

The 2005 General Election in Great Britain

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Executive Summary

The UK general election was held on May 5th 2005. Although Labour secured its third successive victory, its share of the popular vote fell from 41 percent in 2001 to 35 percent and its Commons' majority was reduced from 165 to 66. Electoral turnout, at 61 percent, made a modest recovery from its post-war 'low' of 59 percent in 2001.

This report uses survey evidence to analyse the public's experiences of the 2005 general election and, in particular, to explain why some people decided to vote while others did not. The report is divided into six sections. Section 1 describes the extent to which the contemporary British electorate is engaged with politics and the electoral process. It also explores how far this engagement has changed in recent years. The evidence shows that, although turnout and voters' attachments to mainstream political parties have declined since the 1960s, people's interest in politics has not changed substantially over the same period.

Section 2 examines the relationship between voting in the general election and other forms of political and community activity. It focuses particularly on the extent to which non-voters are disproportionately likely to engage in non-electoral forms of political activity. In fact, non-voters do not consistently displace their political concerns into non-electoral forms of political activity. On the contrary, voters are significantly more likely than non-voters to take in part in a range of 'complementary' political activities such as protests and community action.

Section 3 outlines the ways in which socio-demographic factors such as age, ethnicity and geographical location affected whether or not people voted in the 2005 general election. The key finding here is that, as in 2001, age remains a crucial predictor of turnout – younger cohorts of voters are significantly less likely to vote than their older counterparts. A secondary finding is that there are no significant national variations in turnout patterns – Scottish and Welsh voters are virtually indistinguishable in this regard from voters in England.

Section 4 compares the experiences of the growing numbers of 'postal voters' in 2005 with those who voted 'in person' at polling stations. The evidence suggests that voters were broadly very satisfied with the administration of the electoral process, regardless of the way in which they voted. This section also examines the explanations that voters and non-voters themselves gave for why they decided (not) to vote and, where appropriate, looks at the reasons voters gave for choosing postal ballots. Voters, interestingly, cited both 'duty' and 'rights' as reasons for wanting to vote. Among non-voters, ironically, the most popular reason cited for non-voting was that the individual 'intended to vote' but was 'prevented from voting by circumstances on the day'.

Section 5 stands back from voters' own accounts of their behaviour and, instead, identifies a number of common-sense explanations, rooted in social science theory, of why people participate in elections. Each of these explanations is tested systematically against the available survey evidence. A statistical model is developed

that enables the relative importance of each explanatory factor to be carefully evaluated. (For example, net of all other effects, someone who was personally contacted by any political party during the election campaign was roughly 7 percent more likely to vote in the general election than a similar person who was not contacted personally.) The evidence indicates that the decision to vote is a combination of rational calculation about the likely costs and benefits of voting, the exercise of moral judgement about the duties of the citizen, and the contingent effects of personal campaigning by the political parties. The evidence also suggests that in most important respects postal voters are indistinguishable from 'in person' voters – the only (unsurprising) exceptions being that the very old and the disabled are more likely to make use of postal ballots.

Finally, Section 6 considers the impact that the election, as a democratic event, appears to have exerted on people's attitudes towards the political system as a whole. For the most part, these effects are very modest indeed.

The bulk of the evidence presented in this report is taken from a two-wave panel survey, in which over 4700 randomly selected British adults were interviewed both before and immediately after the 2005 general election. The survey, which has a weighted N of 3979, used a random probability-based design and the post-election interviews were carried out face-to-face in people's homes in May, June and July 2005. The results reported include respondents interviewed before July 10th 2005. Note that the survey excludes Northern Ireland, where polling methods are traditionally different from those adopted in Great Britain. The survey was designed explicitly to include representative numbers of voters and non-voters, and has a weighted N of 3979. The proportion of non-voters in the 2005 general election, given that turnout was 61 percent, was 39 percent. In the survey, reported non-voting was 33 percent compared with a reported turnout rate of 67 percent. This discrepancy is typical of random probability post-election surveys, for two main reasons: (1) voters are more likely to agree to be interviewed than non-voters; and (2) some people claim to have voted when in fact they have not. This discrepancy does not affect the validity of the statistical analysis that is reported here. On the contrary, any attempt to 'weight' the data by turnout prior to analysis would itself bias any statistical findings suggested by the data.

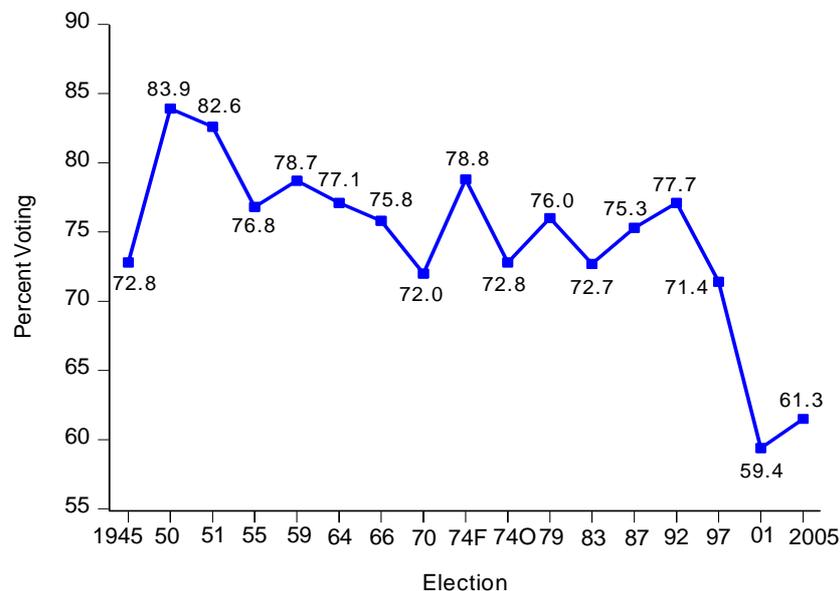
The first, pre-election, interviews were conducted in February and March 2005. The second, post-election interviews were carried out in May, June and July. The results from this survey are compared, where appropriate, with evidence from similar surveys conducted at the time of previous general elections. The panel survey referred to here was part of the 2005 British Election Study at the University of Essex. The Economic and Social Research Council and by the Electoral Commission jointly funded the survey. The National Centre for Social Research conducted the fieldwork.

1. Public engagement with politics and the electoral process: trends in turnout, party identification and political interest

Turnout

After the 2001 general election, concern was expressed in a variety of circles about the sharp decline in electoral turnout – the percentage of eligible voters who actually vote in general elections – that occurred between 1997 and 2001. Figure 1.1 reports the variations in general election turnout between 1945 and 2005. As the figure shows, until 1997, UK general election turnout was relatively stable and invariably exceeded 70 percent. The decline to 59 percent in 2001 raised fears that, if the pattern continued, elected governments in the future might find it increasingly difficult to claim a mandate from the electorate for their stated policy programmes. In an important respect, these fears were probably exaggerated. It seems likely that at least a part of the turnout decline between 1997 and 2001 was the result of the widely perceived one-sided nature of the contest between the major parties competing for government. Almost continuously throughout the 1997 parliament, Labour had held a clear opinion poll lead over its main Westminster rivals. Indeed, according to the ‘poll of polls’, in the six months immediately before the general election, Labour averaged a 12-point lead over the Conservatives. Unsurprisingly in these circumstances, some voters – aware of the general picture if not of the precise opinion poll gap – concluded that the outcome of the election was a forgone conclusion and opted not to vote at all, thereby depressing turnout.

Figure 1.1: Turnout in UK General Elections, 1945-2005



Source: UK Election Statistics 1918-2004, House of Commons Research Paper 04/61, p. 17; General Election 2005, House of Commons Research Paper 05/33, p. 1.

