may be in store for democracy:

It is by no means certain that the size of the democratic deficit from which this cohort (those born in the late 1970s and early 1980s) currently suffers will remain this large as they age. Instead they may revert to type as they move into their 30s and become comparable to today's 30 year olds. But, for this to be the case, they have a great deal of catching up to do. [Park, 2000, p. 11]

Most opinion polls or surveys are one-off snapshots of public opinion that rely on limited samples. In order to test cohort and generational effects a different type of data is required, such as a panel survey (which asks the same people questions at different points in time) or at least a series of surveys that ask the same questions to similar types of people. There is a lack of longitudinal data, and those datasets that could begin to do this job (the British Social Attitudes series or the British Household Panel Survey series) are underused, with a few notable exceptions. This means that we are unable to say for certain whether the disengagement of young people around the time of the 2001 general election was a one-off event or the portent of some future democratic crisis.

1.3 Turnout in Britain

In the aftermath of the 2001 election, the issue of turnout became the issue in British politics. Official turnout at the 2001 general election – at 59.4% – was at the lowest since 1918. This marked a dramatic fall from the level of voter engagement of 1997 (71.6%) which in itself had caused significant discussion about falling levels of participation and the democratic deficit (see Denver and Hands, 1997a; Heath and Taylor, 1999; Pattie and Johnston, 2001).

Figure 1.1 Percentage turnout at general elections as proportion of registered electorate, 1929–2001
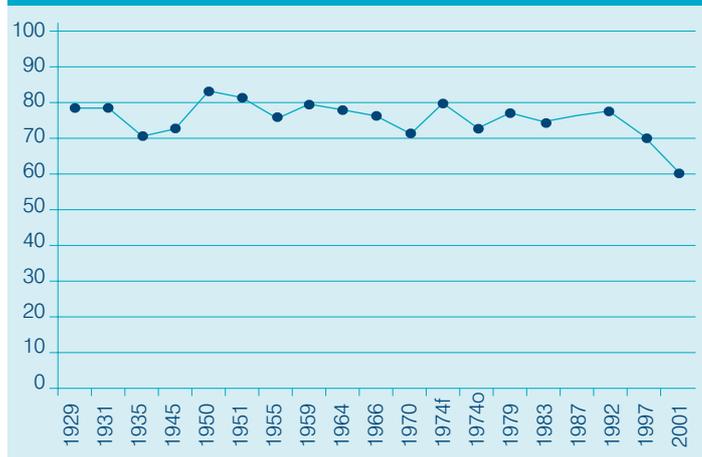
Sources: Butler and Butler, 2000; Electoral Commission, 2001

Taking 1929 as the starting point (the first election where men and women had an equal right of suffrage) it is clear that the 2001 general election represented a historic low point in terms of participation in modern British elections. Turnout in general elections peaked in 1950 (see Denver and Hands, 1997a) although no real pattern of decline is clearly discernible until the 1997 election (see Figure 1.1). Indeed a key feature of the 1992 election was the small but significant upturn in turnout that may have contributed to the unexpected victory of the Conservatives under the leadership of John Major.

There does seem to have been an unprecedented fall in turnout rates since the 1997 election. Between New Labour's first and second electoral victories, participation has fallen across all levels of electoral contest and now appears to be in free-fall. In second-order elections, such as those for local government in Britain and the European Parliament, there does seem to have been a clear secular decline in turnout rates (see Rallings and Thrasher, 2001; Blondel *et al*, 1998). The UK has the lowest rate of turnout in the EU at European elections (24% in 1999) and an average of 29.6% in local elections in 2000 (Electoral Commission, 2001). In the by-elections held during the 1997 parliament, turnout was consistently lower than at any stage of modern British political history. An all-time low was marked in May 1999 when a by-election caused by the death of Derek Fatchett – the sitting member for Leeds Central – witnessed a turnout of less than 20% (Electoral Commission, 2001, p. 240).

The emphasis on registered turnout in 2001 has masked a related but often overlooked feature of public electoral participation. Regardless of the changing size of the registered electorate, fewer people actually voted in 2001 than in any election since the end of the Second World War (Table 1.1). In 1997, official turnout was lower than at any time since 1945 but by 2001 the average rate of constituency turnout had fallen a further 12%. In 2001 the British seat with the highest level of voter engagement – Winchester – had a turnout rate of 72%, only a single percentage point higher than the national average turnout in 1997, despite being the

most marginal seat at the 1997 general election. Only three constituencies in Britain equalled or bettered the average level turnout from 1997, and all of those saw turnout fall in the constituency itself. This reveals the extent of Britain's current democratic malaise. Even a dramatic electoral contest, such as the one at Wyre Forest, where an Independent candidate – Dr Richard Taylor – defeated a sitting member of the government in an election dominated by local issues against the national trend, could not entice more people to vote in 2001 than in 1997.

Table 1.1 Post-war electorates and voting in UK general elections		
	Registered electorate (millions)	Votes cast (millions)
1945	33.2	24.1
1950	34.4	28.8
1951	34.9	28.6
1955	34.9	26.8
1959	35.4	27.9
1964	35.9	27.7
1966	36.0	27.3
1970	39.3	28.4
1974 F	39.8	31.4
1974 O	40.1	29.2
1979	41.1	31.2
1983	42.2	30.7
1987	43.2	32.6
1992	43.2	33.7
1997	43.8	31.3
2001	44.4	26.4

Source: International IDEA, 2002, p. 154

The low turnout in recent British elections has been attributed to a number of factors that relate to a wider set of issues for democracy. Explanations put forward have included:

• disenchantment of core Conservative voters;

• disenchantment in the Labour heartlands;

• the commonly held notion that the 2001 election was a foregone conclusion (even at the constituency level);

• disillusionment with politics and politicians more generally (eroded by sleaze, undelivered promises and low moral/professional standards from politicians);

• a decline in civic duty (caused by the increasing atomisation of British society);

• a perceived lack of ideological distinctiveness between the two main parties (as the parties converge it actually does not matter which party wins);

• lacklustre campaigns that failed to trigger interest in the voting and non-voting public.

1.4 The 2001 election: the apathetic landslide?

At least two leading academics were quick to label the outcome of the 2001 general election an 'apathetic landslide' (see Norris, 2001; Harrop, 2001), suggesting a direct link between the unprecedented level of non-voting in a modern British election and a second sweeping victory for Tony Blair's Labour Party. Indeed this may represent the consensual account of 2001, with much of the reaction to the campaign focusing on the supposed inability of the political parties to enthuse and engage the electorate, rather than upon the apparent historic nature of Labour's second successive overwhelming electoral victory. Ian McAllister went so far as to say that, turnout aside, the election was 'otherwise unremarkable' (McAllister, 2001, p. 256).

Nevertheless, despite a common concern about low turnout, Norris and Harrop offer different interpretations of the causes and consequences of the high rates of voter abstention in 2001. For Norris the low level of voter engagement was 'less a dramatic crisis of British democracy, nor widespread public cynicism…' than the inevitable consequence of media attention to the forthcoming foregone conclusion in the run-up to the 2001 election (Norris, 2001, p. 6). On the other hand, Harrop hinted that the historic low turnout of 2001 might have repercussions for the very nature of British democracy:

Elections may have suffered some permanent loss of authority. [Harrop, 2001, p. 295]

14

One of the tasks of this research will be to seek support for either of these apparently irreconcilable points of view. The Electoral Commission (2001) argued that falling turnout was:

> *not a function of declining interest in politics or elections but rather of the failure of the campaign to connect with the electorate.* [Electoral Commission, 2001, p.17]

This report will attempt to investigate whether the context of the 2001 election was particularly responsible for suppressing levels of turnout, as well as assessing the likely impact of some proposed remedies for low turnout among the youngest sections of the electorate.

At the initial stage however, when 5 million fewer people voted in the last general election than the one before, it is hard to dispute that there was:

> *a growing disconnection between the electorate and the electoral process* [Electoral Commission, 2001, p. 20]

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) pointed to the impact of 'watershed' events capable of shaping the enduring political behaviour of those who experience them. In this light the section of the electorate that were first eligible to vote after the Second World War are often said to have picked up an enduring set of political belief systems associated with their wartime experience (for example, Morgan, 1990). Similarly political shocks such as stock market crashes, economic crises and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe might produce specific 'cohort' effects in the electorate that buck the overall trend expected from age effects. For example, Inglehart (1971) famously posited the thesis that post-materialist attitudes and values could take root in certain parts of the youngest sections of society in response to economic growth and prosperity. Some studies have attempted to assess the period of Thatcherism as a watershed event, having a dislocating effect upon the otherwise rigid relationship between age and voter engagement (see Brown, 1992; Russell *et al*, 1992; Heath and Park, 1997).

The thinking behind the Harrop thesis that elections may have suffered a permanent loss of authority is born from fear that abstention in 2001 could be seen as a 'watershed' event – that non-voting can become learned behaviour in the same way that voting can become entrenched over time, that abstention becomes habit-forming and that individuals lost at the first hurdle may not return to the electoral or political process in future elections.

In other words, the central worry for those concerned with the state of democracy in Britain is that young voters are indifferent to and ignorant of politics, and this is causing an erosion of the concepts of citizenship and participation. Young people are in the vanguard of such a change.

In the build-up to the 2001 general election one Liberal Democrat candidate told Russell and Fieldhouse of his concerns about the established parties' lack of outreach to first-time voters:

> *What worries me is that no matter how hard we try, we cannot persuade these kids – youngsters, new voters – to support us in the ballot box. They won't vote for anyone else, but they just can't be bothered, [they] don't see what it has to do with them. And once you've lost them, you've lost them for good… It's a worry for the party, for all the parties really, not just the Lib Dems but Labour and the Tories as well.* [Russell and Fieldhouse, 2001].

In the final analysis the reasons for unprecedented low turnout in 2001 are various. From the literature there is evidence that both Norris and Harrop could be correct in their assessments. The ideological proximity of the parties, the lack of a real contest, the prophecies of the media that concentrated on low turnout and widespread disengagement could have been self-fulfilling, and a closer-run contest where the outcome of an individual's votes might count for more in the near future might see turnout increase. On the other hand, the extent of the drop in turnout from an already low base and the sheer size of the number of non-voters in 2001 could well have an effect on more than one election.

Turnout: young people and voting

2.1 Why voting matters

Turnout is the most obvious example of political participation and electoral engagement, but it is simply a democratic health-check. Poor turnout is likely to be the consequence of poor electoral engagement rather than the reason behind it. Focusing solely on the issue of turnout runs the danger of attempting to cure the symptom rather than the cause of the democratic malaise. Furthermore, falling electoral turnout is probably the most tangible evidence of a continuing crisis in democracy, but in terms of youth engagement it is only one aspect of a failure to fully include the youngest sections of the electorate in the political process.

Nevertheless rates of turnout (or more pertinently rates of abstention) are important because of their effect on electoral outcomes. In their study of the electoral system in Britain, Johnston et al (2001) state that high-level abstention in safe seats can distort the election result under a first-past-the-post system:

> The geography of abstentions, like the geography of third party support, is crucial to the election outcome – in particular to its bias towards one or other of the two main parties. By reducing the number of votes necessary for victory in a constituency, abstention can make it easier for one party rather than another to win seats.
> [Johnston et al, 2001, p. 47]

2.2 Variations in turnout

> Turnout is lower when the weather is bad, when the barriers to registration are steep, and in elections whose outcomes few care about. [Grofman, 1993, p. 102]

The argument that the context of an election will be important in determining outcomes is a powerful one (Heath and Taylor, 1999; Pattie and Johnston, 2001). One reason for the apparent strength of the relationship between the competitiveness of elections (and at the local level constituency marginality) on the one hand, and turnout on the other, may lie in the number of opinion polls reported by the media that contribute to the impression that an election

is already decided before it occurs (see Coleman, 2001a). If voters do not think it will make much difference who wins the election, then turnout is likely to fall (Heath and Taylor, 1999; Whiteley et al, 2001). These are both associated with a reduction in the feeling of political efficacy, and as young people are less likely to vote than the rest of electorate their outlooks are particularly important.

Turnout varies between different social and demographic groups (Swaddle and Heath, 1987). It also varies geographically and is lowest in inner-city and socially deprived areas. In a multivariate analysis of constituency-level turnout at the 1997 general election, Denver and Hands (1997a) show that turnout is related to a number of social and political factors including class composition, housing characteristics, age profile, and the electoral and tactical context of a constituency (see also Johnston and Pattie, 1998). Political competition may also intervene to affect turnout rates; the biggest single influence on turnout in 1997 was apparently the marginality of each constituency (Denver and Hands, 1997a).

2.3 Young people and abstention

The problem of falling turnout is not exclusively British. Turnout seems to be falling in most established democracies across all orders of election (see Blondel et al, 1998; Dalton, 1988, 1996) and crucially for our study it appears to be falling most swiftly among the youngest sections of the electorate (see Lutz, 1991; Crewe et al, 1992; Whiteley et al, 2001).

In the study of voting across a large number of (mostly European) countries Franklin relates turnout to a number of individual-level features. In particular he finds that the best single fixed predictor of turnout in European Parliament elections was age, with the youngest sections of the electorate being the most likely to opt out of voting (Franklin, 1996, p. 220).

In a study of nine democratic countries in the late 1990s Blais reports that 'the two most crucial socio-economic determinants of voting are education and age' (Blais, 2000, p. 52).

An association between age and turnout in the 1997 election is clearly shown in Table 2.1. Each constituency in Britain was profiled according to age using data from the 1991 census. Those with the highest proportion of young people of voting age also had the lowest turnout rates – producing negative coefficients for turnout – whereas 'older constituencies tended to witness higher rates of turnout'. This association is interesting but far from definitive – areas typified by high proportions of young people might also be typified by other inhibitors to voter engagement such as overcrowded living conditions, low-cost housing low-income employment. However, the relationship between age and turnout merits further investigation.

Table 2.1 Constituency age profiles and turnout in the 1997 general election	
Proportion of constituency aged 16 – 24	-.544**
Proportion of constituency aged 25 – 39	-.376**
Proportion of constituency aged 40 – 65	.684**
Proportion of constituency aged over 65	.185**
**Pearson correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)	

Source: British Constituency Dataset / Russell (1999)

The analysis for 1997 was based on constituency results and ecological data from the 1991 census. Since it deals with age groupings it may be inappropriate or misleading to repeat the exercise for the 2001 election until the data from the 2001 census are available. Early indicators are, however, that age structures of constituency profiles were not unambiguously associated with differential turn out in the 2001 contest.

Age and cohort effects are part of a wider set of social cleavages and alignments that can influence political attitudes and behaviour. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) suggested that the young were more radical than their older counterparts but also more likely to abstain from participation in the political (and electoral) process. Butler and Stokes (1974) confirmed that the political affiliations of the young were less well defined than the affiliations of older generations and hence the young were more likely to alter their opinion, and preference, on subsequent occasions.

Research from the 2001 general election campaign clearly illustrates the depth of differential age effects. Worcester and Mortimore report a clear age effect, with the oldest sections of society being the most likely of all voters to vote and also the least likely to support New Labour. In 2001, MORI found that 70% of those aged 65 and over cast a vote, whereas only 39% of 18 – 24 year olds voted (Worcester and Mortimore, 2001, p. 205; Electoral Commission, 2001, p. 15). The demographics of an ageing population thus meant that the oldest electoral cohort had four times the electoral power of the youngest. As Worcester and Mortimore report:

> *The higher propensity of older voters to turn out and vote becomes of increasing significance as turnout falls.* [Worcester and Mortimore, 2001, p. 205]

2.4 The context of voter engagement of young people

The mainstream notion of voter engagement may be traced to the 1960s. The classic comparative account of Almond and Verba (1963) measured 'pride' in political institutions and the degree of 'political' activity among the citizenry. The definitive account of voter engagement and political participation in Britain came from Parry *et al* (1992). There is much to recommend the claim of Parry *et al* that voter engagement can be defined in a much wider sense than merely voting and that participation may include activities that may not even be seen as 'political' in narrow terms. Bhavnani's (1994) study of young people called for a wider definition of politics in order to label the activities of the groups in her study.

The role of youth in political engagement has been explored by – among others – Jennings and Niemi (1981), Miller *et al* (1981) and Mulgan and Wilkinson (1997). The standard paradigm of age and political engagement has survived virtually intact for nearly four decades. Few challenges have been made to the central notion of the linear relationship between age and voting behaviour. Furthermore, research that has begun to deconstruct the relationship between age effects and political engagement has tended to support the

general thesis. Brown (1992) found support for the standard pattern of youth support for the Labour Party, while several studies have found youth detachment from the formal process of politics either through cynicism or scepticism (Wring *et al*, 1999; Henn and Weinstein, 2002), alienation (Roker and Player, 1997), a decline in trust (Mulgan and Wilkinson, 1997) or historical political disconnections (Wilkinson, 1996).

2.5 Political ramifications

In Britain the standard age-voter engagement paradigm has tended to mean that the youngest sections of the electorate were the most likely to vote Labour. Certainly the extension of the franchise to 18 year olds in the late 1960s was popularly assumed to be of benefit to the incumbent Labour government of Harold Wilson. However, Richard Crossman's *Diaries* (1977) make clear that Wilson was fearful of a youth inspired SNP surge in Scotland, and whatever the effects of the first test of the 18-year-old vote in 1970, it did not prevent a Conservative victory in the general election.

With voter engagement of young people at a record low, many have attempted to address the democratic deficit in terms of youth engagement in the voting process. Several studies have pointed to the lack of connection between what might be called a youth agenda and the agenda that tends to dominate elections (Kimberlee, 1998; Leonard and Katwala, 1997), and the lines of communication between parties and youth seem to have been undermined in recent times.

In other democracies the minimum voting age varies (the lowest is 15 in Iran, Malaysia has a minimum voting age of 21). In German experiments at the state level, the inclusion of 16 and 17 year olds in Hanover resulted in greater participation from this group than from those between 18 and 35 (International IDEA Democracy Forum, 1999, p. 12). In a series of publications, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance has called for serious consideration to be given to lowering the age of majority (International IDEA, 1999, 2002), and after the 2001

election in Britain, a movement to lower the voting age to 16 has gained momentum. The Liberal Democrats have added the call for votes at 16 to their official policy stance. As well as the element of natural justice, extending voting rights to people who can marry, join the armed forces and pay taxes already, the debate has been characterised by an appeal to the whole ethos of citizenship and active participation. Launching the policy, the Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy evoked images of civic responsibility and the mutual trust between electors and elected:

> *The worrying thing about last year's general election was how few people turned out to vote. … We trust people to make decisions for themselves – the more responsibility you give them, the more responsible they will be.*
> [BBC, 2002a]

The political ramifications of lowering the voting age are uncertain, but any move would have to be accompanied by a serious educative process (probably through the Citizenship initiative in Key Stages 3 and 4 in schools). Any such process ought to centre on the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship in modern-day Britain.