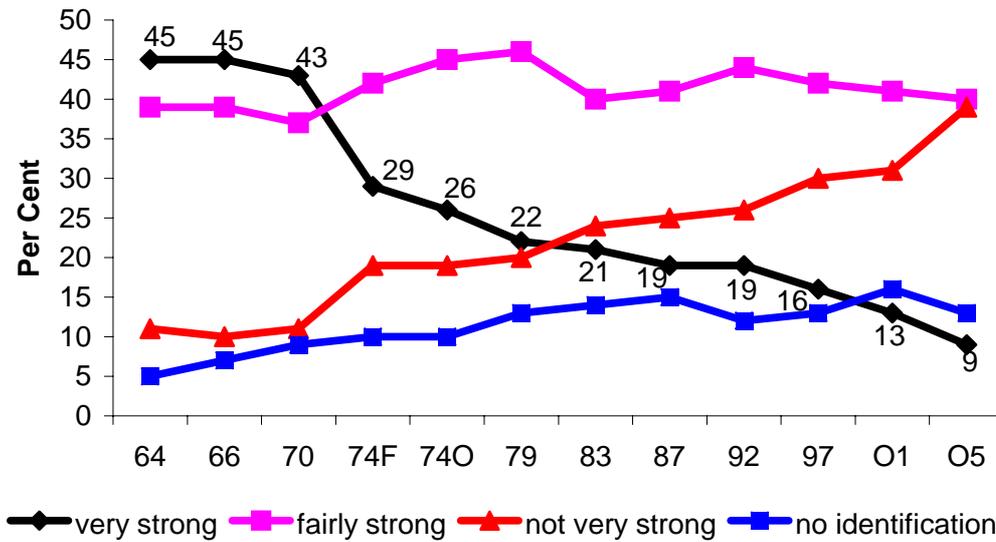
A simple statistical model of general election turnout throughout the post-war period – a statistical explanation of the graph shown in Figure 1.1 – is presented in Appendix 1. The model shows that, although there has been a gradual trend decline in turnout since 1945, a crucial factor that affects turnout is the gap between the vote intention ratings of Labour and the Conservatives, as recorded by the major opinion polls, in the month preceding the election. In 2005, the gap was much narrower than it had been in 2001 – though Labour was typically ahead in most polls by a margin of less than five percentage points. Accordingly, turnout increased modestly in May 2005. A closer contest in the next general election promises to increase turnout still further, though for reasons outlined below it seems unlikely to recover to the pre-2001 average of 75 percent. The precise factors that affect individual citizens' decisions to vote or not to vote are discussed in some detail in sections 3 and 5 below. We simply note here that the turnout decline that was observed in 2001 was not repeated in 2005 – and that the small upward trajectory in the most recent general election is at least partly explicable in terms of the more competitive nature of the national election contest itself.

Party identification

The act of voting is clearly not the only way in which voters and non-voters can engage with the political system. One of the key ways in which political engagement has changed in Britain over the last 40 years concerns 'party identification'. Since the 1960s, UK electoral analysts have asked voters about the sense of attachment that they have to particular political parties. The standard survey question they are asked is: 'Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, (Scottish National/Plaid Cymru) or what?' Respondents have the option of indicating 'none' or of specifying the particular party that they 'identify' with. If they indicate a party, they are then asked about the strength of their 'identification' with it.

Party identification matters because it predisposes individuals to vote for the party with which they 'identify' and acts as a sort of perceptual filter for evaluating political information. I tend to view the pronouncements and explanations that are proffered by 'my party' more sympathetically than those issued by others – at least up to the point where I find my party saying so many things with which I disagree that I cease to regard it as 'my party', and therefore stop 'identifying' with it. The intriguing long-term feature of party identification in Britain has been its progressive decline. In the mid 1960s, almost half of the British electorate identified 'very strongly' with one of the three national parties – and most of those very strong identifiers associated themselves with either the Conservatives or Labour. As Figure 1.2 shows, the pattern changed markedly after 1970. The percentage of very strong identifiers fell to 29 in 1974 and then continued to decline progressively. By 2001, only 13 percent of the electorate could be classified as very strong identifiers. It is also clear from the figure that this process of 'partisan dealignment' continued through to 2005, when only 9 percent of respondents could be so classified. Even taking into account the percentage of 'fairly strong' identifiers, the number of fairly and very strong partisans combined fell from 84 percent in 1964 to 54 percent in 2001 and to 49 percent in 2005.

Figure 1.2: Levels of Party Identification in Britain, 1964-2005



These figures on declining partisanship are of obvious importance to the political parties themselves with regard to their efforts to secure votes at election time. Strong identifiers do not take a lot of persuading in order to vote for ‘their’ party. As the pool of strong identifiers shrinks, the established parties have to campaign harder among the swelling ranks of the less committed in order to maintain vote share. But there is a further possible implication of partisan dealignment for the democratic process as a whole. Political parties are central to the operation of democratic parliamentary government – combining different interests into policy programmes, forming a government that is answerable to the legislature, and constituting an opposition that tries to hold the government to account until the next election. The potential problem is that a declining attachment to the main parties could degenerate into indifference to, or even hostility towards, parties in general. The evidence from the 2001 British Election Study suggests that most voters in fact continue to take a relatively benign view of political parties in general. More detailed analysis of the 2005 data, not yet completed, will enable an assessment to be made of whether British voters, in an era of dramatically weakened partisanship, are beginning to take a more critical view of parties generally. If they are, then further serious consideration may need to be given to institutional reforms, such as a proportionally elected House of Commons, that might reinvigorate the party system itself.

Interest in Politics

Analysts of elections frequently have to remind themselves that many people are not particularly interested in either politics or elections. Predictably, as we show in section 5 below, people who are politically uninterested are significantly less likely to bother to vote in general elections. But is there any evidence that the public is becoming less interested in politics over time?

Consider, first, the evidence from the 2001 and 2005 British Election Studies. In both studies, respondents were asked: How much interest do you generally have in what is

going on in politics? The response options and the percentage of respondents selecting each of them in 2001 and 2005 are shown in Table 1.1. As the table shows, only around one third of people in both election years had ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of interest in politics. But on each occasion, over two-thirds expressed at least some political interest – and more people appear to have been interested in 2005 than in 2001, a reflection, perhaps, of the more closely contested nature of the election that was noted earlier.

Table 1.1: Interest in Politics in 2001 and 2005

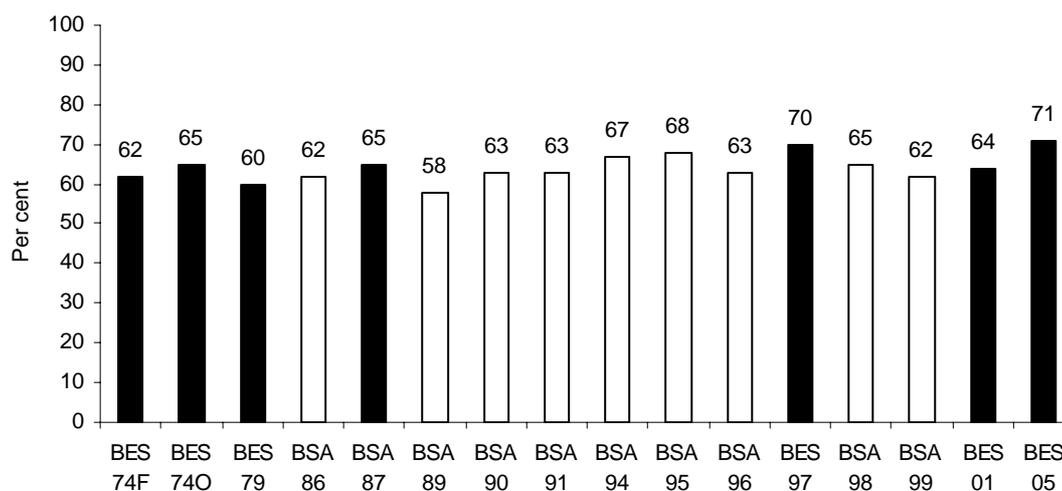
Question: How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics?

	2001 (%)	2005 (%)
A great deal	8	7
Quite a lot	21	26
Some	35	38
Not very much	26	24
None at all	9	6

Source: British Election Study Post-Election Survey, 2001 and 2005

How do these findings compare with earlier evidence? Since 1974, the British Election Study (BES) and the British Social Attitudes Study have periodically asked their respondents the same question as that shown in Table 1.1. Figure 1.3 reports the percentage of respondents who expressed at least some interest in politics on each occasion. Two obvious conclusions are suggested by the figure. First, interest in politics tends to be higher in general election years than at other times. Second, and more importantly, the public’s interest in politics has been remarkably stable for over thirty years. Indeed, the figure of 71 percent interest for 2005 is the highest recorded since 1974. Contemporary British citizens may not appear to be very interested in politics – but they are no different from their predecessors in this regard.

Figure 1.3: Levels of Interest in Politics, 1974-2005



Percentage of respondents with at least some interest in politics, 1974-2005.

Source: 1974-2005 BES post-election surveys and 1989-99 British Social Attitudes Survey. Shaded areas indicate election years.

2. Voting, non-voting and other forms of political activity

Non-voters are sometimes characterised as people who tend to be alienated from the liberal democratic political system and who are more prepared than voters to engage in ‘unconventional’, non-electoral forms of participation. How plausible is this characterisation? The BES surveys in 2001 and 2005 asked their respondents a series of questions about how likely they were to engage in a range of different political and community activities ‘over the next few years’. Respondents were asked to indicate the chances that they would engage in each activity on 0-10 probability scale. The putative activities ranged from voting in European and local elections to participating in community organisations, protest demonstrations and organised boycotts of goods. The precise activities involved are listed in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Probability of Engaging in Political and Community Action, 2001 and 2005

Question: Now, a few questions about how active you are in politics and community affairs. Let’s think about the next few years. Using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, how likely is it that you will....

	<i>Average Score 2001</i>	<i>Average Score 2005</i>
Vote in the next election for the European parliament	6.11	6.23
Vote in the next local government election	7.84	7.13
Work actively with a group of people to address a public issue or solve a problem	3.48	3.48
Participate in a protest, like a rally or a demonstration, to show your concern about a public issue or problem	2.77	2.74
Be active in a voluntary organisation, like a community association, a charity group, or a sports club	4.64	4.69
Give money to a political party	1.19	1.30
Try to convince someone else how to vote	1.67	2.36
Work for a party or a candidate in an election campaign	1.22	1.25
Discuss politics with family or friends	5.02	5.49
Join a boycott, that is, refuse to buy a particular product or to shop at a particular store	4.71	4.20

Source: BES 2001 and 2005. Cell entries are the average score on the 0-10 scale for each item. 2001 N=2440; 2005 N=3979.

The figures in Table 2.1 show the average scores on the 0-10 probability scale for each activity, as measured in 2001 and in 2005. For example, the top left cell of the table shows that in 2001 the average probability score (on the 0-10 scale) for participating in the next European elections was 6.11. In 2005, the equivalent figure

was 6.23. The figures have no absolute meaning in their own right. However, they can be compared, both over time and across activities in order to see what kind of activity is on average most (or least) likely.

Comparison of the entries in the columns of Table 2.1 suggests that the public's propensity to engage in these various activities was stable over the four years 2001 to 2005. For example, the average score on the 0-10 scale for 'participating in a protest or demonstration' in 2001 was 2.77; the equivalent figure in 2005 was 2.74. Even more marked, the average scores for 'working with a community group to solve a common problem' were identical, at 3.48, on both occasions. The over-time stability of all of the measures strongly reinforces confidence that the questions tap genuine predispositions among the British electorate.

Unsurprisingly, the table shows that the average scores were *highest* in both 2001 and 2005 for the two *voting* measures. The average score for participating in local elections in 2001 and 2005 were 7.84 and 7.13 respectively; for voting in the European elections, the equivalent scores were 6.11 and 6.23. In contrast, the lowest average scores were for giving money to (1.19 in 2001; 1.30 in 2005) or working for (1.22 in 2001; 1.25 in 2005) a political party.

The evidence presented in Table 2.2 shows the different propensities to engage in the various political activities among voters and non-voters in 2005. The first column reports the average scores on the 0-10 scales for people who did not vote in the 2005 general election; the second column reports the average scores for people who did. The first two rows of the table present the obvious information that people who voted in the general election are also much more likely to vote in European and local elections. For example, among people who voted in the general election, the average probability score for voting in the next local elections is 8.01 – compared with an equivalent local election average score of 4.42 for non-voters. The first two rows of the table, then, tell us what is already well known – that people who vote in general elections are also more likely to vote in other elections.

What of activities other than voting? If non-voters are proportionately disillusioned with conventional electoral politics, are they more prepared to engage in non-electoral forms of political action than their voting counterparts? The evidence reported in Table 2.2 shows, overwhelmingly, that they are not. On every single item shown in the table, non-voters present a lower average propensity to take political or community action than do voters. It might be expected that voters would be more likely to give money to a political party or to try to persuade someone else how to vote (average scores: 1.39 and 2.62 respectively) than non-voters (average scores: 1.10 and 1.84 respectively). But exactly the same pattern applies to working with a community group (average score: 3.62 for voters; 3.20 for non-voters); boycotting goods (average 4.53 for voters; 3.52 for non-voters); and even for protesting (voters average is 4.85; non-voters is 4.37). Moreover, in every single case, the difference between voters and non-voters is statistically significant at the .0001 level – there is less than one chance in 10,000 that these observed differences could result from random fluctuations in the data. In short, the evidence shown in Table 2.2 comprehensively refutes the idea that non-voters are somehow displacing their political concerns and acting politically in a disproportionate way in non-electoral

Table 2.2: Probability of Engaging in Political and Community Action, 2005, Voters Compared with Non-Voters

	<i>Average Score Non-Voters</i>	<i>Average Score Voters</i>
Vote in the next election for the European parliament	4.01	7.34
Vote in the next local government election	4.42	8.01
Work actively with a group of people to address a public issue or solve a problem	3.20	3.62
Participate in a protest, like a rally or a demonstration, to show your concern about a public issue or problem	2.47	2.87
Be active in a voluntary organisation, like a community association, a charity group, or a sports club	4.37	4.85
Give money to a political party	1.10	1.39
Try to convince someone else how to vote	1.84	2.62
Work for a party or a candidate in an election campaign	0.98	1.38
Discuss politics with family or friends	4.37	6.06
Join a boycott, that is, refuse to buy a particular product or to shop at a particular store	3.52	4.53

Source: BES 2005. Cell entries are the average score on the 0-10 scale for each item. Question as in Table 2.2. N=3979

arenas. On the contrary, non-voters in general are significantly less likely than voters to engage in all forms of political activity, electoral or otherwise.

Note, however, that this general pattern derives from viewing non-voters as a single, amorphous group. It was noted earlier that non-voters constituted some 33% of the 2005 BES sample. There are obviously a number of ways in which ‘non-voters’ could be differentiated from one another – in terms of age, gender, ethnicity or region to mention but a few. In fact the implications of many of these possible differentiating factors are explored in sections 3 and 5 below. However, one potential source of differentiation is worth pursuing at this stage: non-voters’ degree of satisfaction with the workings of democracy.

The 2005 BES survey asked its respondents: ‘On the whole, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in this country?’ In response, 6 percent of respondents said they were ‘very satisfied’; 62 percent were ‘fairly satisfied’; 25 percent ‘a little dissatisfied’; and 6 percent ‘very dissatisfied’. It is possible that those non-voters who are ‘very dissatisfied’ with British democracy are distinctively different from those who are either satisfied or ‘a little dissatisfied’. Indeed, it is possible that they reject parliamentary democracy but still seek to find ways of acting politically. If this were the case, we would expect that ‘very dissatisfied non-voters’ would be more likely than comparable groups to seek to express their political disaffection in non-electoral ways. In short, we might expect

them to be more likely to engage in some of the non-electoral activities shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.3 considers only those 6 percent of respondents who expressed themselves very dissatisfied with the workings of contemporary British democracy. Within that group, it compares voters with non-voters in terms of their preparedness to engage in non-electoral political and community action. It is clear from the table that on all counts, in contrast to the above speculation, the ‘very dissatisfied voters’ are much more active than the ‘very dissatisfied non-voters. Specifically, the dissatisfied voters are *more* likely than the dissatisfied non-voters to engage in group activity, protest, voluntary associations, political discussion and boycotts. Again, even though much smaller numbers of respondents are involved because we are considering a small subset of the sample, all of these differences are statistically significant. The key point is that even when we consider only those non-voters who very dissatisfied with democracy, we find no evidence that they are more inclined than similarly dissatisfied voters to engage in non-electoral political action. In short, there is no distinctive group of disaffected non-voters ‘out there’ – not even a small one – that systematically channels its political disaffection into non-electoral politics.