18

Understanding abstention among young people

3.1 Reasons for voting and not voting

What makes people decide to vote or not to vote? As we shall see, the answer may not be as simple as the question. [Blais, 2000, p. 1]

There is a basic dichotomy in the electorate, a polarisation between those who vote and those who do not. As Blais recognises, it is an 'existential' problem, and one that exercises academics at the most basic and most complex levels (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

As we will see below, the 2001 MORI surveys for The Electoral Commission show that young voters could be split into two distinct groups. The dividing line between these groups can be drawn by the act of voting. Those who voted might have attracted less attention than those who abstained from the 2001 electoral process, but there were nevertheless some very interesting features of their rules of engagement electorally. Typically, those who voted were interested in politics, found the orthodox methods of promoting the campaign adequate, and were more likely than the rest of the electorate as a whole to discuss the campaign with friends and family. Those young people who were inclined to opt out of the electoral process were less likely to say they were interested in politics, were liable to express dissatisfaction with the utility of election broadcasts, articles in newspapers and the official literature from the political parties, and were less likely to discuss the election with others.

According to a rational choice analysis of voting behaviour, although the costs of voting may be quite small they may nevertheless outweigh the individual benefit derived from voting (see Downs, 1957; Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974; but also Smith and McLean, 1994; Dunleavy, 1991; Buffachi, 2001). This means we are faced with the question – why should anyone vote at all? Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974) claim that a voter may weigh up the consequences of abstention in a cost-benefit analysis (asking 'what if I didn't vote and my preferred party lost by one vote?'). Habitual voters may have recourse to communal responsibility or civic duty to vote in an election or they maybe motivated by having

a say in the democratic process (Jones and Hudson, 2000), but variation in turnout might be the result of a number of factors that are worthy of further investigation.

Using a spatial proximity model of voting (see, for example, Merrill and Grofman, 1999) we might expect that, as parties become more similar and/or elections become less competitive fewer people will vote. There are a number of evidence-based studies that seem to bear out these expectations. Heath and Taylor (1999) and Pattie and Johnston (2001), for example, demonstrate that turnout is closely correlated with closeness of the election, while Marshall (forthcoming) uses MORI data to demonstrate that abstainers did not vote because they did not like what was on offer.

In order to understand why some people do vote and others do not, commentators have pointed to differences in resources (for example education or class: see Parry et al, 1992; Verba et al, 1995), motivation (interest in politics and the electoral process) and mobilisation (the role of parties and organisations: see Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Rallings and Thrasher, 2001). To these we would add the political context, including the closeness or significance of the election, the marginality of the seat and the ideological differences between the contesting parties (see Evans et al, 1999; Whiteley et al, 2001). Many reasons for non-voting appear in the literature, ranging from the mundane and the benign to the systemic and more worrying. The main ones are summarised as follows:

- **Personal or convenience issues:** According to the MORI data, young non-voters were particularly likely to favour reforms to the voting process that would widen access to the voting process (24-hour polling stations, telephone polling and internet voting). This suggests that inconvenience was a significant factor in youth abstention in 2001 (however, see below for a discussion of the problems in assuming this from the data).

- **Legal or non-registration:** Again, according to the MORI data, the youngest sections of society were the most likely not to be registered, and young non-voters the most inclined not to vote because of non-registration.

- **Apathy:** As well as the indifference to politics and the election campaign reported earlier, young non-voters in the MORI survey were disproportionately inclined to claim that they did not vote because they were 'not interested in politics' or that it made little difference who won the election. They were also much more likely than other non-voters to claim that the entire voting process was 'unimportant'.

- **Alienation:** This refers to the disenchantment with the political system among specific groups and hence an absence of feeling of civic duty. According to the MORI data young voters were less likely to claim to have voted through a sense of civic duty than the rest of the electorate. Young non-voters were the most likely to complain that 'no one party stands for me' or that they felt 'powerless' in the electoral process. Recent research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation claimed that a sense of powerlessness was endemic among young people (White *et al*, 2000).

3.2 Personal and convenience issues

According to rational choice theories of voting, the difficulty and inconvenience of voting can have a significant impact on whether individuals vote. Arguably, voting requires few resources. However, it could be made easier and more accessible, particularly for people who might be working on election day, people who are away from home (including students), people who are house-bound, people who have child care problems, people who may not wish to go out at night and people who live in remote areas.

As Lijphart (2001) points out, research dating back to the work of Gosnell in the 1920s has firmly established the link between turnout rates and ease of voting (Gosnell, 1930). More recent survey research of more than 350 local authorities in the UK by Rallings and Thrasher (1996) suggests that there is demand for modernisation of the mechanics of voting procedures.

In recent times modernisation suggestions and innovations include: simplifying registration procedures, advance voting, access to polling stations, the extended opening of polling stations, weekend voting, extension of postal voting, simplifying the design of the ballot paper, use of electronic and telephone voting and mobile polling stations. Interest in using technology to maximise the convenience of voting has been intense in recent times. The world's first binding internet voting experiment in Arizona in 2000 saw a significant increase in turnout (BBC, 2002b). In Britain the local elections of 2000 saw a range of innovations and experiments in the mechanics of voting procedures (DTLR 2001; Local Government Association, 2000). In the 2002 round of local elections, pilot voting experiments were again trialled. These included full postal voting, voting by text messaging, voting via digital TV and telephone and internet technology.

In the majority of the local pilot schemes of 2000, all postal voting experiments coincided with turnout increases of at least 50% (Electoral Commission, 2001). In the recent referendums, as part of the new political structures reform under the Local Government Act, turnout was much higher where postal voting was either an option or the only option. For example in Sunderland where the referendum was conducted at polling stations without the option to vote by post, the turnout was only 10% compared with an average of 29% for all postal referendums.

Recent changes in the law have meant that any member of the electorate can now vote by post. Initial analysis by The Electoral Commission suggests that at least 1.4 million postal votes were cast at the 2001 general election, almost double the number cast in 1997. The Electoral Commission provides a detailed summary of some of the problems encountered in the increased use of postal voting in the 2001 general election (Electoral Commission, 2001).

Extending the opening hours of polling stations and/or weekend voting have also been found to have an impact on turnout. Lijphart (2001) reports that in an analysis of turnout in 29 countries weekend voting increases turnout by 5 – 6% (9% in European Parliament elections) and that postal voting increases turnout by 4%.

Access to the polling station is also an important issue for some individuals with disabilities. A nationwide survey in 1997 conducted by the disability organisation Scope found that out of 1,965 polling stations 94% had one or more access problems. In 2001 it was found that only a third were fully accessible (Scope, 2001).

3.3 Registration

Levels of turnout are directly related to the completeness of the electoral register and therefore cannot be fully understood without also considering registration. Registration varies by age, sex and ethnicity (see Smith, 1993). Registration also varies according to 'political' influences. Following the introduction of the 'Community Charge' (or 'Poll Tax') in 1990 there was evidence of large numbers of people, especially young men, evading the register (McLean and Smith, 1994) as a method of avoiding payment, a small decline in rates of registration during the preceding decade notwithstanding.

Increasing rates of voter registration became a key feature of systemic reform in the late 1990s, and young voters were encouraged to enlist on the electoral register via programmes such as the British variant of Rock the Vote in the run-up to the 1997 election. A scheme of rolling registration was introduced in 2001 resulting in a 1.3% increase in the number eligible to vote compared to 1997 (Electoral Commission, 2001). Nevertheless, non-registration remains one of the key features behind low levels of turnout among young voters (especially those who dwell in rented accommodation in large urban areas). MORI data indicate that over 10% of non-voters aged between 18 and 24 in 2001 were not registered on the electoral roll (or at least blamed non-registration for not voting), while a BBC poll found that up to 15% of first-time voters were not registered to vote (BBC, 2001).

The levels of non-registration have serious implications for the estimations of turnout, and the geographic concentrations of non-registration can have specific implications for the local area and democracy.

Specific initiatives in certain local authority areas have proved that there is scope for significantly increasing registration levels among local communities. Recent campaigns by Operation Black Vote (OBV), which was set up in 1996 in order to increase the number of black and minority ethnic individuals registered to vote, have had a major impact in specific local areas (Purdam *et al*, 2002). In the USA, the youth registration scheme, Rock the Vote, had considerable success by promoting the Motor Voter Bill, which allowed voters to register as part of their driving licence application (International IDEA, 1999, p. 45).

The Representation of the People Act 2000 served to make registration easier with the introduction of a rolling registration programme. The register is now updated each month and people can register to vote in the weeks before the election, but not once the election has been called. There was a 1.3% increase in the number eligible to vote in 2001 compared to 1997 (Electoral Commission, 2001). However, research by MORI on behalf of The Electoral Commission indicates that around 15% of non-voters were not registered (Electoral Commission, 2001; and see section 5 below). Also at the 2001 general election The Electoral Commission was made aware of a number of errors in the electoral register by people who claimed to have registered or from people whose details had not been correctly registered (Electoral Commission, 2001). The Electoral Commission reports some concerns with the gap between the last day for registering and the actual day of voting (Electoral Commission, 2001).

Further reforms of the electoral register are proposed in the UK with the development of an electronic version by the Improvement and Development Agency. Though under current proposals the management of the register would remain locally based, it is likely to be the basis for the development of a fully automated national register. It is clear that in the pursuit of increasing voter engagement ensuring accurate and high levels of registration is a key starting point.

International examples of voter engagement may be informative here. Facilitating late or automatic registration might be considered. In the USA individuals can register to vote on the day of the election, and Lijphart (2001) argues that automatic registration can increase turnout by at least 10% and possibly by 15%. In Bangladesh voter awareness and education programmes have reportedly increased turnout by 50%. Innovative campaigns supported by the Department of Mass Communication with support from the UNDP have focused on women and involved the establishment of 15,000 trainers working nationwide. These campaigns included education rallies (where participants can discuss their voting rights and responsibilities and learn about measures that they can take if they encounter obstructions to voting) and voter education slogan contests. In the 2001 general election in Bangladesh over 80% of eligible women electors voted – double the number in 1991 – contributing to the largest turnout ever of 74% (http://www.un-bd.org/undp/feature/2001/09/).

3.4 Apathy?

As we have seen, a common explanation given for low turnout in 2001 was apathy. We wish, however, to draw a distinction between apathy and alienation. Whereas alienation implies a positive dislike or distrust of politics, apathy implies ambivalence. In other words people simply do not care about politics. Alienation implies a problem of exclusion; apathy might (but will not necessarily) reflect contentment. In many circumstances alienation may cause apathy, as alienated voters begin to ask, 'Why should I care?'

Stephenson (2001) claims that some women felt the election campaign was too dominated by men's issues, and that the media's attention on the detail of the campaign was responsible for many voters switching off. Coleman (2001a) claims that the political agenda was too remote from the interests of ordinary voters, and their disinterest in the campaign as defined by the parties and the media should not be confused with disinterest in politics *per se*.

A worrying aspect of the 2001 election was the high proportion of young people who professed to have no interest in politics at all (MORI Phase 1), while in the BBC poll of non-voters in 2001 77% stated that there was no point voting because 'it would not change a thing'.

Following the 2001 general election it has been argued that apathy reflects not so much the failure of politicians but a genuine lack of interest among the public in the mundane details of everyday politics. Hugo Young has argued that we live in an age where fundamental political conflicts are replaced by technical and managerial minutiae. Most voters are simply not interested in the timing of entry into the Euro or the funding of public transport. It is this essential tedium of politics that breeds apathy. The voter is faced with the question of who would best manage the economy rather than competing ideologies (*Guardian,* 14 March 2002). Marshall (forthcoming) uses MORI data to demonstrate that apathy in 2001 might be better termed 'positive abstention'.

3.5 Political and social alienation

More information. Or rather, there probably is plenty of information, but they have to adapt it to a young audience. When I see politicians campaigning, I get the feeling they're talking to someone else, not me. I don't know their reality, and they don't know mine. [Jon Mueller, 20, Sweden – cited in International IDEA, 1999]

There are a number of recent studies that support the notion that the youngest sections of society are de-coupling from central aspects of political life in Britain. A Radio 1 Newsbeat poll of first-time voters in May 2001 found that 52% of their sample claimed that they were unlikely to vote in the forthcoming election, and a large proportion of these prospective abstainers had decided not to vote because of their antipathy to politics (BBC, 2001).

Analysis of the British Social Attitudes survey revealed a cohort or generational effect. Park (2000) reports that at the turn of the twenty-first century only one tenth of 18 – 25

year olds were 'interested' (or 'very interested') in politics – less than half the corresponding proportion from the cohort of 18 – 25 year olds a decade earlier. White *et al* report that the disinterest in politics they identified in their study of young people was prefigured by a deep scepticism of politicians and party politics (White *et al*, 2000).

On the other hand, several authors have urged a wider interpretation of politics in order to suggest that the much-reported disaffection with politics is really centred on party politics. White *et al* (2000), found that young people's mistrust of politics was actually distrust of established party politics, while Laura Edwards in a report for the IPPR claimed that British youth were disengaged from politicians rather than from politics:

Young people are not apathetic or disengaged from the issues that politicians and decision-makers seek to address… [They] are not switched off from the issues that form the foundations of political decision-making but they are less enamoured with the way we 'do' politics. [Edwards, 2001, p. 6]

The empirical evidence also suggests that any reduction in feelings of civic duty or loosening sense of partisanship is also likely to be important (Clarke *et al*, 2001). These in turn may be due to alienation from the political system and political parties, especially among some groups in society such as young people.

3.6 Election context

There are two contexts in which the closeness of an election might be important, the national and the local. Both could affect potential voters' beliefs that their vote counts. At the national level people may perceive that the result is a foregone conclusion if one party is a long way ahead in the polls. Pattie and Johnston (2001) demonstrate that turnout in Britain is related to how close the election is perceived to be. The International IDEA (2002), using data from around the world, show that there is a clear link between voter turnout and competitiveness: in 542 elections where the

largest party won less than half the votes, turnout was 10% higher than the 263 elections where a single party won over 50% of the popular vote.

At the constituency level, voters may believe there is little point in voting if they do not live in one of the few constituencies where electoral competition is real (although some have argued this is not important once individual-level factors are taken into account – see Matsusaka, 1993; Matsusaka and Palda, 1993). Nevertheless, the impression that the contest in an individual constituency is irrelevant may be compounded by the behaviour of political parties who campaign harder in marginal constituencies at the expense of voters in safe seats (Johnston *et al*, 1999). It is likely that first-time voters, in particular, might expect more from the parties than they receive if they do not happen to reside in a 'key' seat and, as a consequence, young voters may go unnoticed under the radar of the electoral strategists from the parties.

From the constituency dataset we were able to construct a bivariate analysis of uneven rates of turnout according to political marginality (see Table 5.3). For all of the British seats, a virtually linear relationship between marginality and turnout rates emerged. In Northern Ireland, the stronger lines of demarcation between the two sets of parties, the ideological distance between the parties and the domination of the election by a single but germane issue (the Good Friday Agreement) probably accounted for the significantly higher turnout rates in Northern Ireland than in Britain. This adds weight to the theory that political context is an important factor in determining propensity to vote.

If we are to see marginality or political context as the over-riding feature influencing turnout – what Franklin (2001) calls the 'salience of the election' – the challenge as far as young people are concerned is to convince them that they have a stake in the electoral process and that outcomes may depend on their inputs. In particular first-time voters may need extra attention from the parties in order to draw them into the electoral process.

3.7 Representation and electioral systems

Young people are the least likely of all sections of society to be included in the political process. Parry *et al*, (1992) believe this to be the result of their lack of the necessary 'resources' to form an ongoing attachment to political institutions and the sense of civic duty required from the electorate as a whole. Denver and Hands' study of modern constituency electioneering (1997b) reveals that all established parties find it more difficult to mobilise youth activism than any other aspect of their support. Whiteley *et al*, (1994) famously report that the Conservative Party overwhelmingly recruits members and activists from the elderly. The way that the established parties 'look' to the outside world may be important to their ability to recruit young people to the electoral process as a whole.

Politicians are widely seen as unrepresentative of the wider population in the UK in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and social class. Only one in every eight MPs is a woman (there were 118 female MPs in 2001); only 12 MPs are from black and minority ethnic communities, and all of these represent the Labour Party. In terms of age, the established career structure of politics effectively rules out large-scale representation by young people. After the 2001 general election only five of the 659 MPs in the Commons were under 30, and the average age of MPs was 49 (Criddle, 2001, p. 199). Time and time again, calls are made to reduce the distance between young people and the electoral process, yet the distance between electors and elected seems magnified when the profile of young people and MPs is considered in this way.

Turnout tends to be higher under proportional electoral systems than under majoritarian systems such as the British variant of first-past-the-post. Farrell (2001) shows that in the most recent election in 39 democracies where voting is not compulsory, turnout averaged 68.2% in non-proportional systems and 70.8% in proportional systems. Lijphart (1994) showed that the average voting participation is about nine percentage points higher in PR systems than in non-PR

systems. Using percentage of voting age population (and therefore allowing for non-registration) the International IDEA (2002) show that plurality and semi-PR systems only average 59 – 60% while straight PR systems average 68%.

However, as outlined above, PR has not yet delivered higher turnout in the UK in elections to the devolved governments and the European Parliament. In fact, turnout levels at elections held under a form of proportional representation to the devolved governments were similar to that for the 2001 general election for the Scottish Parliament (58%), but substantially lower for the National Assembly for Wales (46%). In the London mayoral election 34.7% of registered voters turned out in 2000 compared to 34.75% of registered voters taking part in the borough elections. In addition, 2.2% of votes for the Mayor and 5% of the votes for the Greater London Assembly were declared invalid (Constitution Unit, 2001), and the levels of non-registration in London are among the highest in the UK.