Table 2.3: Probability of Engaging in Non-Electoral Political and Community Action, Voters Compared with Non-Voters; Respondents Very Dissatisfied with Democracy Only

	<i>Average Score Dissatisfied Non-Voters</i>	<i>Average Score, Dissatisfied Voters</i>
Work actively with a group of people to address a public issue or solve a problem	3.20	3.62
Participate in a protest, like a rally or a demonstration, to show your concern about a public issue or problem	2.47	2.87
Be active in a voluntary organisation, like a community association, a charity group, or a sports club	4.37	4.85
Discuss politics with family or friends	4.37	6.06
Join a boycott, that is, refuse to buy a particular product or to shop at a particular store	3.52	4.53

Source: BES 2005. Cell entries are the average score on the 0-10 scale for each item. Question as in Table 2.2. N=242; 121 non-voters, 121 voters. Includes only respondents who are ‘very dissatisfied’ in answer to the question ‘On the whole, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in this country?’.

3. The socio-demographics of voting and non-voting in 2005

As the number of non-voters has risen in recent general elections, increasing attention has been paid to the correlates of voting *versus* non-voting. One obvious set of criteria to examine is people's socio-demographic characteristics – their age, sex, ethnicity and so on. Sometimes these socio-demographic correlates are presented almost as explanations in themselves for why people choose to vote or not vote. For example, younger people tend to vote less than their older counterparts. It can be argued that their very youth means that politics intrudes far less in their lives than the rival attractions of popular culture and entertainment, and that as a result they participate less in electoral politics. More typically, however, socio-demographic variations in voting patterns are seen as providing important descriptive, contextual information. Policymakers concerned with issues of equal access to political resources can use this information. As we show below, it can also be incorporated into statistical models that explicitly seek to 'explain' why people vote or not.

Research prior to the 2005 general election established a fairly standard socio-demographic profile of the typical voter. In comparison with non-voters, voters tended to be disproportionately middle-aged and old rather than young; female; from white rather than from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities; from non-manual rather than manual occupational class backgrounds; relatively well off; and relatively well educated. The one exception to this pattern appeared to be in the 2001 general election when ethnic minority respondents were in fact more likely to vote than their white counterparts.

Table 3.1 reports the socio-demographic breakdown of voting and non-voting in the 2005 general election. The 'baseline' figure for evaluating all potential socio-demographic effects is given at the foot of the table. This shows that among our survey respondents, 67 percent were voters and 33 percent non-voters. Among all respondents, 58 percent voted in person and 9 percent voted by post. (Note that these latter two figures mean that 86 percent of *voters* did so in person, while 14 percent of voters did so by post).

The first column of the table shows the proportion of each socio-economic sub-group as a percentage of the voting age population. For example, 19 percent of the 2005 BES survey respondents were aged between 18 and 24; 20 percent were between 25 and 34; and so on. The second column of the table shows the percentage of respondents in the sub-group who voted. For example, 45 percent of 18-24 year olds voted in 2005. The third column shows the corresponding percentage that did not vote – fully 55 percent in the case of the 18-24 sub-group. (It is evident that the numbers in columns 2 and 3 must sum to 100). The fourth and fifth columns report the breakdown, respectively, between voting 'in person' at polling stations and voting by post.

Age. Consider, first, Panel [a] of Table 3.1. There are enormous differences among the different age groups (or 'cohorts') in terms of their pattern of voting and non-voting. As noted above, only 45 percent of the youngest (18-24) age group actually voted, a potentially alarming figure. Moving up through the different age groups, the proportion of voters gradually increases: to 55 percent among the 25-34 cohort; to 73 percent among the 35-44 group; and rising to 87 percent among the over 65s. The

Table 3.1: Socio-Demographic Breakdown of Voting and Non-voting in the 2005 General Election

		<i>All Respondents</i>	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Non Voters</i>	<i>In person Voters</i>	<i>Postal Voters</i>
[a] Age	18-24	19	45	55	39	6
	25-34	20	52	48	47	5
	34-44	19	71	29	64	7
	45-54	15	76	24	69	8
	55-64	12	84	16	73	12
	65+	15	87	13	65	22
	Under 45	59	56	44	50	6
	45+	41	82	18	68	14
[b] Gender	Male	48	66	34	58	10
	Female	52	67	33	57	9
[c] Ethnicity	Minority	7	56	44	49	7
	White	93	68	32	58	9
[d] Class	Manual	31	57	43	48	8
	Non-Man	69	71	29	62	9
[e] Poverty	Under £15k	5	49	51	58	7
	Over £15k	95	68	32	42	9
[f] Country	Wales	5	68	32	58	10
	Scotland	9	67	33	60	6
	England	86	67	33	57	10
[g] Disability	Not disabled	81	66	34	59	7
	Disabled	19	69	31	52	17
[h] Education	To A-level	69	63	37	53	9
	A-level +	31	76	24	67	9
ALL (%)		100	67	33	58	9

Source: BES 2005. N=3979.

Cell entries are percentages. In each row, voters plus non-voters sum to 100; postal voters plus in-person voters sum to the percentage of voters.

In order to interpret the entries, consider the first row. The figure 19 means that 19% of all respondents are aged 18-24; 45 means that 45% of the 18-24s were voters. 55% of 18-24s were non-voters. Among the 18-24s, 39% voted in person and 6% voted by post.

simplified age group comparison that appears at the bottom of Panel [a] shows that among the under 45s as a whole turnout was only 56 percent, compared with a figure for the 45+ group of 83 percent. This marked differential in age group turnout clearly requires further exploration. We pursue this task below – after considering the other, less pronounced, socio-demographic patterns shown in Table 3.1. One further feature of Panel [a] requires brief attention, however. It is clear from the entries in Column 5 that voters made increasing use of postal ballots, as they got older. Well under 10 percent of the four youngest cohorts voted by post. The figure for the 55-64s rose to 12 percent; and for the over 65s to 22 percent. This pattern almost certainly reflects the difficulty that many older voters anticipate they will experience in trying to get to the polling station on election day. The over 65s, at least, clearly take full advantage of the opportunities for postal voting that recent legislation has allowed.

Gender. Panel [b] of Table 3.1 reports the pattern of voting and non-voting for men and women. The figures suggest virtually no gender differential in turnout in the 2005 election. Some 66 percent of men voted compared with 67 percent of women. The difference is not statistically significant. There similarly appears to be no significant gender difference in the take-up of postal ballots: 10 percent of men voted by post compared with 9 percent of women.

Ethnicity. Panel [c] describes the voting pattern of white versus ethnic minority respondents. Note that in a survey that aims to be representative of the population as whole, the overall figure of 7 percent ethnic minority respondents shown in column 1 is broadly in line with that reported in the 2001 Census. The relatively small number of ethnic minority respondents, however, means that it is not possible to break down the behaviour of BME respondents into more specific ethnic minority groups. A companion study discusses these within-group differences in a separate report. The simple message of the results shown in Panel [c] is that Britain's ethnic minority citizens were noticeably less likely to vote than their white counterparts: 56 percent of BME respondents voted compared with a figure of 68 percent among whites. However, there was not much difference between the two groups in terms of the take-up of postal votes: a 7 percent take-up rate among BME respondents compared with 9 percent for whites.

Class. Panel [d] provides a breakdown of voting/non-voting by occupational class. The results are very much in line with findings from previous elections. Manual workers and their families in 2005 were significantly less likely to vote than people from non-manual occupational backgrounds. Some 57 percent of manual workers voted, compared with a figure of 71 percent for non-manual workers. Whether this is a genuine 'class effect' or the incidental consequence of some correlate of occupational class is at this stage difficult to determine. However, we explore this issue more fully in section 5 below.

Income. Panel [e] considers the simple proposition that 'the very poor' might simply lack the resources to be able to vote at the same rate as their richer counterparts. This obviously begs the question as to how to define 'poverty'. Whilst recognising the enormous difficulties of arriving at a satisfactory definition, we define it here for

practical purposes as having a total household income, from all sources, of less than £15,000 per year – a figure that covers some 5 percent of our respondents. It is clear from Panel [e] that poverty defined in this way is associated with low turnout. Among our ‘poor’ respondents, turnout was 49 percent, compared with 68 percent among the ‘not poor’. As with occupational class, this apparent effect may be explained by other factors – such as the fact that poor people are disproportionately from ethnic minority backgrounds or old, or both. Again, this is an issue that is explored in section 5.

Education. Panel [f] of Table 3.1 examines the relationship between turnout and education. The reported results distinguish between ‘up to and including A-level’ and ‘post A-level’ qualifications – though a similar pattern obtains with more fine-grained measures of education. The impact of education on turnout is clear. Among those with post A-level qualifications, turnout was 76 percent, compared with 63 percent among the less qualified group. One of the incidental features of the efforts of successive governments to boost the numbers of students in further and higher education may have been to bolster general election turnout.

Disability. Panel [g] describes an increasingly important socio-demographic variable: disability. Just under one-fifth of the UK population regard themselves as disabled in some way. Given the independence, mobility and access difficulties that some disabled people still experience, it might be expected that disabled people would be less likely to vote than those without disabilities. Certainly, more disabled people (17 percent) opted for postal ballots in 2005 than did non-disabled people (7 percent). In part thanks to this high level of ‘disabled’ postal voting, disabled people as a whole exhibited a higher level of general election turnout (69 percent) than did the non-disabled (66 percent). This relationship, of course, takes no account of other factors that affect turnout. Nonetheless, it suggests that, in simple terms, disability is not necessarily a bar to equal electoral participation.

Country. Finally, Panel [h] reports the pattern of voting/non-voting in England, Wales and Scotland. The results indicate that the take-up of postal voting was marginally lower in Scotland (6 percent) than in England and in Wales (both 10 percent). They also show that reported turnout levels were virtually identical in all three countries: turnout in England and Scotland was 67 percent and 68 percent in Wales. It seems likely in these circumstances that the same factors that impel people to vote (or not vote) in general elections operate similarly in all three countries.

It is clear from all of the evidence presented in Table 3.1 that there are significant socio-demographic variations in turnout. Age, ethnicity, occupational class, poverty, education and disability status are all correlated with people’s propensities to vote.

But of all these effects, clearly the most striking is that of age. Data from the British Election Study allow this relationship to be analysed back to the mid 1960s. Table 3.2 shows how non-voting has varied, by age cohort, since the general election of 1964. (Note that the age of majority was reduced to 18 in 1970). Relatively high levels of non-voting are indicated in **bold** in the table. It is clear from the table that the very youngest cohort of voters has been relatively unlikely to vote since the mid 1960s. However, the loss of interest in voting appears to have begun seriously to afflict the 18-24 cohort in the 1990s. Voting among the 18-24s fell from 24 percent in 1992 to

38 percent in 1997. Since then it has increased progressively with each general election. In 1997, moreover, the impetus to non-voting also spread to the next cohort two cohorts – in that year the 25-34s increased to 32 percent non-voting while the 35-44s increased to 22 percent. In 2001, some 44 percent of 35-44s failed to vote. By 2005, this pattern had even begun to affect the 45-54 cohort, 24 percent of whom failed to vote.

Table 3.2: Non-Voting in British General Elections, 1964-2005

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
1964	11	19	8	9	10	9	16	11
1966	33	21	12	11	14	14	19	16
1970	28	24	18	15	15	11	13	18
1974f	21	14	12	9	8	10	15	12
1974o	27	19	13	10	11	11	10	15
1979	27	18	15	9	8	9	16	14
1983	26	23	13	11	11	16	16	17
1987	23	15	14	8	10	10	10	14
1992	24	13	12	8	13	10	13	13
1997	38	32	22	15	11	11	16	21
2001	46	44	33	21	21	14	14	29
2005	55	47	29	24	16	15	11	29

Source: BES, 1964-2001

What all this indicates is that the effective British electorate is becoming progressively older, election by election. Moreover, it seems unlikely that this is a ‘life cycle effect’ in which currently young non-voters will turn into voters as they get older. On the contrary, the spread of relatively high levels of non-voting to all three of the younger cohorts suggests that, over the last 30 years or so, habits of non-voting acquired in youth have tended to be carried forward into middle age – and will perhaps continue even into old age. If this is indeed the case, then unless remedial steps can be taken to address the abstention tendencies of the current generation of under 45s, turnout looks set to continue trending downwards in the future. In order to identify what that ‘remedial action’ might be, it is necessary to establish why people choose to vote or not to vote. It is this task that we pursue in the next two sections.

4. Voters' experience of the election and people's explanations of their own voting and non-voting behaviour

We saw in the previous section that some 67 percent of our survey respondents voted in the general election. Of these voters, 86 percent voted in person and 14 percent voted by post. What were their conclusions about the mode of voting that they chose?

The BES survey asked people who voted in person a series of questions about the administration of the election. The results are shown in Table 4.1. They suggest that in-person voters were satisfied with all major aspects of the process. In terms of convenience, 83 percent found voting 'very convenient' and 14 percent found it 'fairly convenient'. Only 1 percent found voting in person 'fairly inconvenient' and not a single person found it 'very inconvenient'. A similarly glowing set of responses is evident in relation to the assistance that people received at polling stations. Some 69 percent of voters were 'very satisfied' with the assistance they received, 20 percent were 'fairly satisfied', and only 2 percent dissatisfied.

Table 4.1: In-Person Voters' Experience of the Administration of the Election

Question: How convenient was voting in person at a polling station?

	%
Very convenient	83
Fairly convenient	14
Neither convenient nor inconvenient	1
Fairly inconvenient	1
Very inconvenient	0

Source BES 2005, N=2286

Question: When you voted in person, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the guidance and assistance provided by the staff in the polling station?

	%
Very satisfied	69
Fairly satisfied	20
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	9
Fairly dissatisfied	1
Very dissatisfied	1

Source: BES 2005, N=2282

Postal voters were asked a slightly different set of questions, to reflect the different character of the process. Table 4.2 reports the results. The results show high levels of satisfaction with the postal vote application process. 65 percent of postal voters were 'very satisfied' with the process; and 28 percent 'fairly satisfied'. Only two percent were dissatisfied. In terms of actually completing the postal ballots, 62 percent were 'very satisfied' and 28 percent (again) 'fairly satisfied'. Some 6 percent were dissatisfied with the instructions, though it should be noted that this figure represents the views of only 20 people.

Table 4.2: Postal Voters' Experience of the Administration of the Election

Question: How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the process of applying for a postal vote?

	%
Very satisfied	65
Fairly satisfied	28
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	5
Fairly dissatisfied	1
Very dissatisfied	1

Source BES 2005, N=362

Question: How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the instructions and advice given about how to complete a postal vote?

	%
Very satisfied	62
Fairly satisfied	28
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	5
Fairly dissatisfied	5
Very dissatisfied	1

Source: BES 2005, N=366

Both in-person and postal voters were asked their views as to how far their chosen method of voting was safe from fraud and effective at preserving the secrecy of the vote itself. The results are displayed in Tables 4.3 and 4.4.

Table 4.3 Perceptions of the Safety from Fraud of In-Person and Postal Voting

Question: When it comes to voting being safe from fraud or abuse, would you say that voting [in person /by post] is:

	In Person Voters %	Postal Voters %
Very safe	56	16
Fairly safe	37	50
Neither safe nor unsafe	4	14
Fairly unsafe	2	17
Very unsafe	1	4

Source BES 2005. N for in-person voters is 2228; for postal voters 361

As Table 4.3 shows, there is clearly a difference of view about the safety and effectiveness of the two modes among those that used them in 2005. Some 56 percent of in-person voters believe that their chosen method is 'very safe' from fraud, compared with only 16 percent of postal voters. When the 'very safe' and 'fairly safe' categories are combined, in-person voting receives a positive response of 93 percent – compared with 66 percent for postal voting. The corollary is that while only

3 percent of in-person voters consider ‘their’ mode to be ‘unsafe’ from fraud, fully 21 percent of postal voters express concern about the dangers of fraud with postal voting.

Table 4.4 Perceptions of the Safety from Fraud of In-Person and Postal Voting

Question: How effective do you think that voting [in person /by post] is in keeping your vote secret?

	In Person Voters %	Postal Voters %
Very effective	61	25
Fairly effective	31	46
Neither effective nor ineffective	4	17
Fairly ineffective	2	9
Very ineffective	2	4

Source BES 2005. N for in-person voters is 2280; for postal voters 355

Table 4.4 indicates that a similar pattern is evident with regard to protecting the secrecy of the ballot. 61 percent of in-person voters think that such voting is ‘very effective’ at preserving secrecy and a further 31 percent think it is ‘fairly effective’. The equivalent, and contrasting, figures for postal voters are 25 and 46 percent respectively. Indeed, while only 4 percent of in-person voters express reservations about the ineffectiveness of secrecy surrounding in-person voting, some 13 percent of postal voters express doubts about the secrecy of postal voting.