24

Young people and the media

4.1 Where do young people get their politics?

Young people tend to be the most sophisticated consumers of media, being more likely to use new forms of media – especially the most technologically advanced media – of all electors. However, they are not especially disposed to using these new media for the digestion of politics. Buckingham reports from his study of news consumerism of young people that even those who watched television news rejected items that were deemed 'political':

Of all the issues covered in news, politics was the most consistently singled out for rejection and condemnation. The picture of young people's alienation from politics… was, on one level, very much confirmed. … Politics was seen by the large majority [of young people] as simply irrelevant to their lives. [Buckingham, 2000, p. 67]

MORI data on the attitudes of children aged between 11 and 16 demonstrate that they have developed a view of citizenship and democracy but are likely to spurn concepts of politics in their everyday lives. Many claimed to know 'hardly anything' about parliament (37%) or the EU (41%), whereas only 6% identify 'voting at elections' as the 'one of the two or three most important things that make someone a good citizen'. Although 57% claim it would be their duty to vote when they are older, only 17% agreed that voting was not important. There were fewer children who felt the government of the UK influenced their everyday life (40%) than children who felt large companies such as Nike, Coca-Cola and Microsoft had an impact (53%) (MORI, 2002).

Buckingham asserts that youth consumerism of politics from the media and even interest in politics tends to be the reserve of middle-class young people (Buckingham, 2000, p. 206). Norris *et al* (1999) found that 17–24 year olds were the least likely of all groups in society to report the regular watching of television news or to regularly read a newspaper (Norris *et al*, 1999, p. 91). Yet Harrison and Deicke (2000, p. 33) found that television was the main source of political information for most first-time voters. This is a conundrum. Young people do not watch television news, but get

most of their information about politics from television. If we are to believe that young people do not watch news on television, and that this is the main source of their political information, we may conclude that young people are the least well informed of all social groups about politics.

Newspapers carried less politics during the election campaign than in any comparable election. More newspapers on more campaign days in 2001 carried non-election stories on the front page than in previous contests (Scammell and Harrop, 2001) and when they touched on stories about youth, they invariably did so by mentioning apathy and disillusionment (Harrison, 2002).

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, Professor Anthony King was the most blunt:

Thousands of people, especially young people, are positively switched off politics and politicians. … There is anger and frustration out there as well as apathy. [Daily Telegraph, 21 May 2001]

This aspect of media coverage may be self-fulfilling, a point Buckingham reinforces in his study of young people, news and politics:

Expressions of distrust in politics have become almost ritualistic conversational clichés. They may reflect little more than a superficial form of cynicism, which derives from a sense of individual powerlessness – although ultimately they may also serve to reinforce it. In this respect, perhaps, the students were merely saying what they thought they were expected to say. [Buckingham, 2000, p. 70]

This then becomes a challenge for the political parties. How can the disengaged youth be appealed to? An answer to this challenge still appears elusive to the parties (Cloonan and Street, 1997). Henn *et al*, have shown that many attempts to evoke the youth vote simply miss their target, from birthday cards to celebrity endorsements (Henn *et al*, 1999). In the 2001 general election attempts to meet the youth agenda by using new media (for example text messaging and the internet) and from association with celebrities were met with derision:

The use of out-of-fashion Chris Evans indicated that some Millbank address books required updating, Geri Halliwell's appearance on the [Labour] Party's first election broadcast suggested that more than a few needed throwing away. [Fielding, 2002, p. 32]

4.2 The youth media

We wanted to explore how the issues of the election were addressed in the youth media. The youth media market is marked by its diversity. Our limited focus was therefore on music magazines and press. Even here the market is differentiated between publications for teenagers and young adults. In the teenage bracket we looked at *Smash Hits* and *Just Seventeen*, whereas for the young adults we considered the main music papers and magazines.

The most coverage of the election emerged from the News section of the *New Musical Express*. This is the seventh largest-selling music paper with a circulation of just over 70,000. The largest-selling paper with a circulation of 200,000, the monthly magazine *Q*, had no coverage of the election. Indeed the top five best-selling music magazines and the main teenage magazines such as *Smash Hits* and *Just Seventeen* also had no coverage.

NME has a longstanding reputation as the music paper with a political edge. In 1998 the paper 'declared war on New Labour' because its New Deal threatened to restrict the development of cultural artistry (see Wring *et al*, 1999). During the 2001 campaign there was a certain amount of political and election coverage but it was restricted largely to the relationship of pop-stars to the election process rather than to more substantive issues. A general awareness of the need for voting emerged from one or two pieces during the campaign, but in a rather skewed manner. This clipping from the *NME* is telling:

Geri Halliwell is to star in an election broadcast for the Labour Party, set to air on British television tonight [May 14].

The current chart-topper, who in the past has expressed admiration for long-time Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, will be seen serving tea to pensioners

as the theme to Labour's election campaign, 'Lifted' by the Lighthouse Family, plays.

She added: *'I don't know a lot about politics, as I am sure a lot of people in this country don't. I am not telling people who they should vote for but I do want people to realise how important it is to vote and to have their say.'*

Of course it later emerged that Ms Halliwell was not registered to vote for 'security reasons'. The *NME* countered the Halliwell story with a story about Radiohead lead singer Thom Yorke who expressed his dissatisfaction in no uncertain terms.

Thom Yorke lays into Blair

Thom Yorke has launched another stinging attack on New Labour on the eve of the general election...

He said: 'I won't vote and haven't voted for a man willing to go along with Son of Star Wars. It's not exactly surprising that a large section of the population will not give a flying f*** about the election. Everybody blames everybody else... they are not in touch and have blatantly betrayed all who supported them except those friendly business interests.'

It is clear that the impact of media upon youth voter engagement is an under-researched area, but one that ought to attract more attention. This is particularly the case when the youth media is concerned. The most surprising thing about these features about the election campaign is how rare they were. In the youth magazine market we could find little evidence of political engagement via the music press – and what little there was came from weeklies that could react quickly to a news agenda, and tended to be negative in tone. On the whole it is tempting to conclude that the lack of politics coverage in the youth media reflects a lack of desire for stories about 'politics' and the sheer distance between the electors and the elected.

Survey analysis

5.1 Introduction

The Electoral Commission contracted the polling organisation MORI to conduct a two-party survey into public attitudes before and after the 2001 general election (Electoral Commission, 2001). The survey was carried out in two phases, interviewing UK representative samples between 9 and 15 May (Phase 1) and 9 and 18 June (Phase 2). The surveys were designed to gauge public attitudes towards voting, elections and the political process.

When the information from these polls is added to existing knowledge from previous research, the aggregate figures reveal that interest in politics has remained stable over the past three decades, that civic duty and habit are the key motivators to voting, and that people have positive attitudes towards voting (Electoral Commission, 2001). As Park pointed out, however, net stability can mask massive gross volatility. A lack of overall change in the aggregate level of attitudes cannot necessarily be taken to mean that young people in the early twenty-first century hold the same views that young people did in the last century (Park, 2000, p. 10).

In this section we revisit the MORI surveys with particular focus on those respondents aged between 18 and 24. These data are wide but not particularly deep because of the small samples sizes and so, in addition, we draw evidence from the 2001 British Election Survey (BES) and the constituency election results dataset.

5.1.1 MORI survey 2001 – sample

Since young people were not 'over-sampled' in relation to their population, there were only a relatively small number of respondents aged 18 – 24. We have used the weighted totals for each analysis, although caution should be exercised in the interpretation of many of the findings – particularly from questions that are not asked to all young people. Table 5.1 shows the sample size in each age group.

There are very few cases in the 18–24 age category for both polls (but particularly for the post-election phase). As a consequence it is important to treat the age group

Table 5.1 Sample composition

Age group Phase 1	Unweighted frequency Phase 1	Weighted frequency	% Phase 1 Phase 2	Unweighted frequency Phase 2	Weighted frequency	% Phase 2
18 – 24	152	198	11.0	83	129	11.1
25 – 34	362	358	19.9	221	233	20.1
35 – 54	679	649	36.0	485	417	35.9
55 – 64	263	236	13.1	172	150	12.9
65+	345	360	20.0	201	233	20.1
Total	1,801	1,801	100.0	1,162	1,162	100.0

Source: MORI/Electoral Commission, Phases 1 and 2

distinctions with a degree of caution. This is also true when attempting to interpret questions asked of only a slice of the poll. For instance, when analysing the reported reasons for non-voting, we will be using questions asked only to those respondents who reported not voting – and as many as up to four out of five respondents claimed to have voted in the Phase 2 poll. Further disaggregations of such data by demographic or attitudinal categorisation can only be achieved with caution, and multivariate analysis would simply be unsustainable. The reasons behind the apparently unreliable levels of reported turnout are explored later in this section.

5.2 Reported vote and turnout

One of the key points of interest in youth and politics is how many, or how few, young people actually turn out to vote in the electoral process. In the run-up to the 2001 election in Britain this seemed to be the aspect of youth politics that dominated press and media coverage (see Harrison, 2002, for a discussion of media presentations of young people during the campaign).

In the event there is no way of knowing the actual turnout rate for 18 – 24 year olds without compromising the secrecy of the ballot. The lack of disaggregated voting returns means that we are left to estimate turnout from specific groups via survey or poll findings, and thus the end figures may only be as reliable as the representativeness of the survey or poll allows in the first place.

In their account of the 2001 election, MORI's most senior pollsters Robert Worcester and Roger Mortimore estimate that 39% of 18–24 year olds voted in the general election (Worcester and Mortimore, 2001, p. 205; Electoral Commission, 2001, p. 15). It is worth noting that of those 18–24 year olds in Phase 2 of the MORI-commissioned poll for The Electoral Commission, 55% claim to have voted (Figure 5.1). It is clear that the data might suffer from a source of contamination not uncommon in this field since they over-report actual voting. We know from official constituency returns that 59% of the electorate voted whereas 80% of the entire sample claims to have voted. We discuss the methodological problems of over-reporting civic responsibilities in section 6 of this report, but for a general discussion of the factors likely to lead to over-reporting of activities such as voting see Noelle-Neumann (1984).

The methodological concerns notwithstanding, the general trend in the MORI data is clear and remains useful. The MORI data confirm that 18–24 year olds were the least likely of all social groups to claim to have voted in the election. On the other hand, over 80% of those aged 25 or over claimed to have voted in the general election according to Phase 2 of the MORI data (Figure 5.1). The differences in reported votes according to age are illuminating since they confirm the general hypothesis of the established work on electoral participation and age (Parry *et al*, 1992; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The youngest sections of society are more likely to opt out of the electoral process than their older counterparts.

5.3 Reasons for not voting

If we begin to scrutinise why young people were disproportionately likely to admit to not voting in the 2001 election, the immediate conclusion is that their motivations not to vote seem quite different from the motivations not to vote exhibited by their older cohorts.

Young people were much less likely to blame their non-participation in the general election upon issues of inconvenience or happenstance than their older

Figure 5.1 Young people and reported turnout 2001 general election

Legend: 25+ (n=1,033); 18–24 (n=129)
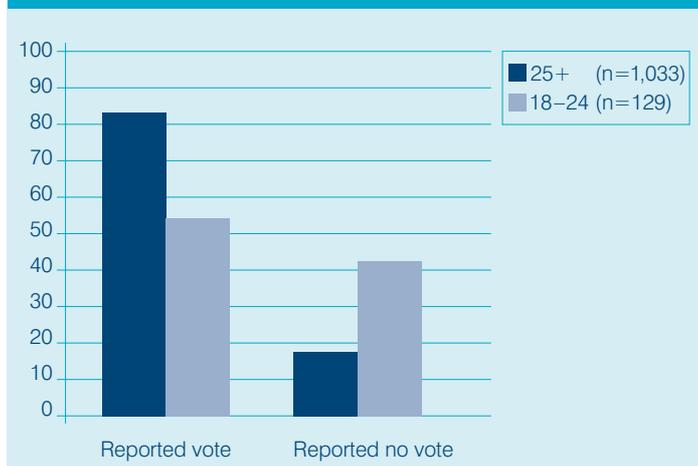
Source: MORI/Electoral Commission: Phase 2 poll

counterparts. For example, a popular justification for not voting in the electorate as a whole was that the respondent had been 'away on the day of polling', perhaps indicating that they may have voted had they not been unavoidably detained elsewhere. In any event such a justification seems to be a dilute expression of alienation or antipathy to politics. Young people, according to the MORI data, rarely use this justification. Instead they are significantly more likely to justify non-voting on more structural or 'direct' grounds. In particular, young people are more likely to claim they were not registered to vote in the first place. This could mean that the structures of the registration procedure were still responsible for disenfranchising a significant proportion of young people despite the recent overhaul of the registration system.

The more direct justifications for not voting given in disproportionate numbers by young people include a disinterest in politics and an active dislike of the candidates on offer (Figure 5.2). From a participatory democracy standpoint the willingness of young non-voters to justify their inactivity in such direct terms may represent a challenge in the near future. In particular the avowed disinterest in politics exhibited by many of those 18–24 year

old abstainers might signal a direct challenge to the citizenship project over the coming years – and may necessitate a much wider definition of 'politics' among young people and the establishment.

Figure 5.2 Selected reasons for not voting (base non-voters)
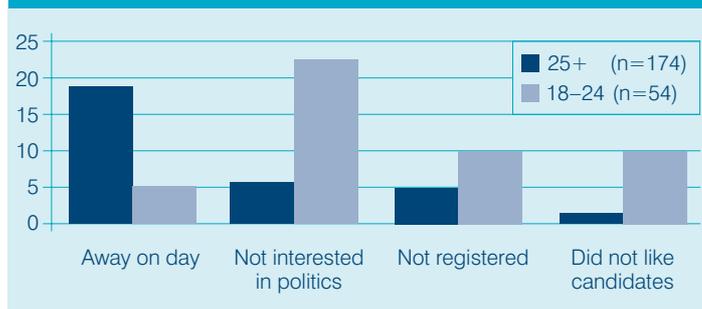
Source: MORI/Electoral Commission, Phase 2

Young people who did not vote in 2001 were also more likely than all other non-voters to believe that the act of voting was a meaningless or insignificant one. The established orthodoxy on civic duty and the rational actor's motivation to vote is that individuals think their vote counts. The individual voter's chances of participating in the poll are greatly enhanced by her or his belief that their vote is vital to the outcome of the election (or at least is to be seen as a part of a collective good for the ends of a democratic society). Young people were less likely to hold the view that voting would make a difference than their older cohorts in the electorate. This poses many interesting supplementary questions: did this view represent a new cynicism, or in the context of an unprecedented 'no-change' election did it simply reflect an accurate assessment of reality for most voters? Why were young people more likely to take this view than older cohort groups? Was it the result of a more dilute socialisation pattern, or the emergence of a new set of generational identities? Further research is needed in order to begin to answer some of these supplementary concerns. Such research can be both quantitative and qualitative in nature but ought to include elements of time series and sufficient numbers to allow significant levels of disaggregation in order to provide reliable evidence between and within age groups.

5.4 Registration

When discussing selected reasons for non-voting it was noted that structural forces may prevent the electoral engagement of young people in disproportionate numbers. In particular, the increased propensity of young people not to be present on the electoral register may be given as a justification for non-voting.

As Grofman noted (see above), structural forces may depress turnout, and, as the MORI data revealed, young people may be in the firing line of such structural limits to turnout, being the most likely to be missing from the electoral register – and thus disenfranchised from the entire electoral process. Young people, in particular those living in rented accommodation in highly urban areas, have remained the hardest group of all to reach in the electoral process. Recent registration drives have been successful up to a point, but have failed to significantly alter the dynamics of youth registration deficits. It may be time for a more radical approach to registration drives similar to the 1990s 'Voter Motor' registration drive in the USA – where voters can be registered to vote as a by-product of some other activity (such as applying for a driving licence – see Putnam, 2000, for more details). An even more radical approach would be to break the link between registration to vote and the collection of local taxation. The rolling registration procedure has begun to splinter the link between the two, but most people on the electoral register still enrol after returning a registration query from their local authority – which is later responsible for the collection of council tax.

5.5 Interest in politics/the election

Our next task was to attempt to examine whether a lack of engagement with the political realm was also evident among young people who did vote and assess its impact upon turnout. As the MORI data reveal, young non-voters were the most likely to report that their non-vote was the result of a lack of interest in politics. The next step is to ascertain the extent of interest in politics or news of the election campaign among the youngest sections of the electorate. In line with

other recent research, analysis of the MORI data reveals that the young were less likely to be interested in the election campaign in 2001 than the rest of the electorate. Seventy per cent of those aged 25 and over claimed to be either 'very' or 'fairly' interested in news about the general election and 30% 'not particularly' or 'not at all' interested. The ratio of young people aged between 18 and 24 who were interested in the campaign versus not interested was much closer (54% to 45%).

Not only were young people more likely to claim not to be interested in news about the election campaign, they were also less likely to convert any degree of interest into reported voting in the 2001 election. Figure 5.3 shows the attempt to disaggregate the relationship between interest in politics and reported vote in 2001 by examining the levels of interest in news about the general election among the electorate and their propensity to vote.

Figure 5.3 shows four pairs of columns, each of which draws out the relationship between interest in the election and voting in that election. For each category of interest – 'very interested', 'fairly interested', 'not particularly

interested', and 'not at all interested' – there is a column for all voters and a column for 18–24 year olds. These columns portray the proportion of each interest group who went on to report a vote, who reported abstention in the 2001 general election and those who refused to reveal (or claimed not to know whether they had voted or not). The most immediate feature of this relationship is that young people were less likely to report having voted in 2001 regardless of their self-proclaimed level of interest in the campaign. Only 7% of respondents who were very interested in news of the election campaign claimed not to have voted in 2001, but 14% of very interested 18–24 year olds failed to vote. At all levels of interest in news of the campaign, from very interested to not at all interested, the youngest slice of the electorate was the most reluctant to actually vote. Not surprisingly incidence of voting fell alongside interest in politics, but 63% of those who claimed they were 'not at all interested in news about the election' cast a vote nevertheless. However, among the 18–24 year olds who were 'not at all interested in politics' only 16% converted disinterest into voting.