The implications of these findings are clear. Postal voting is obviously an important option for people who, for whatever reason, find it difficult to vote in person. Nonetheless, a significant minority of users of the postal option express firm reservations about its safety from fraud and the extent to which it can preserve the secrecy of the ballot. Unfortunately, given the practical difficulties of supervising the completion of postal ballot forms, there is probably not very much that can be done about such reservations at the present time, other than for policymakers to be aware of them.

Self-expressed reasons for voting and non-voting

The reasons that people give for their own behaviour often need to be treated with some scepticism by observers who wish genuinely to understand that behaviour. All too often, people rationalise their behaviour in order to conform with the self-image that they wish to project to others. This said, there can be no doubt that the ways in which people talk about their actions can provide important insights into the character and causes of their actions. Accordingly, the BES survey invited respondents in different categories to reflect on the reasons for their actions. All non-voters were offered a list of possible reasons for voting and were asked to indicate which applied to them (respondents were allowed to check as many reasons as they wished). All voters were provided with a comparable general list of ‘reasons for voting’ and invited to indicate which applied to them. In addition, postal voters were invited to

indicate their ‘reasons for postal voting’ and in-person voters to indicate their ‘reasons for voting in person’. The results are shown in Tables 4.5 to 4.8.

Table 4.5 reports the reasons cited by non-voters for their decision not to vote. The various percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents were encouraged to check as many reasons as applied to them. Interestingly, as the table shows, 33 percent of non-voters indicated that ‘I really intended to vote but circumstances on the day prevented me’. Note that non-voters were one-third of our sample of respondents. It follows that, if the 33 percent of that one-third had all actually voted – as they claim they intended to do – then turnout would have been 11 percentage points higher in the 2005 general election than it was. Of course, such an inference must immediately be qualified by the recognition that statements like ‘I intended to vote but circumstances on the day got in the way’ may reflect precisely the sort of rationalisation/projection referred to above. However, unforeseen circumstances may also be a genuinely important reason for non-voting for a sizeable number of non-voters. In these circumstances, making more days available for voting – perhaps two rather than the current single day – might make a non-trivial contribution to increasing electoral turnout.

Table 4.5: Reasons given by Non-Voters for their Decision Not to Vote

Question: People have different reasons for not voting in general elections. Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your reason(s) for not voting in the general election that was held on May 5th?

	Cited by (%)
I really intended to vote but circumstances on the day prevented me	33
I’m just not interested in politics	25
There was no point in voting because it was obvious who would win the election	13
The party I used to support no longer stands for what I believe in	3
There was no point in voting because all the parties are the same	13
You can’t trust politicians to keep their promises	20

Source: BES 2005. Percentage can sum to more than 100 because multiple responses were explicitly allowed. N=1323. Respondents were given the option to specify any ‘other’ reason (not reported).

The two other major reasons cited by non-voters for their non-participation are that they are ‘not interested in politics’ (cited by 25 percent of non-voters) and ‘you can’t trust politicians to keep their promises’ (cited by 20 percent). Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of these two figures is how low they are. The first suggests that only a quarter of non-voters are motivated by lack of interest in politics; the second that less than a fifth abstain primarily because they are cynical about politicians. A similar observation is merited in relation to two of the minor reasons cited for non-

voting – that ‘there was no point in voting’, either ‘because it was obvious who would win’ (cited by 13 percent of no-voters) or ‘because all the parties are the same’ (also cited by 13 percent). As noted in section 1, there is some evidence to suggest that the first of these factors does have an impact on turnout overall: turnout is generally higher when the opinion poll gap between the major the parties is relatively small. That only 13 percent of non-voters cite this as a reason for their non-participation suggests that people’s estimates of the closeness of the national party competition may have had only a limited effect on non-voters in 2005. We return to the idea that ‘all parties are the same’ represents a possible explanation for the decision to vote (or not) in section 5 below.

Table 4.6: Reasons given by Voters for their Decision to Vote

Question: People have many different reasons for voting in general elections. Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your reason(s) for voting in the general election that was held on May 5th?

	Cited by (%)
I wanted to have a say in who wins the election	51
I wanted to support the candidate I preferred	29
It is my duty to vote	60
I wanted to support the party I preferred	40
I always vote	44
I wanted to vote against a party I didn’t like	19
It is my right to vote	49
I wanted to send a message to the government	20

Source: BES 2005. Percentage can sum to more than 100 because multiple responses were explicitly allowed. N=2659. Respondents were given the option to specify any ‘other’ reason (not reported).

But if non-voters emphasise their own good intentions, lack of interest and the unreliability of politicians as causes of their own non-involvement in electoral politics, what of voters? Table 4.6 outlines the percentages of voters who cited each of the variously proffered reasons. The most frequently cited reason (indicated by 60 percent of all voters) was ‘it is my duty to vote’. Clearly this sense that citizens have a duty to participate in the election of their government remains prevalent among British electors. As we will see in Section 5 below, this sense of moral obligation is strongly related to age and is in fact one of the strongest statistical predictors of voting turnout. Yet, in addition to recognising their moral obligations, voters were also concerned with the opposite side of the coin: rights. Some 51 percent asserted that one of the reasons they voted was that ‘I wanted to have a say in who wins the election’ and 49 percent intimated part of their reasoning was simply to assert that it was ‘my right to vote’. (Further analysis of the rights/duties relationship (not shown) indicates that 35 percent of all voters cited both rights and duties as reasons for their having voted; 25 percent cited duties only; 15 percent cited rights only or duties; and 25 percent cited neither). As Table 4.6 also shows, less important reasons cited for

voting were habit – 44 percent assert that ‘I always vote’ – and voting to support a party (40 percent) or a candidate (29 percent). The least frequently cited reasons from the list offered were ‘to send a message to the government’ (20 percent) and ‘to vote against a party I didn’t like’ (19 percent). In short, people seem to be less prepared to admit to having negative as opposed to positive motivations when they are offering explanations for their actions.

Tables 4.7 and 4.8 divide voters up according to the mode of casting their vote. Table 4.7 outlines the reasons that people gave for voting in person. The most popular by far was habit: 71 percent cited ‘I always vote in person’. Also fairly important were ‘voting in person prevents fraud or abuse’ (32 percent) and ‘I enjoy the experience of voting in person’ (26 percent). Two of the three remaining very minor reasons were ‘I didn’t know I could vote any other way’ (5 percent) and ‘I wanted to vote by post but didn’t know how to do it’ (1 percent). These relatively low levels of ignorance about alternative voting methods suggests that public agencies have been relatively successful in recent campaigns aimed at informing voters about the voting options available to them. Finally, Table 4.8 shows the reasons that postal voters gave for choosing that option. Note that the absolute numbers here are quite small (total N=373) because of the relatively low incidence of postal voting. All of the frequently cited reasons are associated with the convenience of postal voting (cited by 43 percent) and the attendant difficulties in getting to the polling station, either at all (20 percent) or at the appropriate time (10 percent cite being away on holiday; a further 10 percent cite being away on business).

Table 4.7: Reasons given by In Person Voters for their Decision to Vote in Person

Question: Here are some reasons why people choose to vote in person. Please indicate the reason or reasons that apply to you.

	Cited by (%)
I didn’t know I could vote any other way	5
I always vote in person	71
I enjoy the experience of voting in person	26
Voting in person prevents fraud or abuse	32
I wanted to vote by post but didn’t get round to organising it	2
I wanted to vote by post but didn’t know how to do it	1

Source: BES 2005. Percentage can sum to more than 100 because multiple responses were explicitly allowed. N=2293. Respondents were given the option to specify any ‘other’ reason (not reported).

What can be concluded from this review of the reasons that individual voters and non-voters cite for their actions? As intimated at the beginning of this section, these reasons tend to be suggestive rather than compelling because of the possibility that in explaining their own actions people tend to engage in rationalisations of various sorts. The findings presented in Tables 4.5-4.8 accordingly need to be viewed with some

Table 4.8: Reasons given by Postal Voters for their Decision to Vote By Post

*Question: Here are some reasons why people choose to vote **by post**. Please indicate the reason or reasons that apply to you.*

	Cited by (%)
I have difficulty getting to the polling station for health reasons	20
I have trouble getting transport to the polling station	5
I am often on holiday on polling day	10
I am often away on business on polling day	10
It is more convenient to vote by post than in person	43
I have difficulty finding the time to vote on polling day	18
A party or candidate encouraged me to vote by post	2
A trade union or other organisation encourage me to vote by post	0
I have voted by post in the past and liked doing so	1
I don't live in the area where I vote	3

Source: BES 2005. Percentage can sum to more than 100 because multiple responses were explicitly allowed. N=373. Respondents were given the option to specify any 'other' reason (not reported).

scepticism. However, there are certainly pointers in the reasons that voters and non-voters themselves provide that can be incorporated into more systematic, testable hypotheses about the causes of voting and non-voting. From the point of view of the voters, duty is hugely important as a driver of voting. This clearly implies that a sense of duty (or, where relevant, the lack of it) needs to be fully considered in any systematic analysis of turnout. From the point of view of the non-voters, the largest group claim that they really intended to be voters anyway. There is unfortunately no convincing way that the 'I really intended to vote' claim can be incorporated into a useful model, for two reasons. First, for an unknown number of individuals, the claim may be no more than a *post hoc* rationalisation intended to impress the survey interviewer rather than a 'real' description of the respondent's motivation. Second, any measure devised from the responses to such a question – which was only asked of non-voters – would be at last partly tautological, since the reason by definition could not apply to people who did vote. Note, however, that the second largest group of non-voters aver that they are simply uninterested in politics. Interest in politics can be measured straightforwardly and, since it is asked of everyone in the sample, a simple comparison can be made between levels of interest on the one hand and voting/non-voting on the other. It is to this sort of comparison, and to more complex statistical models, that we turn in the next section.

5. Towards an explanation of turnout in 2005

As we have suggested, asking people why they do things can only provide a limited understanding of the ‘real’ factors that underpin their behaviour. Rationalisation means that we cannot always, or perhaps even often, believe self-reported explanations of behaviour. Worse, people often overlook some of the key factors that actually affect what they do. Indeed, it is often said that, if analysts could believe the reasons people give for their own behaviour at face value, election surveys would only need to ask two questions. Why did you (not) vote? And why did you vote for your chosen party? The one thing that we can be fairly sure about is that the answers we received from such questions would not be very helpful for explaining either individual vote decisions or election outcomes.

The standard social science approach to explanation in this context is to ask what explanatory factors (such as sense of civic duty) could plausibly affect behaviour (in our case, voting versus non-voting); to ask questions of all respondents relating to each of those factors; and then to compare the incidence of the behaviour (voting or not voting) with the incidence of the supposed explanatory factor (sense of duty or no sense of duty). It is only when we make this full comparison that we can really say that there is an association between that which we are trying to explain and the factors that we think might explain it. In this section, we use this logic to develop a series of hypotheses about the key drivers of turnout. We specify clear operational measures of each of these drivers and then present simple cross-tabulation evidence to indicate whether or not the presumed explanatory variable correlates with the individual decision to vote or not. Finally, we combine all these different bivariate effects in a single multivariate model that enables us to determine the relative importance of each explanatory variable while controlling statistically for the effects of all the others.

Perceived party differences and the benefits of voting

We noted in section 4 above that some 13 percent of non-voters cited a lack of difference between the parties as an important reason for their lack of participation in the general election. Although we cast doubt on the explanatory value of these ‘self-reported’ findings, the possibility must be considered that many people are indeed motivated to vote precisely because they do see differences between the parties. If they see differences between the parties, then other things being equal, they are more likely to benefit in policy terms if the party for which they vote is elected.

One way of approaching the extent to which people see differences between parties is to ask how much they like each of them. If they like – or dislike – them all to more or less the same extent, then it implies that they do not differentiate among the parties and will therefore not benefit very much, if at all, if one party rather than another gets elected. For example, if voter A in a three-party system likes the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats equally well, A is likely to be indifferent as to which of them gets elected and is therefore unlikely to vote. In contrast, if A likes the Conservatives a great deal and really dislikes both Labour and the Liberal Democrats, A will benefit significantly if the Conservatives are elected. This in turn gives A a strong motivation to vote.

Electoral analysts make use of these different ‘likings’ for parties in order to summarise the ‘benefits’ that accrue to the individual from the act of voting. Suppose that we measure each individual’s ‘liking’ for each party on a 0-10 scale. Suppose further that person A rates the Conservatives at 9, Labour at 3 and the Liberal Democrats at 5. The absolute gaps between these three numbers are $9-3=6$ for the Conservative/Labour comparison; $9-5=4$ for the Conservative/Liberal Democrat comparison; and $5-3=2$ for the Liberal Democrat/Labour comparison. The average ‘liking’ gap for person A is $(6+4+2)/3=4$. Now consider person B, who dislikes all three parties and rates them all the same, at 2. Each pair-wise party comparison is now $(2-2=0)$ and the average ‘liking’ gap is therefore 0. The clear prediction of what we can call the ‘benefits hypothesis’ is that A (who would benefit quite a lot if the Conservatives won the election) would be much more likely to vote than B (who derives no benefit from anyone winning and who therefore couldn’t care less who wins). The general claim is that the bigger the average benefits gap, the more likely a person is to vote and vice versa.

Table 5.1 reports the results of comparing people’s perceptions of the differences between parties and whether or not they voted in the 2005 general election. The precise way in which the differential ‘liking’ or ‘benefit’ scores were calculated for each individual is indicated in the table. For presentational purposes, the table divides people into (a) those who had a larger than average gap in the extent to which they liked the various parties and (b) those who had an average or less than average gap. The simple prediction of the benefits hypothesis is that those with a greater than average ‘liking’ gap will be disproportionately more likely to be voters than those with a less than average gap. The table shows that this prediction is strongly supported by the evidence. Among people with a less than average gap, where the benefits of voting are relatively low, 58 percent were voters and 42 percent non-voters. Among those with a greater than average gap, where the benefits of voting are relatively high, 78 percent were voters and only 22 percent non-voters. The table also shows (see the Fisher’s Exact Test statistic) that the relationship is highly significant statistically. The key point is that benefits – measured as differences in the extent to which individuals like or dislike parties – clearly make a difference to whether or not people vote.

Table 5.1: Turnout by Perceptions of the Benefits of Voting, 2005

	<i>Perceived Benefits Low (%)</i>	<i>Perceived Benefits High (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	42	22
<i>Voters</i>	58	78
Chi-squared = 182.2 Fisher’s Exact Test probability = .000		

Source: BES 2005. N=3979. Benefits defined as the average distance between the major parties on 0-10 party affect scales, as described in the text. In England, the pair-wise distances between Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats are used. In Scotland, the pair-wise distances between SNP, Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats are used. In Wales, the pair-wise distances between Plaid Cymru, Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats are used. This produces a scale with a range of 0 to 6.67, with a mean of 2.35. ‘Low’ Perceived Benefits are defined as being below or at the average Benefits score. ‘High’ Perceived Benefits are defined as being above the average Benefits score.

The costs of voting

Any discussion of the ‘benefits’ of voting immediately raises the complementary issues of the potential costs involved. The costs of voting are normally regarded as the time, effort and potential inconvenience involved in the act of voting itself. Although these costs are not generally large, it seems plausible to argue that, particularly where people perceive them to be high relative to the benefits of voting, they will operate to reduce the chances that an individual will vote. However, people are often reluctant to admit to survey interviewers that they themselves are affected by what are often considered to be relatively trivial costs. As a result, analysts typically ask an indirect question in order to tap people’s ‘real’ attitudes to the ‘costs of voting’. We employ one such question here. Our survey respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement that ‘people are so busy that they don’t have time to vote’. If people’s assessments of costs really affect their propensity to vote, then we would expect to find that respondents who agree that ‘people are so busy...’ are really talking about themselves and that they would be less likely to vote than people who disagree with the statement.

Table 5.2: Turnout by Perceptions of the Costs of Voting, 2005

	<i>Perceived Costs Low (%)</i>	<i>Perceived Costs High (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	26	55
<i>Voters</i>	74	45

Chi-squared = 283.5 Fisher’s Exact Test probability = .000

Source: BES 2005. N=3979. Perception of Costs defined by responses to the statement: ‘People are so busy that they don’t have time to vote’. People who agree with the statement are defined as ‘high cost’ perceivers. People who disagree with the statement or who have no opinion are defined as ‘low cost’ perceivers.

Table 5.2 compares patterns of voting and non-voting against agreement/disagreement with the ‘so busy...’ statement. The results support the idea that the costs of voting significantly reduce the chances that an individual will vote. Among people who disagree with the statement – who, by implication, do not regard going to vote as involving much if any cost – a clear majority (74 percent) voted. In contrast, among those who agreed with the statement – people, who by implication do regard the costs of voting as non-trivial – a clear majority (55 percent) failed to vote. Again, the relationship is highly statistically significant, producing a very high chi-squared summary statistic of 283.5.