Source: MORI/Electoral Commission, Phase 2

Figure 5.3 Interest in news about general election and reported vote
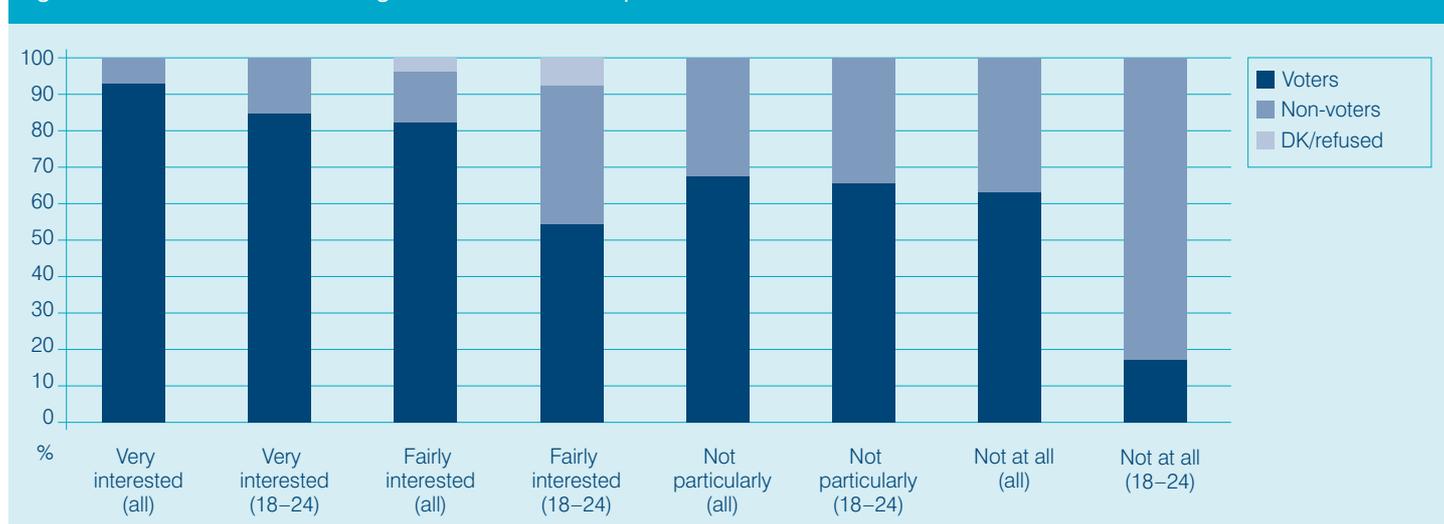
Clearly young people were more willing to proclaim themselves not interested in news of the campaign and were less willing to vote in the general election as a consequence. Whether this is a result of a breakdown in the meaning of civic duty among the youth of Britain is a moot point.

5.6 Civic duty

Notions of civic duty are central to any discussion of voter engagement. The latest iteration of sociologist Robert Putnam's thesis on social capital in the USA claims that the salvation of American community politics may be found in the continued willingness of Americans to 'talk about politics' despite their reduced capacity for being involved in overtly 'political' acts (such as voting) (Putnam, 2000). In Britain recent evidence-based work from the Hansard Society using MORI data has concluded that British youth have retained a strong sense of civic duty, even if that sense of duty did not necessarily include voting (MORI, 2002). On the other hand, using the 2001 British Election Study, Clarke *et al*, (2001) report an age-related decay in civic responsibility:

The possibility that the voting-civic duty nexus has eroded in recent years cannot be ruled out. A question in the 2001 BES asking respondents if they seriously neglect their duty if they do not vote produces much larger differences across the age groups. Most striking, only two in five persons 25 or younger think that failing to vote is a serious neglect of their civic duty, and only slightly over half of those in the 26-35 age group do so. [Clarke *et al*, 2001, p. 8]

Figure 5.4 Selected reasons for voting (all reported voters)

Source: MORI/Electoral Commission, Phase 2

We have noted above that young people were less likely to justify their vote in terms of civic duty or from a feeling that 'everyone should vote' than all other sections of the electorate. Rather they were more likely to claim that they voted from a sense of 'having a say'. This might mean that young people's views of civic responsibilities are markedly different from those shared by the rest of society.

Furthermore, young people were much more likely than the public as a whole to deny the importance of voting – a central tenet of civic duty. It is becoming clear that if young people in Britain in the early twenty-first century have a sense of civic duty it seems to have a different set of reference points than the more familiar participatory civic culture of Almond and Verba (1963).

5.7 Modelling abstention: factor analysis and principal components analysis

We have attempted to build a model of abstention at the individual level using data from the 2001 British Election Study (BES). The BES gave us the great advantage of a wider set of variables than the commissioned polls but crucially it also gave us the necessary depth for more robust multivariate analysis – permitting disaggregation of data on a number of social, demographic, political and attitudinal scales.

We used the BES to investigate the sense of civic duty among the electorate as a whole and young people in particular. Respondents from the BES were invited to agree or disagree with a range of statements about civic responsibility and voting.

Principal components analysis was used to identify the grouping of attitudes to these questions around certain dimensions. For instance, responses to questions such as 'I would seriously neglect my duty if I were not to vote' and 'Democracy only works if people vote' tend to travel together. As such they are dual components in a family of attitudes to the process of voting that we have called 'civic duty' (in column 2 of Table 5.2). A second dimension (or factor) surrounds questions that assess the connection between political parties and the electorate in a component
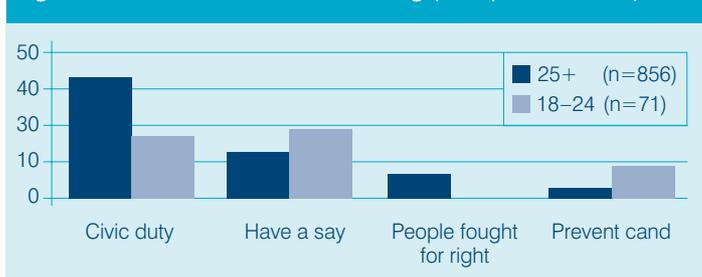
we call 'distrust of politicians' (column 3). A third factor emerged around a component that seemed to be measuring attitudes to the general or abstract engagement between public and government. We have termed this factor 'disillusion with politics' (column 4 of Table 5.2).

This technique allows us to see how groups of attitudes are clustered together, to see which of these beliefs tend to be associated with each other or, in other words, form natural groups of issues. We find that we can summarise the 14 beliefs in three summary indexes. The score of each component on these summary indexes represents how closely the variable correlates with the index.
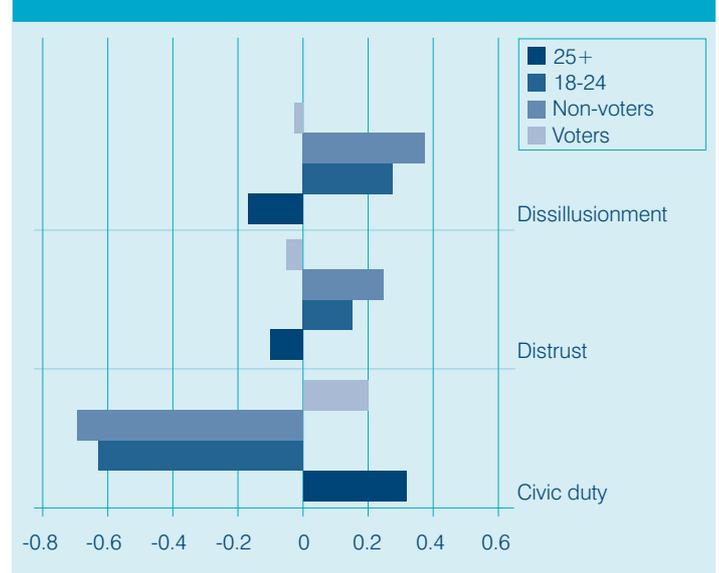
The advantage of this analysis is that we can now compare how people score on these broad issue groups, without having to rely on single responses which tend to be more volatile (see Fieldhouse, 1995, for a more theoretical discussion of the use of factor analysis and principal components analysis in political science).

Figure 5.5 Index scores by key characteristics

Each response from each individual in the BES was analysed and standardised into a low or negative score suggesting agreement with these issues and a high score suggesting disagreement. As we might expect, according to our principal components analysis, what we find is that non-voters score much lower on the civic duty scale (Figure 5.5). Distrust of politicians is less closely associated with turnout but again the relationship is consistent: the higher the levels of distrust, the greater the chance of abstention rather than reported vote in the 2001 election campaign. There is a further relationship between the disillusionment factor and reported turnout, with non-voters much more likely to find politics difficult to understand or to think that people are too busy to vote.

Figure 5.5 reveals that for all three factors the relationship between young people and non-voting is clear. Across all three components young people were likely to have attitudes that inhibited turnout, while the rest of the voting population were slightly in line with the national propensity to vote rather than abstain. Young people typically had a deficiency in their sense of civic duty, were more distrustful of politicians and

Table 5.2 Civic duty: principal components analysis

	Civic duty	Distrust of politicians	Disillusion with politics
Seriously neglect duty if not vote	.86		-.14
Feel very guilty if not vote	.84		-.14
Every citizens duty to vote	.77		-.10
Sense of satisfaction when vote	.73	-.20	
Democracy only works if vote	.62		
Government doesn't care		.81	.14
Parties only interested in votes		.79	.15
MPs lose touch with people		.73	.17
People like me have no say		.68	.17
Govt treats people like me fairly	-.17	-.58	
Voting can change Britain	.43	-.50	.21
Politics difficult to understand		.19	.69
Gap between expects and actually get		.23	.62
People too busy to vote	-.25		.57

Extraction method: Principal component analysis rotation method: varimax with kaiser normalisation. Component loadings > 0.1 are shown.

parties than the electorate as a whole, and were more likely to seem disillusioned with the political process.

5.8 Combining individual and contextual factors affecting turnout

At the constituency level, voters may perceive little benefit in voting in a contest that is unlikely to be close. We were able to test this hypothesis by using the British Parliamentary Constituency dataset. We were able to construct a bivariate analysis of uneven rates of turnout according to political

Table 5.3 Variable turnout in 2001 by constituency marginality in 1997			
	Mean turnout	N	Std deviation
Ultra-marginal seat (0–5% majority)	64.4 %	68	3.96
Fairly marginal seat (5–10%)	61.9 %	85	4.57
Fairly safe seat (10–15%)	62.6 %	85	4.17
Very safe seat (15–20%)	62.5 %	72	3.30
Ultra safe seat (20%+)	55.4 %	329	6.07
All	59.0 %	639	6.39

Source: British Parliamentary Constituency dataset

marginality (see Table 5.3). For all of the British seats, a virtually linear relationship between marginality and turnout rates emerged. This adds weight to the theory that political context is an important factor in determining propensity to vote, at least at the aggregate level.

If we are to see marginality or political context as the over-riding feature influencing turnout, the challenge as far as young people are concerned is to convince them that they have a stake in the electoral process and that outcomes may depend on their inputs. In particular first-time voters may need extra attention from the parties in order to draw them into the electoral process.

At the aggregate – in this case, constituency – level, it is clear that there is a relationship between constituency

closeness and rates of turnout and abstention. This would fit with the studies of Denver and Hands (1997a) and Pattie and Johnston (2001). Some have argued, however, that at the individual level marginality is unlikely to have the same impact (Matsusaka, 1993; Matsusaka and Palda, 1993).

Our next task was to construct a combined individual- and constituency-level model of voting and abstention using compositional, demographic and attitudinal data from the British Election Study. In order to test which factors most influence turnout, we fitted a logistic regression model of non-voting using the BES and the constituency database for both the young people and black and minority ethnic community studies (Purdam *et al*, 2002). The model simply estimates the variables that best predict which respondents vote and which do not. The model included a wide range of explanatory variables designed to measure demographic and social characteristics, attitudinal measures of civic obligation and views about the political parties and the political system. In addition, constituency-level variables were added based on the characteristics of the constituency in which the respondents were surveyed. An important part of this analysis was the component loadings from the factors produced by the principal components analysis reported earlier.

In common with the findings of Matsusaka and Palda (1993), constituency-level characteristics proved not to be significant. Differences in levels of significance between individual- and aggregate-level models are not uncommon (see Kinder and Kieweit, 1981; Price and Sanders, 1995). Alternatively it may indicate further limitations of the survey approach to non-voting. Clearly people who respond to a survey are keen that their opinions be heard. These are the very people who are least likely to be dissuaded from voting simply because they do not live in a marginal seat.

What the model does show us, however, is the importance of a feeling of civic duty in influencing turnout (Figure 5.6). This sense of civic duty may also be related to the same factors as non-voting (for example, deprivation or social exclusion). The model similarly shows distrust of politicians and general disillusionment to be important factors,

and holds constant their individual effects. Ethnicity and strength of party identification were also found to be important (see also Clarke *et al*, 2001). It is interesting to note that the comparator age group (over-60s) were the most likely of all age groups to report voting. Those aged between 18 and 24 were around 2.2 times more likely to be non-voters than those in the comparator group after taking these other factors into account.

Figure 5.6 is a pictorial representation of the odds ratios produced by the logistic regression model of abstention and turnout. The regression coefficients illustrate the independent effect upon rates of abstention after all other effects are controlled for. For the sake of simplicity the odds ratios have been presented here in graphical format. An odds ratio less than 1 (to the left of the point of unity on the log scale shown in Figure 5.6) equates to a reduced

chance of abstention (that is, an increased chance of turnout); an odds ratio of greater than 1 (to the right of 1 on the log scale) represents an increased propensity to abstain in the general election. In both cases the larger the block, the bigger the effect on abstention or turnout rates. It should also be pointed out that these effects are significant after all the other items in the model have been controlled for. So, for instance, age remains important in the model of abstention even after the effects of civic duty, disillusion, influence on politics and ethnicity have been controlled for.

Influence on politics scale: The first explanatory variable that was statistically significant was influence on politics. This was calculated by respondents estimating their own influence potential on a scale between 0 and 10. The higher the scale score the greater their perceived influence, and – other things being equal – the greater their chance of reporting a vote in 2001. The odds ratio of 0.94 reveals that for every increase in the influence score of one unit, individuals were 0.94 times as likely (and therefore less likely) to abstain.

Disillusionment score: This was the component loading from the factors produced by the principal components analysis used earlier. The disillusion factor is dominated by views that travel together on issues, such as the view that politics was difficult to understand, that the gap between expectations and delivery was too large, and that people were too busy to vote. The odds ratio for this factor shows that for every increase in disillusionment by one unit, the likelihood of abstention is multiplied by 1.59.

Distrust score: This component loading was dominated by attitudes centring on the BES statements, 'The government doesn't care about people like me', 'The parties are only interested in votes', 'People like me have no say', and negatively associated with views such as 'The government treats me fairly' and 'Voting can change Britain'. The greater the sense of distrust an individual has, the greater the chance of that individual not voting at the 2001 election. The odds ratio score 1.16 shows that for every increase of one unit in the factor score, an individual was 1.16 times more likely to abstain from the election.

Figure 5.6 Significant influences on turnout at individual level (odds ratios from logistic regression analysis)
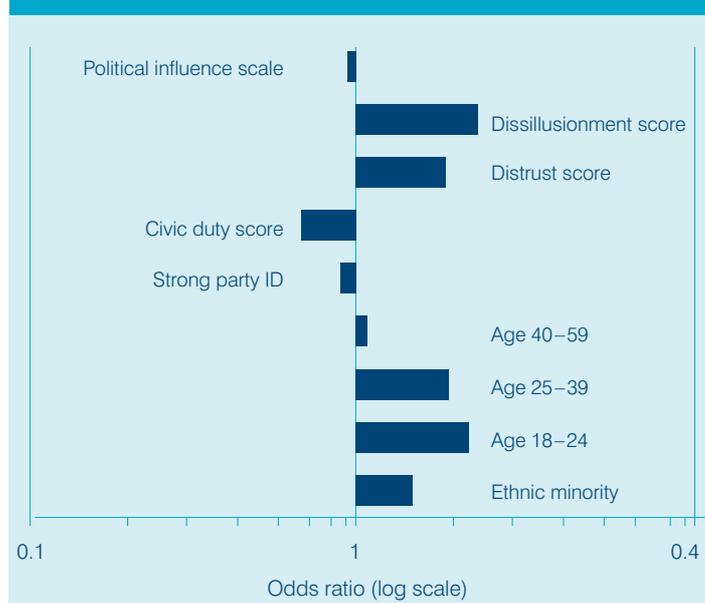
Insignificant variables: age on completing education, whether canvassed, social class, gender, constituency majority 1997, constituency Labour vote 1997, constituency non-white population %, interest in politics, respondent difference in party positions.

Source: BES Cross-section 2001

Civic duty score: The civic duty factor was manufactured from the family of attitudes that travelled together such as 'I would seriously neglect my duty if I did not vote,' 'It is every citizen's duty to vote' and 'Democracy only works when people vote'. The odds ratio for this factor (0.45) shows that civic duty is a considerable inhibitor on the likelihood of abstention in the 2001 general election. An increase of one unit in the factor score made individuals less than half as likely to abstain as before.

Strong party identification: A strong sense of party identification is associated with turning out to vote rather than abstention. Those with a strong sense of party identification were 0.74 times as likely (and therefore less likely) to abstain than those without a strong sense of party identification.

Age groups: Here the model calculates the effects of being in one of three age groups in comparison to the base group – the over -60s. All three groups were less likely to vote than the comparator group. After all other effects were controlled for, those aged between 40 and 59 were 1.1 times more likely to abstain, 25–39 year olds 1.9 times more likely to abstain and 18–24 year olds 2.2 times more likely to abstain than those aged 60 and over. The relationship between age and abstention is consistent with the classic models of age effects, the young being less engaged than the old.

Ethnicity: Individuals belonging to a black and minority ethnic group were 1.5 times more likely to abstain in the election than non-black and minority ethnic individuals, though as shown in Purdam *et al*, (2002) there are wide variations across and within black and minority ethnic communities.

Overall this model shows the independent effects at the individual level of demographic and attitudinal variables upon rates of abstention. An individual's heightened perception of their political influence, a sense of 'civic duty' and strong partisanship all promoted turnout. People from black and minority ethnic communities and those 'disillusioned' with or 'distrustful' of politics and politicians were more likely

to abstain from voting in 2001. Even after these effects are controlled for, age was significantly related to abstention and turnout – the youngest sections of the electorate being more than twice as likely to abstain as those aged 60 and over, regardless of their civic duty, partisanship, influence, disillusion, distrust or ethnicity. Thus the standard model of age and turnout was supported in our analysis of the 2001 election.

## 5.9 Attitudes towards political parties and institutions

One of the most interesting aspects of the BES is the ability to measure a version of the trust variable in the social capital thesis, since it asks respondents to quantify their 'respect' for various institutions and political parties. This is done via a Likert scale; electors were asked to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 would equate to no respect at all, and 10 would equate to maximum respect for an institution or party.

We were interested in levels of respect for political institutions like Parliament, local government in a respondent's area, the European Union and politicians generally. The 2001 BES also asked respondents in Scotland and Wales to estimate their level of respect for the Parliament and Assembly in their own countries. We also wanted to explore levels of respect for less political institutions such as the civil service and the police.

The average scores according to age group reveal that there was a distinct lack of deference among the youngest sections of the electorate. Those between the ages of 18 and 24 typically held institutions in lower esteem than the rest of the electorate did (Figure 5.7). This might be seen as evidence for a decline in the deferential nature of British society when added to the evidence-based research that has claimed that Britons have become more questioning of authority since the days of Almond and Verba (see Pattie *et al*, 2002, for instance).

In truth the relationship between age and respect was often only significant at the margins – the distinctions between young people and over-25s in their assessments of local

Figure 5.7 Respect for institutions by age group
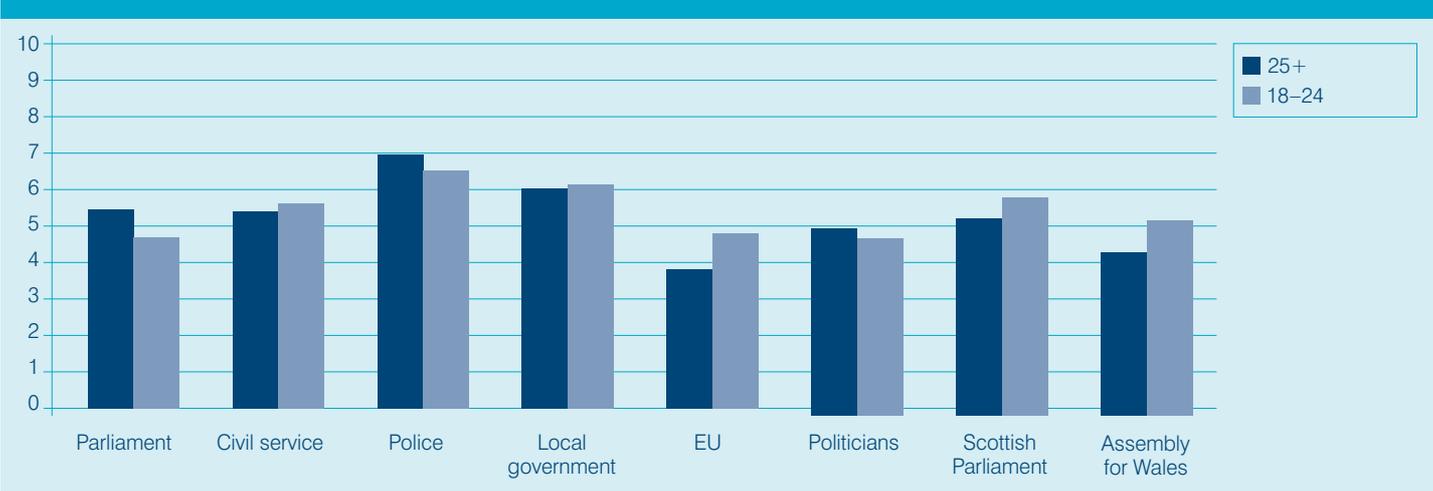
government, the civil service and politicians in general was hardly enlightening. There was little to discern in the age-related pattern of respect for local government in the area where the respondent lived, there being no statistically significant difference in the views held by older and young people.

Figure 5.8 Respect for political parties by age group
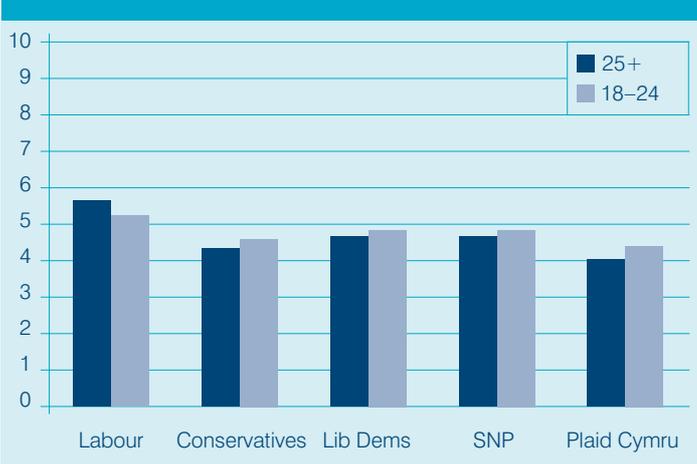
Nevertheless, for the most part, respect for political institutions follows a classic age-support pattern; the youngest sections of the electorate being the most likely to withhold respect for Parliament, the police and politicians generally. This in itself might be important, of course, since the level of respect for politicians in general was low for all sections of society, but the lack of decay in respect according to age was noteworthy.

There was a potentially important emergent finding when respect for newer institutions was assessed. Young people were more respectful of the EU than the electorate as a whole was. However, there is an important caveat here: young people's level of respect for the EU differed little from their respect for the Westminster Parliament, but support for the EU was much lower than respect for Westminster among the electorate as a whole. Consequently we might be witnessing a breakdown of respect among the older population rather than a relatively healthy dose of respect from young people.

The new institutions in Scotland and Wales did seem to enjoy a different dynamic of support. Young Scots appear to hold the Scottish Parliament in significantly higher regard than their older cohorts do. It is also worth noting that the absolute level of respect for the Scottish Parliament was higher than for Westminster. The National Assembly for Wales also enjoyed a higher level of respect from the youngest slice of the electorate than from older groups. It could be that respect for the new devolved legislatures in Scotland and Wales will decline over time, but the differential dynamic of support is notable.

The BES also enabled the assessment of levels of respect for political parties. The average levels of respect according to young people and the rest of the electorate are presented in Figure 5.8 (see previous page). In an era when many have concluded that the established political parties were the source of young people's political and electoral disengagement these findings are very challenging.

The party held in the highest regard by all voters appears to be the Labour Party. In many ways this is unsurprising – the party that has won the last two elections by such massive landslides ought to be the most popular of all political parties. Nevertheless, it does reveal that although Labour was the preferred party of the young, 18 – 24 year olds were slightly less likely to hold the Labour Party in high regard than their older counterparts.

The Conservatives enjoyed the least respect of all the major parties in Britain. Here, however, young people were very slightly more open to the Conservative Party than the electorate as a whole (although in truth there is no significant difference in the views of young people and their older cohorts).

Young people were slightly more likely to respect the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Nationalist Party and Plaid Cymru than were those aged 25 and over. In the final analysis, however, we should proceed with caution here. It can be asserted that the hypothesis that young people are less respectful of political parties than their older cohorts has

been refuted. In statistical terms there is no difference in the levels of respect for the five different political parties (three Britain-wide parties and two Nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales). Of course, this in itself runs counter to many of the key findings of previous research which suggested that party politics was failing young people. If there is a crisis of democracy caused by party politics it does not seem to be age specific.

5.10 Attitudes to the election campaign

The MORI polls asked respondents for their impressions of the campaign. On a methodological note it is important to emphasise that this was an open-ended question. Consequently, the frequencies for the various categories of response may seem lower than for some of the closed questions analysed elsewhere.

Analysis of open-ended responses ought to be covered by a health warning since patterns in unspecific favourable or unfavourable responses might mask more detailed patterns in specific aspects of the campaign. Nevertheless, at a very tentative level, the thesis of White *et al*, (2000) that young people are not uninterested in politics may have been supported by the revelation that young people were slightly more likely to report favourable – and less likely to report unfavourable – impressions of the election campaign. Young people were also much less likely to report that they found the election campaign turned into a 'slanging match' between the competitive parties or that there was 'not much talk about policies' than were those aged 25 and over. Those aged between 18 and 24 were also much less likely to report that they found the election campaign 'boring' than older sections of the electorate. This is somewhat counter-intuitive given that young people were reportedly less interested in the campaign than those aged 25 and over. Given these apparent contradictions, it is probably wise to exercise some caution in the interpretation of these results.

More striking than the favourable impressions of the campaign apparently offered by young people is their marked tendency to 'tune out' of the campaign process completely. Significantly more young people were likely

to report no impression of the campaign, or that they 'did not notice' the election campaign, that they had 'no impression' of the campaign or that they simply did not know what to make of the campaign than any other section of the electorate. This might be a significant finding since a key feature of the social capital thesis is that citizens make informed choices to participate and become active in community politics on the basis of political knowledge. From the MORI data, a case is beginning to emerge that young people were less resourced in terms of 'information' and less able to make informed decisions about politics due to a lack of knowledge about politics in general and the election campaign in particular. Furthermore, there appears to be a significant cleavage in the youth electorate, as those who voted in 2001 seem to be quite different from those young people who opted out of the election campaign. The former appear interested in the campaign, in party election broadcasts (60% of young people who watched party election broadcasts thought they were informative whereas only 48% of those aged 25 and over who watched party election broadcasts felt the same), and generally felt relatively positive about their electoral experience. Those who did not vote seemed much more likely to opt out of the entire process. Not being registered to vote was highly correlated with not 'noticing' the campaign and with 'don't know' responses to many of the questions that required a degree of political knowledge.

This is clearly a finding that needs exploration via different data. A research agenda that seeks to connect political knowledge to youth participation rates with longitudinal data is required. Milner (2001) has suggested that civic engagement can be directly linked to political knowledge; at the most basic level, it would be helpful to know how much young people knew of the 'nuts and bolts' of the electoral process, and political facts.

The MORI data suggest young people were the most likely of all age groups to express satisfaction with the electoral campaign – 36% of 18–24 year olds agreed that it was an interesting campaign, whereas only 28% of those aged 25 and over felt the same. Such a sanguine view is harder

to sustain, however, when assessments of the nature of the campaign are introduced. Young people were reluctant to say that the campaign of the political parties had been positive – only 23% of respondents between 18 and 24 felt that the parties had primarily promoted their own policies rather than attacked the policies of their opponents. Among those aged 25 and over there was a more positive view of the campaign, perhaps indicating that the electoral experience had been somewhat different from that expected by first-time voters in 2001.

The theme of the election not matching the expectations of first-time voters can also be drawn out from the type of campaign elements on which young people felt they had too little information (Figure 5.9). There was widespread agreement that the general voting public had received too little information on individual candidates, on the policies of the political parties, and the parties' campaigns, but these views were held in disproportionate numbers by young people.

Figure 5.9 Too little information received about

25+ (n=1,033)
18–24 (n=129)
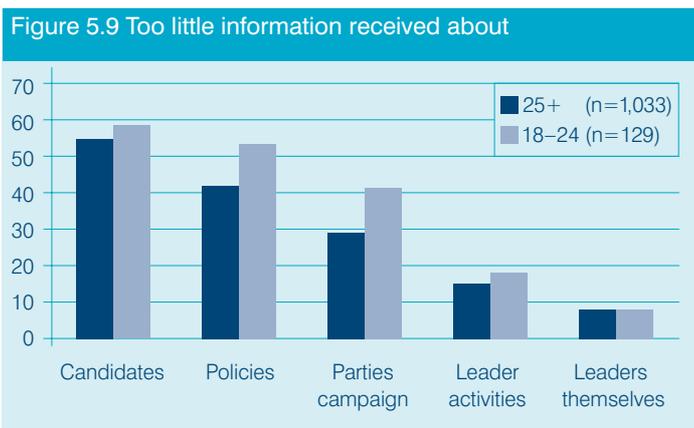
Perhaps young people eligible to vote in a general election for the first-time expected more from their first experience of popular democracy. Many may have been disappointed with the quality of communications they received during the campaign and wanted better information about candidates, policies and the campaign – they did not appear to want more information on the leaders themselves.

We have seen that marginality has an impact upon the aggregate level of turnout in a parliamentary constituency. Elections in Britain are decided by the outcome of key contests in a small number of marginal seats. Consequently, the drive to more professional campaigning by political parties in recent times has seen an increasing concentration upon the voters who are likely to make a difference to the outcome of an election. Thus, unless young people happen to reside in marginal constituencies, they are unlikely to be the recipient of a personal call from the candidates, a fact which might be far away from their expectation of the value of their vote as citizens.
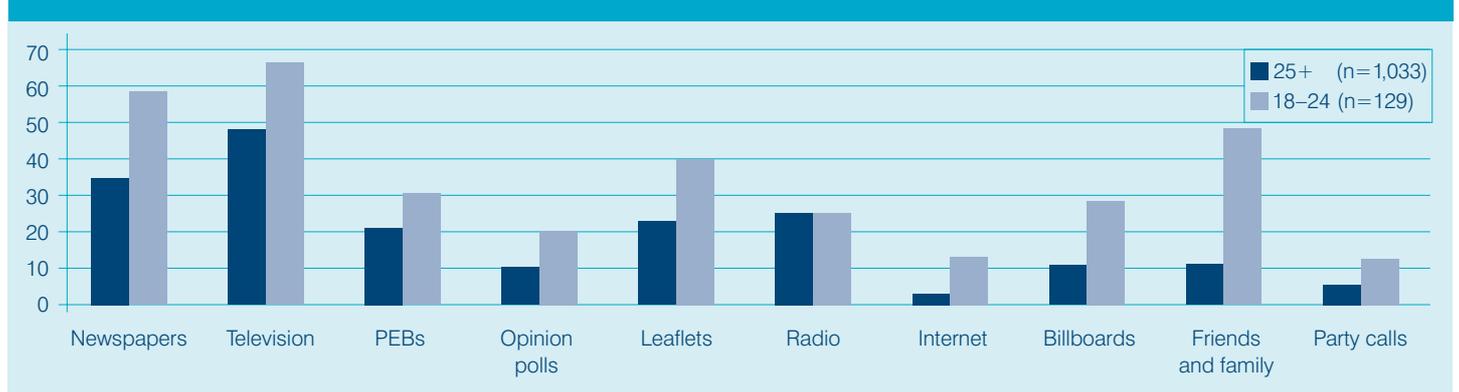
Lipset and Rokkan (1967) believed that young people were the least secure of all sections of the electorate in their voting behaviour and would be the most susceptible to influence from the parties and media. In fact, from the MORI data, 18–24 year olds were the most likely of all groups to be influenced by newspapers, television, party election broadcasts, opinion polls, election leaflets, the internet, political advertising on billboards, talking to friends and family and calls from representatives of the parties (Figure 5.10). Young people certainly seem to be more impressionable in their voting choice, probably because they are less certain about how to (or whether to) vote in their first general election. It is possible that the electoral abstainers of 2001 were more likely to be advised not

to vote by friends and family than at any comparable British election. The so-called apathy of the 2001 campaign may have had a double impact: first, on the experienced electorate, and second, on first-time voters who sought the opinions of the established electorate.

This might make it imperative for the media to be responsible in the way that it promotes the election campaign when it comes to young people. An interesting feature of the press coverage of the election in 2001 was that it concentrated unduly on the prospect of an exceedingly low turnout from young people before the day of polling (Harrison, 2002). It could further be that such reports of expected youth abstention may have been self-fulfilling prophecies as first-time voters came to believe that there was little point in voting. Voter education campaigns aimed at young people must therefore address the positive aspects of voting rather than focusing on the prospect of failed electoral engagement.

Another note of caution needs to be struck here. Although the media, parties and personal networks disproportionately affected the votes of young people, it does not seem that young people were more attentive to all aspects of the campaign than the electorate as a whole. In fact, those aged between 18 and 24 were more likely to miss completely many aspects of the campaign than those aged 25 and over (Figure 5.11).

Figure 5.10 Influences on my vote/non – vote choice (combined great deal/fair amount scores)

Legend: 25+ (n=1,033); 18–24 (n=129)

Categories: Newspapers, Television, PEBs, Opinion polls, Leaflets, Radio, Internet, Billboards, Friends and family, Party calls

Voter engagement and young people

Figure 5.11 Failure to read/watch/notice election coverage during the campaign

Legend: 25+ (n=1,033); 18–24 (n=129)
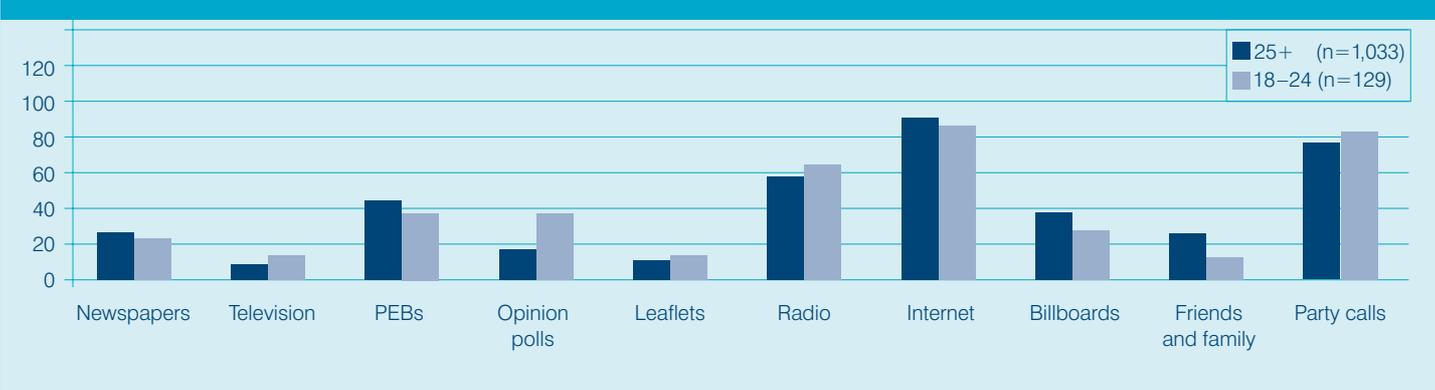
Source: MORI/Electoral Commission, Phase 2

In particular, first-time voters were quite likely not to notice the election coverage in opinion polls. Norris has suggested that the media created the impression that the election result was a foregone conclusion, and this impression depressed aggregate levels of turnout. However, such an impression was unlikely to be particularly disruptive to the plans of the youth electorate, who were quite likely to not even notice media aspects of the election.

There were no real differences in the failure to notice election coverage according to age – except that young people were more likely to contact friends and family than those aged 25 and over. It might be that the widespread failure to 'notice' the election across a range of media may have had a larger impact upon the young than upon the rest of the electorate. For example, young people were only slightly more likely to miss personal calls from representatives of the political parties than those over 25 were. The overall rate of failing to connect with party canvassers was very high (over 80% of all voters received no contact from the parties – Figure 5.11) but the failure of the parties to contact young people may be more pertinent than their failure to connect with older voters. The majority of voters may have already learnt that in modern elections they are unlikely to be contacted by the parties unless they occupy a strategically important demographic position. First-time voters may have felt that their first experience of elections in Britain was

different from their expectation, particularly if their expectations included door-to-door canvassing.
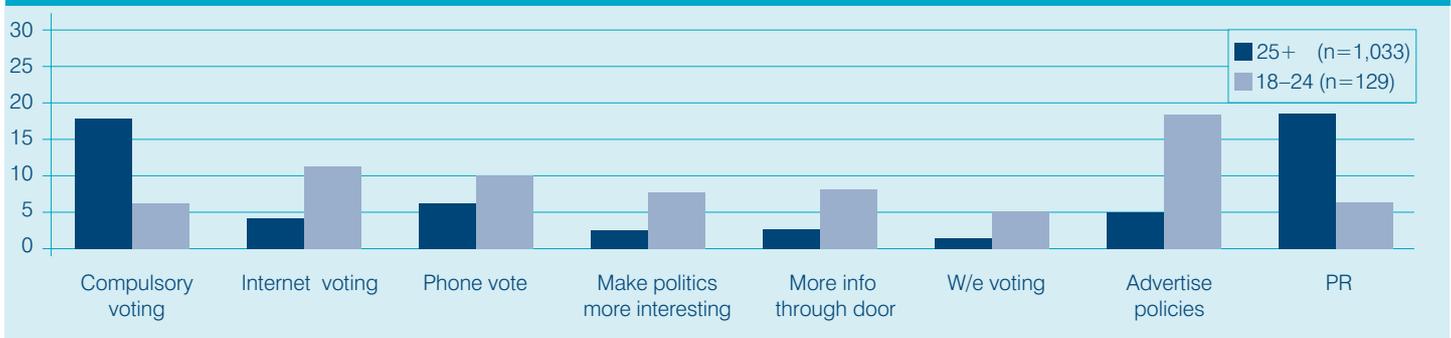
Figure 5.12 reveals an interesting conundrum. Young people who viewed party election broadcasts looked upon the experience rather differently from those election broadcast viewers who were aged 25 and above. By and large,

Figure 5.12 Party election broadcasts watched (all who seen any PEBs)

Legend: 25+ (n=569); 18–24 (n=76)
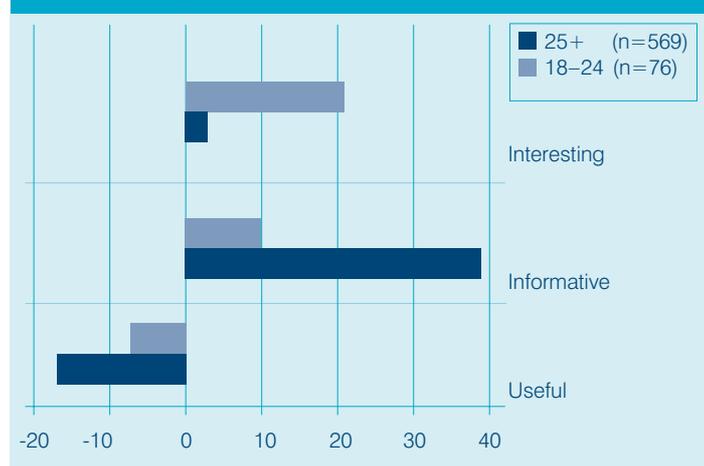
Source: MORI/Electoral Commission, Phase 2

Figure 5.13 Selected 'solutions' for low turnout (all respondents)

Legend:
- 25+ (n=1,033)
- 18–24 (n=129)

Categories: Compulsory voting, Internet voting, Phone vote, Make politics more interesting, More info through door, W/e voting, Advertise policies, PR

Source: MORI/Electoral Commission, Phase 2

broadcast viewers reported that they were interesting and informative. This is hardly surprising given that the viewers of party election broadcasts are a self-selecting audience likely to be already partisan or highly interested in politics and the election. In contrast, the young people who watched them seemed to find party election broadcasts more informative but less interesting and even less useful than those aged 25 and over. Brushing aside the distinction between 'informative' and 'useful', it could be claimed that the thirst of young people for election information extends to that much-maligned artefact – party election broadcasts – and that they find such broadcasts informative even though they are not very interesting.

5.11 Changes in voting procedures

The MORI data reveals that young people were significantly less likely to report voting than were the rest of the electorate. Analysis using other datasets such as the BES has revealed that young people were disproportionately disengaged from the electoral process. As a social group young people have less at stake in the electoral process than their older cohorts, their sense of civic duty is less well developed, their electoral resources underdeveloped.

The reviewed literature seems to suggest that young people in contemporary Britain are less engaged with the democratic process than young people were a generation ago. If this is correct, it might have serious repercussions for the state of democracy in Britain.

What then can be done to arrest this decline? Several suggested solutions were offered to respondents in the MORI polls. However, it is important to note that this question was not open-ended and as such all support for changes to the mechanics of voting might be falsely inflated as a result.

Notwithstanding the concern about over-reported support for these proposed changes, young non-voters were more likely to favour certain solutions than those aged 25 or above. In particular they tended to favour 24-hour opening of polling stations, telephone voting and internet voting (although as outlined above current use of the internet for electoral information was hardly measurable). There are also methodological concerns about question order in this poll that are addressed in the methodology section of this report.

When all respondents were given the chance to comment on their preferred solutions for counteracting low turnout more robust answers emerge (Figure 5.13). Young people were relatively unenthusiastic about the prospects of better rates of public participation after the introduction of compulsory voting or proportional representation (although it is hard to see how the introduction of compulsory voting could fail to increase turnout, if nothing else).

On the other hand, young people were keener on other proposed changes to the fabric of voting procedures in Britain. In particular, young people were more likely to favour new mechanical arrangements in the voting process (internet voting, telephone voting and weekend polling), and on improving the channels of communication between electors and the process of elections (getting more information through the door, making politics 'more interesting' and advertising policies).

In short, this provides food for thought for the consideration that young people were particularly isolated from the electoral process in 2001. As the modern party campaign becomes more professional, more centralised and increasingly concentrated upon highly specific sets of voters, it begins to miss many of the more traditional targets of election campaigns. As parties continue to concentrate their resources on 'target voters in target seats,' because they are the bell-weather voters in an election contest under the single member, simple plurality electoral system, then non-target voters can be overlooked. If the campaign machinery routinely overlooks young people they might get the impression that they are unimportant to the outcome of the election. If young people feel that their views are not valued by the political parties it would be hardly surprising if they began to question their role in the election process. If young people feel undervalued during the election (and there is evidence that they expected more information from the parties, more policy detail and more personal canvassing from the people seeking office) they may justifiably begin to question the value of the election itself.

Research methodologies in voting studies

Voting and non-voting tend to be widely misreported, and survey data provide little in the way of reliable evidence as they are frequently at odds with what is known from the official reported levels of turnout. Unfortunately official statistics do not allow disaggregation by individual characteristics such as age group. The remaining alternative to survey analysis is to employ ecological analyses. A possible exception to this is the analysis of marked electoral registers with which, using specialised software, we could identify specific groups such as first-time voters (attainers). However, this method has not yet been widely used and the ethical and legal dimensions of this methodology have not been satisfactorily resolved. Ecological analysis tends to infer from the aggregate to the individual level. One such inferential finding might be that since very high concentrations of younger men are more likely to be found in clusters based in areas of low turnout then they must be less likely to vote themselves. Such an assumption, however, is likely to commit the ecological fallacy by inferring incorrectly from the aggregate to the individual level, from the general to the specific. In other words, young men may simply tend to live in low-turnout areas (such as inner cities) but their own levels of turnout may be similar to or different from those living around them. Due to this problem – and the fact that we cannot identify anything about people's views from ecological analyses – we turn to the survey and have to cope with certain associated problems.

The essence of the problem of measuring non-voting and reasons for non-voting with survey data is twofold. First, any sample of the electorate is not likely to represent non-voters in their true proportions. Second, the responses of those sampled are not reliable.

6.1 Non-response bias

Non-response bias is a potential problem in any survey (Fowler, 1993; Kalton, 1983). The crucial issue here is that survey respondents may be self-selecting. Those who agree to be interviewed are likely to be over-representative of those who voted. This may be because the view of civic responsibilities that includes voting may also include participation in social science research – and those who hold themselves to be civic-minded are likely to be both voters and respondents. Whatever the reason, if it is related to both responding to a survey and turning out to vote, then any sample of voters may not be representative of the electorate as a whole. In the MORI/Electoral Commission Phase 2 poll, 79% of all respondents claimed to have voted, in sharp contrast to the 59% of the electorate who voted according to official turnout returns. Non-voting can also be systematically under-represented in surveys where voting can be verified. For example, in the BES validated turnout was found to be 72% for white respondents and 67% for people from black and minority ethnic communities – well above the actual rates at the general election, demonstrating that non-response bias remains a significant concern for studies of voter engagement based on survey data (Purdam *et al,* 2002).

Furthermore, given the strength of the relationship between marginality and turnout at the constituency-level it was surprising that constituency-level characteristics proved not to be significant in explaining variations in constituency turnout rates. This may indicate further limitations of the survey approach to non-voting insofar as providing further evidence that people who respond to a survey are keen that their opinions be heard. These are likely to be the very people who are also least likely not to vote. If voter apathy is related to whether or not an individual responds to an election survey, then any such survey is likely to under-estimate the extent of voter apathy in the electorate.

6.2 Response bias

A common feature of many studies of participation and voter engagement in Britain is that they have tended to uncover a highly participant culture among the British (Almond and Verba, 1963), or a well-developed sense of civic responsibility among British voters (Parry *et al,* 1992). Recent work from the ESRC-sponsored Democracy and Participation study has revealed that there persists a high expectation that at the aggregate level a British citizen ought to vote in elections regardless of an individual's propensity to vote in any particular electoral contest (Pattie *et al,* 2002). Hence if voting is perceived to be part of the essential characteristics that the public see as civic

responsibility, individuals wishing to present themselves as good citizens are likely to report that they were voters rather than non-voters. As such, the act of voting may become a valence issue (see Norpoth, 1992); widespread agreement about the desirability of participation in general and voting in particular might lead to individuals over-reporting their record of voting.

It was noted above that the feeling of civic duty may be compounded by an additional cost of feelings of guilt associated with non-voting (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974; Blais, 2000). This may explain why people commonly misreport to pollsters that they have voted (Harbaugh,1996).

On a related theme, a classic 'spiral of silence' around non-voting may develop among a sampled population. A valence issue such as voting may encourage respondents to over-report their own voting record because they perceive an expectation that they ought to have voted (see Noelle-Neumann, 1984, for the classic literature on the spiral of silence, or Crewe, 1992, for the British electorate's ability to lie to pollsters).

Analysis of validated turnout in the BES reported above showed that a substantial proportion of respondents mis-reported having voted, and many of these were not even registered. Overall 21% were found to be registered and to have claimed to have voted but hadn't and a further 6% claimed to have voted but were not registered.

Furthermore, if respondents cannot be relied on to say accurately whether they voted, they may also be prone to give inaccurate reasons for voting and non-voting. This is not just a problem with those who misreport voting, but a more general issue about how accurately people are able to articulate motivations for behaviour, especially where it is hypothetical or counterfactual. For example, it might be unreasonable to expect an individual to assess their improved chances of voting if internet polling was introduced. The gap between the abstract and the reality is simply too large. The MORI/Electoral Commission data indicated that as many people claimed they would be

more likely to vote if they were allowed a postal vote as was the case for internet voting. The irony is, of course, that in 2001 postal votes were more readily available than at any other British general election. It is unclear how many of these respondents thought they were answering a specific question about elections conducted solely through postal votes (along the lines of the 2000 local election experiments). Such confusion highlights the need for specific, carefully worded questions in surveys.

Other issues are raised by question ordering effects and question types in voting intention surveys (see Moon 1987, 1996). Question ordering is an area of contested territory in political science (for a general overview see Schuman and Presser, 1981). Responses may be sensitive to distortion due to question order on certain political issues. For instance there has been considerable debate about whether asking a question about voting behaviour before asking one about party identification may result in a contamination of results (Heath and Pierce, 1992; Sanders *et al,* 2002, but also McAllister and Wattenberg, 1995).

If respondents are likely to give interviewers answers that they assume to be socially acceptable, this could seriously contaminate the interpretation of data. For example, if it is more socially acceptable to say that pressure of work or illness or other constraints forced an individual's abstention rather than their disinterest in or alienation from politics, interpretations of data may be distorted as a result (particularly when it comes to preferred solutions to lack of engagement).

An associated problem concerns the recall of voting. Several accounts have found evidence of misreporting of which party individuals actually voted for, even after only a short period of time (Broughton, 1995; Worcester, 1983; Ranney, 1985; Sparrow, 2001; Russell *et al,* 2002). This is a problem that is often heightened by an apparent tendency to retrospectively side with the victorious party (Broughton, 1995; Moon, 1996). The value of response may also be affected by the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer (for instance, are they a similar age or ethnicity?).

6.3 Sample size

All sample surveys are subject to sampling error – the random differences between the population and the sample. According to the central limit theorem, with a sample size of around 1,000 it is possible to achieve margins of error of around +/- 3% around a single item of measurement such as voting intention (see Kurtz, 1983; Blalock, 1982). In an often-cited analogy, a poll of 1,000 respondents should be as representative of the views of the electorate as the first ladle of soup is of the contents of the entire cauldron. However, when one is interested in a sub-population, particularly where that population is small (such as the youth electorate) a much larger overall sample or a booster sample of the groups of interest is desirable. Notwithstanding the problems of response bias discussed above, the sampling error alone for a sub-sample of around 200 persons under the age of 24 makes accurate analysis less precise. In short, to understand age group differences high-quality survey data such as the British Election Survey require a substantial booster sample of minority populations (the ongoing research of Henn and Weinstein might provide a template here).

In conclusion, there is a need to do more research on what people do rather than what they say they do. This may take the form of experimental research in which the impact of different factors is assessed directly through the testing of those mechanisms in actual elections. The experimental studies of Sanders and Norris on voters' interpretations of media portrayal of general election campaigns in 1997 and 2001 might prove a useful template here (see Norris *et al,* 1999, for information on the conduct of the 1997 experiment). The findings of the 30 local authority pilot public communication and engagement schemes being conducted in 2002 are also awaited.

It is important to adopt methods which further reduce the risk of misreporting or that allow us to make effective adjustments. Finally, it is necessary to undertake surveys in which young people are sampled in sufficient numbers to allow meaningful analysis.

Youth communication strategies

7.1 Connecting and educating

Given the widespread antipathy to the intrusion of politics into the lives of young people in 2001, extending the notion of 'belonging' is a major challenge facing British democracy. Our next task here is to consider some ways that responses to disengagement may be effective. There is a clear need for an educative process in order to engage youth in the realm of formal politics, but it also clear that the 'establishment' needs to take seriously the charge that it fails to listen to what young people are saying, or at least what they want to hear about.

7.2 Responses from the political parties

The simple truth is that the attempts of political parties to engage young voters appear to have been inadequate. Partly these plans may have been poorly conceived, but partly they suffer from a strategic weakness – being tarred with the same brush as the 'party politics' that seemingly repel some young voters in the first place. It could be, however, that political parties might attempt to convince first-time voters that their votes count, even in non-marginal constituencies.

Recent political history has seen numerous attempts to capture the youth vote, from fairly loose associations with well-known party supporters to formal partisan recruitment drives – such as Labour's Red Wedge of the 1980s – and non-partisan voter registration schemes – like Rock the Vote in the 1990s.

The blueprint from these schemes has been retraced and expanded since the 1980s. Red Wedge was disbanded shortly after the 1987 election, but its main tactic of allowing campaigning to be done by high-profile performers such as actors, comedians and football managers continued. In the 2001 election there were many innovative attempts by political parties designed to boost turnout which included election broadcasts featuring soap and pop stars, promotional work in night-clubs, advertisements on beer mats, the relaxation of postal vote regulations, e-mail and even SMS text message inducements to party website subscribers.

The extent to which these measures could be judged successful is debatable. Wring *et al* (1999) and Fielding (2002) in particular have expressed severe doubts about their impact, claiming that cynical young voters easily filter out crude electoral marketing techniques. Certainly it is hard to imagine that turnout was increased by such operations in 2001.

Henn *et al* (1999), in their localised study of young people's attitudes, report the suspicion with which some attempts to connect with and influence young voters were viewed:

> *None of the participants appeared to believe technology was crucial for enhancing the democratic process. Accessible information was seen to be the key. Neither were the conventional registration/get the vote out campaigns welcomed with much enthusiasm. Even the high profile media conscious initiatives were criticised by some, although, typically this was more in terms of how the campaigns were packaged, rather than the underlying rationale itself. As one group member volunteered: 'Damon Albarn doesn't need to tell me to vote. I can work it out on my own.' Rather, as another member admitted: 'I feel a bit patronised by being told voting is cool and trendy. It's not really. It's a serious thing.'*

> *Nor were MPs' birthday greetings welcomed. As one critic put it: 'The thing I remember about getting stupid birthday cards off politicians is that they don't work. They put me off completely.'* (Henn *et al,* 1999, pp.35–6)

Young people in the MORI/Electoral Commission survey did report a willingness to be better informed about the election than might be assumed from the headlines about apathy and disinterest in politics. As the survey analysis shows, young people were the most likely of all groups to actually discuss the forthcoming election with family or friends during the campaign, although they were less likely to have heard about opinion polls or to have been contacted directly by the parties via campaign leaflets. This final feature of removal from the electoral process may have resulted from young people's propensity to live at home with parents or in multi-occupancy dwellings where, even if

delivered, leaflets may not have been received personally. The combined effect of young people's activities during the election campaign is to show that a thirst may exist for more information about the election – and crucially more information that confirms the importance of young people to the electoral process. The difficulty is making that information useful, and preventing it being viewed through a filter of cynicism.

The real dilemma, however, is being able to connect with young people without being viewed as patronising. A MORI poll for the Adam Smith Institute suggested that young people often have a clearly defined idea of citizenship which revolves around social services, education, unemployment and the treatment of others rather than political institutions and norms (Pirie and Worcester, 2000). In the MORI/Electoral Commission poll young voters clearly felt that there was too much focus on the leaders of political parties rather than on issues. Edwards and the IPPR Team (2000) found that very local issues often motivated young people rather than more 'abstract' national ones, but within these concerns (for example, sea pollution in Brighton, crime and racism in Leicester) there was scope for focusing on national themes with local emphases.

Work for the Hansard Society has pointed to the lack of engagement between youth and established parties, and the need to enliven politics to establish a well-informed and well-connected young electorate (Diplock, 2001). White (2001) has advocated a need to make politics more interesting for young people, with more responsive politicians and opportunities for young people to get involved in the active process of politics.

7.3 Minimising obstacles to voting

We might conclude from rational choice explanations of voting that if the cost of voting is reduced (say by telephone or internet voting) then turnout may increase (for survey evidence of this see Electoral Commission, 2001, and Local Government Association, 2001). Nevertheless if expressive sentiments – such as civic duty – are really in decline, then it is hard to see the method of voting having much

independent impact upon turnout levels for younger people or for the electorate as a whole. Moreover, these are measures aimed at solving the symptoms of an unhealthy democracy, not the root cause.

Young people are clearly under-represented on the electoral register, and registration changes might be necessary in order to maximise the chances of young people voting. There are enough examples from other social groups e.g. black and minority ethnic communities, to suggest that registration drives can make a difference when an under-represented group is adequately identified. In truth, however, hard-to-reach groups, such as urban young people, are difficult to mobilise into registration precisely because they are hard to reach. It may be time for new experiences in voter registration, finally and formally breaking the link with local government (and local taxation) and experimenting with non-political recruitment drives on the lines of the US Motor - Voter scheme.

7.4 The mechanics of voting

In comparison with the electorate as a whole, young non-voters seem keen to endorse changes that would open up access to voting, 24-hour opening of polling stations, internet and telephone voting schemes. They are about as keen as the electorate as a whole on other proposals to widen participation such as weekend voting, supermarket polling and postal votes. However, caution should be urged here since the range of positive responses to all of these questions might suggest a classic 'halo effect'.

The most obvious method of improving turnout would involve a change of law, making voting compulsory as it is in many countries. Those who make the case for compulsory voting (for example, Watson, 2001) focus on the undeniable boost to turnout figures that a change of law would produce. Compulsory voting would have to be associated with an overhaul of the culture of a voter's duties via an education campaign. At worst, compulsory voting runs the risk of treating the wrong problem – turnout rather than ineffective democracy.

There appears to be some support from young people for a 'none of the above' option (Diplock, 2001), but more rigorous experiments are needed before we can confidently assert that they would improve participation in elections.

7.5 Pre-adult socialisation

It is clear that much work needs to be done before a better form of linkage between the youngest sections of the electorate and the establishment can be forged. One of the mechanisms by which such a link might be forged is through the citizenship initiative for older school pupils (see Newton, 2001). If the youngest generations are not participating in politics because they lack sufficient social capital, education ought to be a necessary precondition for reinvigorating democracy. We would argue, however, that active citizenship comprises more than simply voting at elections; the whole range of participatory democracy needs to be covered by any citizenship programme.

7.6 Targeting young people

Unless young people happen to reside in one of the small number of constituencies that were marginal in the last election, they would have been unlikely to receive a personal call from their representative in Parliament. There is some evidence to suggest that this lack of personal contact with the electoral process is likely to depress turnout. First-time voters might even expect to be canvassed in an old-fashioned sense. As the parties have become more efficient electoral machines, focusing their efforts on target voters in target seats, they may have left the bulk of the electorate behind them – and first-time voters in particular are not drawn into the spectacle of the campaign, with the election as an event.

The current electoral system rewards parties that target resources on marginal voters. As such it would be easy for young people to conclude that their contribution to their first electoral experience was unnecessary. If the parties are unwittingly sending out this signal to voters, it is unsurprising that voters reciprocate in kind.

Implications and research priorities

On the basis of the review of existing literature on voter engagement and the survey data, the research team were asked by The Electoral Commission to identify a range of possible policy innovations that could be considered in order to increase voter engagement among young people in the UK. It should be noted that the policy responses identified are not derived from a detailed evaluation of existing policies but from the review of existing research and survey data. As part of this consideration of policy responses, the research team was also asked to identify any areas where there was a need for further research.

8.1 Recognising and understanding young people's concerns

- Low electoral turnout is a symptom of a malfunctioning democracy, not its cause. Therefore attention should be given to improving the relationship between electors and the elected rather than simply on increasing the proportions of people who vote in an election.

- Research indicates a synapse between the agenda of elections in Britain and that of young people. Bridging the gap between what young people want and what parties talk about is a real challenge. If we were to see democracy as a deliberative process, increasing communication would in itself encourage youth participation.

- Research has pointed to the lack of engagement between youth and established parties, and the need to enliven politics to establish a well-informed and well-connected young electorate. There is a need to make politics more interesting for young people, with more responsive politicians and opportunities for young people to get involved in the active process of politics.

- The more direct justifications for not voting given in disproportionate numbers by young people include a disinterest in politics and an active dislike of the candidates on offer. From a participatory democracy standpoint the willingness of young non-voters to justify their inactivity in such direct terms may represents a real challenge. In particular, the avowed disinterest in politics exhibited by many of those 18–24 year old abstainers might signal a direct challenge to the citizenship initiative over the coming years – and may necessitate a much wider definition of 'politics' among young people and the establishment.

- Given the widespread antipathy to the intrusion of politics into the lives of young people in 2001, extending the notion of 'belonging' is a major challenge facing British democracy. There is a clear need for an educative process in order to engage youth in the realm of formal politics, but it is also clear that the 'establishment' needs to take seriously the charge that it fails to listen to what young people are saying.

- Research has shown that very local issues often motivated young people rather than more 'abstract' national ones, but within these concerns (for example, sea pollution in Brighton, crime and racism in Leicester) there was scope for focusing on national themes with local emphases.

8.2 Tackling social and political exclusion among young people

- The issue of voter engagement needs to be viewed in conjunction with problems of social, political and economic exclusion. In general the affluent and more educated middle classes are observed to have higher levels of turnout.

- Research suggests that young people often have a clearly defined idea of citizenship which revolves around social services, education, unemployment and the treatment of others rather than political institutions and norms.

- Political parties have a responsibility to increase the engagement and participation of young people. Research suggests that in the 2001 general election young people were relatively likely to discuss the election and the campaign with friends or family and may have welcomed more direct attention from the parties. Unless they happen to live in a highly contestable constituency, young voters – the slice of the electorate that might benefit the most – may receive less campaign information than they anticipated.

- In the 2001 election there were many innovative attempts by political parties designed to boost turnout which included election broadcasts featuring soap and pop stars, promotional work in night-clubs, advertisements on beer mats, the relaxation of postal vote regulations, e-mail and even SMS text message inducements to party website subscribers. Research has suggested that such initiatives have had little impact, claiming that that cynical young voters easily filter out crude electoral marketing techniques. Political parties need to convince first-time voters that their votes count, even in non-marginal constituencies. In the MORI/Electoral Commission poll young voters clearly felt that there was too much focus on the leaders of political parties rather than on issues in the 2001 general election.

- Research continues to suggest that segregation, racism and unfair treatment affect the lives of young people in black and minority ethnic communities. The implications of this for tackling voter disengagement among young people in black and minority ethnic communities is far-reaching, and policies designed to improve political participation and political parties themselves need to take into account the recommendations of other key reports including the Community Cohesion Report (Cantle, 2002) and the Stephen Lawrence Report (MacPherson, 1999).

8.3 Making registration easier

- Accurate and high levels of registration are a key precursor for increasing voter engagement. It is clear that there are considerable variations in the scope and content of voter registration campaigns across different local authorities. Consideration also needs to be given to the introduction of a form of electoral register which is used solely for the purposes of voting.

- Young people are clearly under-represented on the electoral register, and registration changes might be necessary in order to maximise the chances of young people voting. Recent changes to the registration scheme are helping to address the problem of non-registration among young people. However, further consideration needs to be given to schemes such as automatic

registration and on-the-day registration – both of which are credited with increasing turnout in other countries. More innovative schemes aimed at young people, such as the Motor-Voter law in the USA (which claimed much success in registering young voters via their applications for driving licences), ought to be scrutinised for their applicability to Britain.

- Both quantitative and qualitative studies have demonstrated that young people often have an appetite for politics; indeed, there seems to be a polarisation between those who participate in politics and those who are excluded from participation. On a small scale in the UK, Operation Black Vote has demonstrated that it is possible to convince black and minority ethnic communities of the importance of being registered and of actually turning out to vote. Youth registration drives might learn from this, and would do well to be directed towards the desire to 'have a say' rather than recourse to civic responsibility or political efficacy. Such campaigns should be broadened. Other countries such as Bangladesh and the USA can also provide useful examples of innovative registration and voter information campaigns.

- Targeted voter engagement campaigns need to be ongoing to maintain and increase the levels of registration among young people. They should also focus on trying to increase young people's engagement in politics and decision making more generally.

8.4 Making voting easier

- Research suggests that, in comparison with the electorate as a whole, young non-voters seem keen to endorse changes that would open up access to voting, such as 24-hour opening of polling stations, internet and telephone voting schemes. They are about as keen as the electorate as a whole on other proposals to widen participation such as weekend voting, supermarket polling and postal votes. However, such initiatives are likely to have only a limited impact on more acutely disengaged non-voters and communities. Ultimately it is the politics that matter in ensuring voter engagement. Media and political preoccupation with the issue should not detract from

the more critical issues such as disengagement and alienation. The case for modernising the mechanics of voting in Britain may be overwhelming, but the justification should not centre on young people and voter engagement.

- Further research and pilot studies are required focusing on the wider potential of electronic democracy to provide new means and contexts for political engagement of young people. Consideration also has to be given to the social exclusion issues around access to the internet and digital television. The ongoing pilots of electronic democracy and public engagement being conducted are awaited with interest. Other countries can also provide useful examples of electronic means of voter engagement.

8.5 Raising awareness

- Increasing the recognition of the relevance and impact of politics at a local, national and EU level on young people's everyday lives will be a key part of any successful voter engagement campaign. One aspect of this will be to emphasise the link between voting and policy rather than just elections and to raise awareness of the fact that all young people are involved in politics but few are involved in the actual decision making.

- It seems likely that the attitudes of pre-voting age youth are vital to the development of democracy; information and awareness campaigns need to target this age group.

- One of the mechanisms by which awareness might be raised is through the citizenship initiative for older school pupils. If the youngest generations are not participating in politics because they lack sufficient social capital and/or a sense of civic duty, education ought to be a necessary precondition for reinvigorating democracy. We would argue, however, that active citizenship comprises more than simply voting at elections, and that the whole range of participatory democracy needs to be covered by any citizenship programme.

- It is important that awareness and information campaigns distinguish between active withdrawal of support for parties and broader issues of alienation and disengagement among young people.

8.6 Voter choices and the electoral system

- Research suggests that proportional electoral systems tend to have higher rates of turnout where voting is not compulsory. However, it is unclear whether alternative electoral systems are likely to encourage youth voting.

- Under the first-past-the-post system the political parties largely ignore the electorate in non-marginal seats. Unless young people happen to reside in one of the small number of constituencies that were marginal in the last election, they would have been unlikely to receive a personal call from their representative in Parliament. There is some evidence to suggest that this lack of personal contact with the electoral process is likely to depress turnout. First-time voters might even expect to be canvassed in an old-fashioned sense. As the parties have become more efficient electoral machines, focusing their efforts on target voters in target seats, they may have left the bulk of the electorate behind them – and first-time voters in particular are not drawn into the spectacle of the campaign, with the election as an event. If political parties are committed to voter engagement and to improving turnout, election campaigns should be rolled out to people living in all parts of the country.

- A simple solution to improving turnout at elections would see the act of voting made compulsory. However, compulsory voting does not tackle the root causes of non-voting or make a sizeable difference to the quality of communication between voters and parties. Compulsory voting would have to be associated with an overhaul of the culture of a voter's duties via an education campaign. Compulsory voting runs the risk of treating the wrong problem – poor turnout rather than any of its myriad causes.

- The introduction of a 'none of the above' option on the ballot paper is thought to be likely to have an impact on turnout. There appears to be some support from young people for 'none of the above' candidates (Diplock, 2001), but more rigorous experiments are needed before we can confidently assert that they would improve participation in elections.

- In a number of other democracies the minimum voting age varies (the lowest is 15 in Iran, while Malaysia has a minimum voting age of 21). In German experiments at the state level, the inclusion of 16 and 17 year olds in Hanover resulted in greater participation from this group than from those between 18 and 35 (IDEA Democracy Forum, 1999, p.12). The Liberal Democrats have added the call for votes at 16 to their official policy stance. As well as the elements of natural justice, extending voting rights to people who can marry, join the armed forces and pay taxes already, the debate has been characterised by an appeal to the whole ethos of citizenship and active participation. The political ramifications of lowering the voting age are uncertain, but any move would have to be accompanied by a serious educative process (probably through the citizenship initiative in Key Stages 3 and 4 in schools) that centred on what were the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship in modern-day Britain.

- Young people in the MORI/Electoral Commission survey did report a willingness to be better informed about the election than might be assumed from the headlines about apathy and disinterest in politics. As the survey analysis shows, young people were the most likely of all groups to actually discuss the forthcoming election with family or friends during the campaign, although they were less likely to have heard about opinion polls or to have been contacted directly by the parties via campaign leaflets. It is clear that more needs to be done to both channel the apparent interest in political issues among young people and confirm to young people their importance in the electoral process.

- The transparency of the electoral process, and the accountability of holders of political office and party funding are important in maintaining trust in the political system of young voters. It is noticeable that young people were more likely than older electors to hold in high regard the 'new institutions' such as the EU, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

8.7 Research priorities

- There is a lack of reliable and compelling survey evidence regarding the turnout of young people and what would improve it. In order to target resources and policies effectively there is a need to conduct further research in a number of particular areas, though this should not be at the cost of the development of policy in areas where it is clear what needs to change.

- More accurate estimates of turnout need to be developed, i.e. based on the number of estimated eligible voters in the country. Existing estimates of turnout based on the number of registered voters are unreliable. They also exclude some of the most disengaged individuals.

- More reliable survey data and larger samples are required. In particular, more research is needed which allows for the verification of voting and the assessment of different methods of voting.

- There is a lack of longitudinal data with which to test the hypothesis that the difference in attitudinal outlook between young people and the rest of the electorate is the result of cohort or generational divides. In other words, better data are required in order to establish whether the 'problems' of youth disaffection will diminish as individuals age. Cross-sectional data ought to be better designed, so that studies of young people can confidently assess age effects. In most cases this will require boosted samples of young people in order to allow disaggregation across demographic and attitudinal variables. More information is required on the differences in voter engagement among different young people in relation to gender, ethnicity and social class.

- More needs to be known about voter engagement among young people in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (the numbers in the MORI data do not support disaggregation). It is noteworthy that the 2001 election in Northern Ireland precipitated much higher rates of turnout than in the rest of the UK. This may have been due to the domination of other issues and the continuing distance between the sets of Northern Irish parties. It might also be relevant to examine more closely why the new institutions of government in Scotland and Wales appear to enjoy higher rates of respect from young people than from those aged 25 and over.

- There is a need to do more research on what people do rather than what they say they do. This may take the form of experimental research methodologies in which the impact of different factors is assessed directly through the testing of those mechanisms in actual elections. Alternatively, methods should be adopted which further reduce the risk of misreporting or allow effective adjustments to be made.

- Specific research is required on the impacts of both electronic democracy and alternative voting systems on young people.

- More detailed information is required on how politicians engage with young people and how new technologies can increase communication and interaction.

- More research is also required on why there is so little election coverage in young people's media, and the consequences of such a gap.

- International comparative research would be valuable. Research is required on what voter engagement campaigns in the UK can learn from initiatives in other countries.

References

Almond, G. and Verba, S. (1963) *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ

BBC (2001) Radio 1 Newsbeat Poll of First-Time Voters, May 2001 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/news/election/010514_poll.shtml)

BBC (2002a) 'Allow Voting at 16 – Kennedy' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk_politics/newsid_18001000/1801693.stm)

BBC (2002b) 'E-voting Put to the Test' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk_politics/newsid_19116000/1916184.stm)

Bhavnani, K. (1994) *Talking Politics: A Psychological Framing of Views from Youth in Britain,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Blais, A. (2000) *To Vote or Not to Vote? The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory,* University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA

Blalock, H. (1982) *Social Statistics,* McGraw-Hill, London

Blondel, J., Sinnot, R. and Svensson, P. (1998) *People and Parliament in the European Union,* Clarendon Press, Oxford

Broughton, D. (1995) *Public Opinion Polling and Politics in Britain,* Harvester-Wheatsheaf, London

Brown, J.A. (1992) *Thatcherism and the Young: The Death of the Left?,* CREST Working Paper No.12

Buckingham, D. (2000) *The Making of Citizens: Young People, News and Politics,* Routledge, London

Buffachi, V. (2001) *Voting, Rationality and Reputation,* Political Studies Vol.49, pp.714–29

Butler, D. and Butler, G. (2000) *Twentieth Century British Political Facts, 1900–2000.* MacMillan, London

Butler, D. and Stokes, D. (1974) *Political Change in Britain,* 2nd edn, MacMillan, London

Bynner, J. and Ashford, S. (1994) 'Politics and Participation: Some Antecedents of Young People's Attitudes to the Political System and Political Activity', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol.24, No.2

Cantle, T. (2002) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team* (http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/reu/community-cohesion.pdf)

Clarke, D., Sanders, D., Stewart, M. and Whiteley, P. (2001) *Britain (not) at the Polls,* BES discussion document, University of Essex

Cloonan, M. and Street, J. (1997) '*Politics and Popular Music: From Policing to Packaging*', Parliamentary Affairs, Vol.50, pp.223–34

Coleman, J. (1990) *Foundations of Social Theory,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA

Coleman, S. (2001a) 'The People Have Not Spoken', in V. Gibbons (ed.) *The People Have Spoken. UK. Elections: Who Votes and Who Doesn't,* Hansard Society Report, March 2001

Coleman, S. (ed.) (2001b) *Elections in the Age of the Internet,* Hansard, London

Constitution Unit (2001) 'Monitor' (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/consititutionunit/reports/files/monitr11.pdf)

Crewe, I. (1992) 'A Nation of Liars? Opinion Polls and the 1992 Election', *Parliamentary Affairs,* Vol.45, pp.475–95

Crewe, I., Fox, T. and Alt, J. (1992) 'Non-voting in British General Elections, 1966 – October 1974', in D. Denver and G. Hands (eds), *Issues and Controversies in British Electoral Behaviour,* Harvester Wheatsheaf, London

Criddle, B. (2001) 'MPs and Candidates', in D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2001,* Palgrave, Basingstoke

Crossman, R. (1977) *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister,* Hamish Hamilton, London

Curtice, J. and Jowell, R. (1997) 'Trust in the Political System', in R. Jowell *et al,* (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 14th Report. The End of Conservative Values?* Ashgate, Aldershot

Dalton, R. (1988) *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Western Democracies,* Chatham House, Chatham, NJ

Dalton, R. (1996) *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Western Democracies (2nd edn),* Chatham House, Chatham, NJ

Denver, D. and Hands, G. (1997a) 'Turnout', in P. Norris and N. Gavin (eds), *Britain Votes,* 1997, OUP, Oxford

Denver, D. and Hands, G. (1997b) *Modern Constituency Electioneering: Local campaigning in the 1992 General Election*, Frank Cass, London

Dionne, E. (1991) *Why Americans Hate Politics,* Simon & Schuster, New York, NY

Diplock, S. (ed.) (2001) 'None of the Above: Non-Voters and the 2001 Election', Hansard Society Briefing

Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy,* Harper & Row, New York, NY

DTLR (2001) 'Modernising Democracy Prospectus for Electoral Pilots – local elections 2002'

Dunleavy, P. (1991) *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice,* Harvester-Wheatsheaf, London

Edwards, L. and IPPR Public Involvement Team (2000) *'Politics Not Parties: Young People and Political Engagement – Findings from a Series of Discussion Groups with Young People',* IPPR, London

Electoral Commission (2001) *Election 2001: The Official Results,* Politicos, London

Eliasoph, N. (1998) *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Evans, G., Heath, A. and Park, A. (1999) 'Class: Labour as a Catch-All Party?', in G. Evans and P. Norris (eds), *Critical Elections: British Parties and Voters in Long-Term Perspective,* Sage, London

Farrell, D. (2001) *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction*, Palgrave, London

Ferejohn, J. and Fiorina, M. (1974) 'The Paradox of Not Voting', *American Political Science Review*, Vol.68, pp.525–36.

Fieldhouse, E. (1995) 'Thatcherism and the Changing Geography of Political Attitudes, 1964-87' *Political Geography,* Vol.14, pp.3–30.

Fielding, S. (2002) 'No-one Else to Vote For? Labour's Campaign', in A. Geddes and J. Tonge (eds), *Labour's Second Landslide,* Manchester University Press, Manchester

Fielding, S., Thompson, P. and Tiratsoo, N. (1995) *England Arise! The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain,* Manchester University Press, Manchester

Fowler, F. (1993) *Survey Research Methods,* Sage, London

Franklin, M. (1996) 'Electoral Participation', in L. LeDuc, R. Niemi and P. Norris (eds), *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA

Franklin, M. (2001) 'The Dynamics of Electoral Participation', in L. LeDuc, R. Niemi and P. Norris (eds), *Comparing Democracies 2,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA

Gosnell, H. (1930) *Why Europe Votes.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL

Grofman, B. (1993) 'Is Turnout the Paradox that Ate Rational Choice Theory?', in B. Grofman (ed.), *Information, Participation and Choice: An Economic Theory of Democracy in Perspective,* University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI

Hall, P. (1999) 'Social Capital in Britain', *British Journal of Political Science,* Vol.29, pp.417–61

Harbaugh, W. (1996) 'If People Vote Because They Like To, Then Why Do So Many of Them Lie?', *Public Choice, Vol.*89, pp.63-76

Harrison, L. (2002) 'Media Presentations of Young People in the 2001 British General Election', paper presented to the PSA Conference, Aberdeen, April

Harrison, L. and Deicke, W. (2000) 'Capturing the First Time Voters: An Initial Study of Political Attitudes Among Teenagers', *Youth and Policy,* Vol.67, pp.26–40

Harrop, M. (2001) 'An Apathetic Landslide: the British General Election of 2001', *Government and Opposition,* Vol.36, pp.295-313

Harrop, M. and Miller, W. (1987) *Elections and Voters: A Comparative Introduction,* MacMillan, London

Heath, A. and Park, A. (1997) 'Thatcher's Children?', in R. Jowell *et al,* (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 14th report. The End of Conservative Values?,* Ashgate, Aldershot

Heath, A. and Pierce, R. (1992) 'It Was Party Identification All Along: Question Order Effects on Reports of Party Identification in Britain', *Electoral Studies*, Vol.11, pp.93-105

Heath, A. and Taylor, B. (1999) 'New Sources of Abstention', in G. Evans and P. Norris, *Critical Elections: British Parties and Voters in Long Term Perspective,* Sage, London

Heath, A. and Topf, R. (1987) 'Political Culture', in R. Jowell *et al,* (eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 1987 Report. The End of Conservative Values?,* Ashgate, Aldershot

Henn, M. and Weinstein, M. (2002) 'Do You Remember the First Time? First Time Voters in the 2001 General Election', paper presented to the PSA Conference, Aberdeen, April

Henn, M., Weinstein, M. and Wring, D. (1999) 'Young People and Citizenship: A Study of Opinion in Nottinghamshire', Nottinghamshire County Council, October

Huggins, R. (2001) 'The Transformation of the Political Audience' in B. Axford and R. Huggins (eds), *New Media and Politics,* Sage, London

Inglehart, R. (1971) *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles amongst Western Publics,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ

International IDEA (1999) *Youth Voter Participation: Involving Today's Young in Tomorrow's Democracy,* IDEA, Stockholm

International IDEA (2002) *Voter Turnout Since 1945: A Global Report,* IDEA, Stockholm

International IDEA Democracy Forum (1999) *'What's So Great About Democracy? The Youth Speak Up!',* IDEA, Stockholm

Jennings, M. and Niemi, R. (1981) *Generations and Politics: A Panel Study of Young Adults and their Parents,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ

Johnston, R., MacAllister, I. and Pattie, C. (1999) 'The Funding of Constituency Party General Election Campaigns in Great Britain', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* Vol.17, pp.391–409

Johnston, R. and Pattie, C. (1998) 'Voter Turnout and Constituency Marginality: Geography and Rational Choice', *Area*, Vol.30, pp.38–48

Johnston, R., Pattie, C., Dorling, D. and Rossiter, D. (2001) *From Votes to Seats: The Operation of the UK Electoral System since 1945,* Manchester University Press, Manchester

Jones, P. and Hudson, J. (2000), 'Civic Duty and Expressive Voting: Is Virtue its Own Reward?', *Kyklos,* Vol.53, No.1, pp.3–16

Kalton, G. (1983) *Survey Methods in Social Investigations,* Longman, New York, NY

Kimberlee, R. (1998) 'Young People and the 1997 General Election', *Renewal,* Vol.6, p.2

Kinder, D. and Kieweit, D. (1981) 'Sociotropic Politics: The American Case', *British Journal of Political Science,* Vol.11, pp.129–61

King, A. (2001) 'Why a Poor Turnout Points to a Democracy in Good Health', *Daily Telegraph,* 21 May

Kurtz, N. (1983) *Introduction to Social Statistics,* McGraw Hill, London

Leonard, D. and Mortimore, R. (2001) *Elections in Britain: A Voter's Guide,* 4th edn, Palgrave, Basingstoke

Leonard, M. and Katwala, S. (1997) 'It was the young wot won it!', *Renewal*, Vol.5, pp.314

Lijphart, A. (1994) *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Study of 27 Democracies,* 1945–90, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Lijphart, A. (2001) 'Turnout' in R. Rose (ed.), *International Encyclopaedia of Elections,* Macmillan, New York

Lipset, S.M. and Rokkan, S. (1967) 'Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments', in S.M. Lipset, and S. Rokkan (eds), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives,* Macmillan, London

Local Government Association (2000) *'The Only Way Is Up: Increasing Turnout in Local Government Elections',* LGA, London

Local Government Association (2001) *The Way We Vote Now – Electoral Process for the 21st Century,* LGA, London

Lutz, J. (1991) 'Marginality, Major Third Parties and Turnout in England in the 1970s and 1980s: A Re-Analysis and Extension', *Political Studies,* Vol.39, pp.721–6

MacPherson, W., Cook, T., Sentamu, J. and Stone, R. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/4262.htm)

Marshall, B. (forthcoming) 'Restoring the X Factor', *Political Quarterly*

Martin, C. and Street, J. (1997) 'Popular Culture and Politics', *Politics,* Vol.18, p.1

Matsusaka, J.G. (1993) 'Election Closeness and Voter Turnout: Evidence from California Ballot Propositions', *Public Choice,* Vol.76, pp.313-34

Matsusaka, J.G. and Palda, F. (1993) 'The Downsian Model Meets the Ecological Fallacy', *Public Choice,* Vol.76, pp.855–878

McAllister, I. (2001) 'Explaining Turnout in the 2001 British General Election', *Representation,* Vol.38, pp.256-67

McAllister, I. and Wattenberg, M. (1995) Measuring Levels of Party Identification: Does Question Order Matter? *Public Opinion Quarterly,* Vol.59, pp.259-68

McLean, I. and Smith, J. (1994) 'The Poll Tax, the Electoral Register and the 1991 Census: An Update', in D. Broughton, D. Farrell, D. Denver and C. Rallings (eds), *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1994,* Frank Cass, London

Merrill III, S. and Grofman, B. (1999) *A Unified Theory of Voting: Directional and Proximity Spatial Models,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Miller, A., Gurin, P., Gurin, G. and Malanchuk, O. (1981) 'Group Consciousness and Political Participation', *American Journal of Political Science,* Vol.25, pp.494-511

Milner, H. (2001) *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work,* University of New England Press, Hanover

Moon, N. (1987) 'Dealing with Non-Response With a Political Component', NOP Research Group Paper, Statistics Canada Conference

Moon, N. (1996) 'Question Order Effects in Voting Intention Surveys', AAPOR, Annual Conference

Morgan, K. (1990) *The People's Peace*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

MORI (2002) 'Children's Attidues to Politics', (http://www.mori.com/polls/2002/atl.shtml)

Mulgan, G. and Wilkinson, H. (1997) 'Freedom's Children and the Rise of Generational Politics', in G. Mulgan (ed.), *Life after Politics: New Thinking for the Twenty-First Century,* Fontana, London

Newton, J. (2001) 'Can Citizenship Education Affect Voting Levels and Patterns?', in V. Gibbons (ed.), *The People Have Spoken. UK Elections: Who Votes and Who Doesn't,* Hansard Society Report, March

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984). *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL

Norpoth, H. (1992) *Confidence Regained: Economics, Mrs Thatcher and the British Worker,* University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI

Norris, P. (1995) 'Does Television Erode Social Capital? A Reply to Putnam', *PS: Political Science and Politics,* Vol.29, pp.474-80

Norris, P. (2001) 'Apathetic Landslide: The 2001 British general election', in P. Norris (ed.), *Britain Votes 2001,* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Norris, P, Curtice, J., Sanders, D., Scammell, M. and Semetko, H. (1999) *On Message: Communicating the Campaign,* Sage, London

Nye, J. (1997) *Why People Don't Trust Government,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA

Park, A. (1999) 'Young People and Political Apathy', *British Social Attitudes,* Vol.16, Ashgate, Aldershot

Park, A. (2000) 'The Generation Game', *British Social Attitudes,* Vol.17, Sage, London

Parry, G., Moyser, G. and Day, N. (1992) *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Pattie, C. and Johnston, R. (2001) A Low Turnout Landslide: Abstention at the British General Election of 1997, *Political Studies,* Vol.49, No.2, pp.286–305

Pattie, C., Seyd, P. and Whiteley, P. (2002) 'Citizenship and Civic Engagement: Attitudes and Behaviour', paper presented to the PSA Conference, Aberdeen, April

Pirie, M. and Worcester, R. (2000) 'The Big Turn-Off' (http://www.adamsmith.org.uk/policy/publications/pdf-files/big-turn-off.pdf)

Price, S. and Sanders, D. (1995) 'Economic Expectations and Voting Intentions in Post-War Britain: A Pooled Cross-Section Approach', *Political Studies,* Vol.43, pp.451–70.

Purdam, K., Fieldhouse, E., Kalra, V. and Russell, A. (2002) 'Voter Engagement Among Black and Minority Ethnic Communities', draft report and survey analysis for The Electoral Commission

Putnam, R. (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ

Putnam, R. (1995) 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America', *PS: Political Science and Politics,* Vol.28, pp.664-83

Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* Simon & Schuster, New York, NY

Rallings, C., Thrasher, M. and Downe, J. (1996) 'Enhancing Local Electoral Turnout: A Guide to Current Practice and Future Reform'; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York

Rallings, C.and Thrasher, M. (2001) 'Electoral Turnout – Theories, Trends and Predictions' in V. Gibbons (ed.), *The People Have Spoken. UK, Elections: Who Votes and Who Doesn't,* Hansard Society Report, March

Ranney, A. (ed.), (1985) *The Mass Media in Campaign '84: Articles from Public Opinion Magazine,* American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, DC

Roker, D. and Player, K. (1997) 'Challenging the Image: Young People as Volunteers and Campaigners', *Youth Action,* No. 60, Study for The Trust for the Study of Adolescence

Rosenstone, S. and Hansen, J. (1993) *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America,* MacMillan, New York, NY

Russell, A. (1999) 'First Time Voters and the Labour Landslide: The 1997 General Election', paper presented to the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Conference, Northampton, September

Russell, A. and Fieldhouse, E. (2001) *The Liberal Democrats: Structure, Strategy and Third Party Politics in Contemporary Britain,* Qualidata Archive

Russell, A., Fieldhouse, E. and MacAllister, I. (2002) 'The Anatomy of Liberal Support in Britain, 1974–1997', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* Vol.4, No.1

Russell, A., Pattie, C. and Johnston, R. (1992) 'Thatcher's Children: Exploring the Link Between Age and Political Attitudes', *Political Studies,* Vol.40, pp.742–50

Sanders, D., Burton, J. and Kneeshaw, J. (2002) 'Identifying the True Party Identifiers: A Question Wording Experiment', *Party Politics,* Vol.8, pp.193-205

Scammell, M. and Harrop, M. (2001) 'The Press Disarmed', in D. Butler and D. Kavanagh (eds), *The British General Election of 2001,* Palgrave, Basingstoke

Schuman, H. and Presser, S. (1981) *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys,* Academic Press, New York, NY

Scope (2001) *Polls Apart,* Scope, London

Skocpol, T. and Fiorina, M. (1999) 'Making Sense of the Civic Enagagement Debate', in T. Skocpol and M. Fiorina (eds), *Civic Enagagement in American Democracy,* Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC

Smith, J. and McLean, I. (1994) 'The Poll Tax and the Electoral Register', in A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice (eds), *Labour's Last Chance? The 1992 Election and Beyond,* Aldershot, Dartmouth

Smith, S. (1993) *Electoral Registration in 1991,* OPCS Social Survey Division, HMSO, London

Sparrow, N. (2001) 'Explaining Low Turnout in the 2001 Election', *Guardian*, 6 November

Stephenson, M. (2001) 'Voter Turnout – Apathy or Alienation?', in V. Gibbons (ed.), *The People Have Spoken. UK Elections: Who Votes and Who Doesn't,* Hansard Society Report, March

Swaddle, K. and Heath, A. (1989) 'Official and Reported Turnout in the British General Election of 1987', *British Journal of Political Science,* Vol.19, pp.537–51

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. and Brady, H. (1995) *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA

Watson, T. (2001) 'Abolishing the Democratic Deficit – Time for Compulsory Voting?', in V. Gibbons (ed.), *The People Have Spoken. UK Elections: Who Votes and Who Doesn't,* Hansard Society Report, March

White, C. (2001) 'Young People's Attitudes', in V. Gibbons (ed.), *The People Have Spoken. UK Elections: Who Votes and Who Doesn't.* Hansard Society Report, March

White, C. Bruce, S. and Ritchie, J. (2000) *Young People's Politics,* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York

Whiteley, P., Clarke, H. and Sanders, D. (2001) 'Turnout', in P. Norris (eds), *Britain Votes 2001,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Whiteley, P., Seyd, P and Richardson, J. (1994) *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership,* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Wilkinson, H. (1996) 'But Will They Vote? The Political Attitudes of Young People', *Children and Society,* Vol.10, No.3

Wolfinger, R. and Rosenstone, S. (1980) *Who Votes?,* Yale University Press, New Haven, CT

Worcester, R. (ed.), (1983) *Political Opinion Polling: An International Review,* Macmillan, London

Worcester, R. and Mortimore, R. (2001) *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide,* Politico's, London

Wring, D., Henn, M. and Weinstein, M. (1998) 'Lowering The Age of Assent: Youth and Politics in Britain', *Fabian Review,* Vol.110, No.4

Wring, D., Henn, M. and Weinstein, M. (1999) 'Young People and Contemporary Politics: Committed Scepticism or Engaged Cynicism?', *British Elections and Parties Review* Vol.9, pp.200-216

Young, H. (2002) 'Politicians Get Blamed for the Apathy of the Public', *Guardian,* 14 March

The
Electoral
Commission

The Electoral Commission is an independent
body established by Parliament. It aims to
ensure public confidence and participation in
the democratic process within the United
Kingdom through modernisation of the
electoral process, promotion of public
awareness of electoral matters and regulation
of political parties.