Political efficacy

Political efficacy refers to people’s belief that their actions can have some effect, however small, on the political process and political outcomes. This sense of efficacy clearly varies across individuals. Some people believe that their views and behaviour can have no effect on the political process. Others consider that their actions,

particularly when combined with those of like-minded people, can exercise some political effect. The simple hypothesis suggested by the notion of efficacy is that people with a stronger sense of their own political efficacy are more likely to act politically – in this instance, are more likely to vote – than people with low or zero efficacy.

Table 5.3: Turnout by Perceptions of Political Efficacy, 2005

	<i>Perceived Efficacy Low (%)</i>	<i>Perceived Efficacy High (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	41	26
<i>Voters</i>	59	74

Chi-squared = 101.8 Fisher’s Exact Test probability = .000

Source: BES 2005. N=3979. Efficacy measured by responses to the question: On a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 means a great deal of influence and 0 means no influence, how much influence do you have on politics and public affairs? For subsequent computing reasons, the number 1 is added to all scores so that the scale in practice runs from 1 to 11. The average score on this scale is 3.69. People who score up to and including the average score are defined as having ‘low’ efficacy. People who score above average are defined as having ‘high’ efficacy.

The 2005 BES survey sought to measure individuals’ sense of political efficacy in several ways. The simplest is reported in Table 5.3. Respondents were asked to indicate on an 11-point scale ‘how much influence you have on politics and public affairs’. The table differentiates between respondents who scored above the average ‘efficacy’ score and those who scored at or below it. It compares these two groups in terms of their patterns of voting and non-voting in the general election. The results are unambiguous. Among the ‘high efficacy’ group, turnout was 74 percent, whereas among the low efficacy group it was substantially lower, at 59 percent. The relationship, as revealed by Fisher test, is again highly statistically significant.

Moral obligation and the sense of civic duty

We saw in section 4 that some 60 percent of voters identified their sense of duty as an important source of their voting motivation. Several studies have found that this profound sense of moral obligation is indeed a crucial driver of voting turnout. Indeed, it would be decidedly odd if something cited as important by such a substantial proportion of voters failed to have significant impact on the turnout decision. People are (usually) moral beings and it seems entirely reasonable to suppose that what they think is morally right has some sort of effect (though not necessarily a determining one) on their behaviour. The hypothesis suggested by the idea of duty could accordingly not be simpler. People who have a clear sense of civic duty will be more significantly more likely to vote than those who have no such sense of duty.

Table 5.4 compares people who agree with the statement that ‘it is every citizen’s duty to vote in an election’ with those who disagree with it. Among those who

disagree – whom we infer are those with little or no sense of civic duty – 68 percent are non-voters. In marked contrast, among those who agree – those who do have a sense of civic duty – turnout is fully 79 percent. This relationship is massively significant statistically. The chi-squared of 758.2 is the highest we report in this section by a very large margin. In short, just as the voters themselves asserted in explaining their own behaviour, we find that a personal sense of duty (or the lack of it) is indeed an enormously important driver of the decision to vote or not. The reason we are so confident about this is that not only do most voters have a strong sense of duty, but also most non-voters have no sense of duty.

Table 5.4: Turnout by Perceptions of Civic Duty, 2005

	<i>No sense of Civic Duty (%)</i>	<i>Sense of Civic Duty (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	68	21
<i>Voters</i>	32	79
Chi-squared = 758.2 Fisher's Exact Test probability = .000		

Source: BES 2005. N=3979. Sense of Civic Duty measured by responses to the statement: 'It is every citizen's duty to vote in an election'. People who agree are defined as having a sense of civic duty. People who disagree or who have no opinion are defined as having no sense of civic duty.

We saw earlier that voting is distributed very strongly by age, with the older cohorts being much more likely to vote. Table 5.5 shows that this same sort of distribution applies to the sense of civic duty. The table shows that among the 18-24 cohort, 56 percent agree that it is every citizen's duty to vote. This figure rises progressively cohort-by-cohort. There is 66 percent agreement among the 25-34s; 73 percent among the 35-44s; and so on up to 92 percent agreement among the over 65s. The strength and statistical significance of the relationship suggests that at least a part of the relationship between age cohort and voting is due to the differential sense of civic duty across the generations. There are a number of possible reasons for the decline of civic among the younger cohorts. Among the more obvious candidates are a possible decline in the idea of duty in social relations generally and the possible failure properly to instruct younger generations in the historical struggles that resulted in the extension of the franchise in the first place. Whatever the reasons, it nonetheless seems likely that the sense of civic duty among the British electorate is in long-term decline and that a reversal of this decline would be a very useful way of increasing general election turnout. Quite how that might be done, however, remains a matter for speculation.

Table 5.5: Sense of Civic Duty by Age Cohort, 2005

	<i>Age Cohort (%)</i>					
	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-64</i>	<i>65+</i>
<i>No Sense of Civic Duty</i>	44	34	27	23	12	8
<i>Sense of Civic Duty</i>	56	66	73	77	88	92
Chi-squared = 316.6 Fisher's Exact Test probability = .000						

Source BES 2005. Civic Duty defined as in Table 5.4.

Valence and ‘none of the above’

In some elections in the United States, electoral ballots include not only a list of the candidates who wish to be elected but also a further option of selecting ‘none of the above’. Voters in UK elections do not enjoy the formal luxury of voting for ‘none of the parties on offer’ in this way. However, surveys can ask respondents what they think is the most important problem facing the country and then enquire which party, if any, is best equipped to handle that problem if elected into government. If respondents to the second question are given the option of saying ‘none of them can handle the problem best’, then the analyst can identify those voters who feel that none of the available parties can actually handle the problem they consider most important.

This idea of ‘none of the available choices’ being competent in a critical policy field is the mirror image of what is usually referred to as ‘valence politics’. Valence calculation is typically used as a vehicle for explaining party choice. The core idea is that people vote for the party they consider most competent to handle the issues they consider most important. Note, however, that just as valence can be evoked to explain party choice in this way, it can also be invoked as a partial explanation for why people vote at all. Voters who believe that a particular party – any party – can best handle a key problem will be motivated to vote for that party. But they will also be motivated simply to vote. In contrast, people who believe that no party can handle their key concern will not be motivated to vote for any party. In short, precisely because they believe that no party is competent in what they regard as the pivotal issue area, they will be motivated not to vote at all.

Table 5.6: Turnout by Valence Assessments, 2005

	<i>No party can best handle the most important issue (%)</i>	<i>There is a party that can handle the most important issue (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	43	29
<i>Voters</i>	57	71
Chi-squared = 87.3	Fisher’s Exact Test probability = .000	

Source: BES 2005. N=3979. All respondents were asked to indicate what they thought was ‘single most important issue facing the country at the present time’. They were then asked: ‘Which party is best able to handle this issue?’. Respondents who indicated that ‘none of them’ was best or couldn’t identify a party, appear in the left hand column of the table. Respondents who they identified a party appear in the right hand column.

Table 5.6 tests these claims explicitly. It compares people who consider that ‘no party is best’ to handle the respondent’s most important issue with those believe that ‘any specified party is best’. The results are consistent with the claims of the valence account of voting. The percentage of non-voters among those respondents who believe ‘no party is best’ is 43 percent. Among those who believe that one party is best able to handle the most important problem, the figure falls to 29 percent. Again, the chi-squared statistic indicates that the relationship is highly statistically significant. Although the relationship between ‘none best’ and (non) voting is not a

particularly strong one, it is clearly possible that, if UK voters were to be offered a ‘none of the above’ option on their ballot papers, rather more people might be inclined to vote.

Satisfaction with democracy

A further possible influence on people’s preparedness to vote is their degree of satisfaction with the workings of the democratic process. People who are dissatisfied with British democracy are likely to view the operation of the Westminster system as an irrelevance, and perhaps even as an impediment to ‘real democracy’ (whatever that might mean). They are accordingly less likely to want to participate in elections that merely contribute to its composition. The clear implication of this argument is that people who are dissatisfied with democracy should tend to be non-voters. In contrast, those satisfied with democracy should be more likely to vote.

Table 5.7: Turnout by Democratic Satisfaction, 2005

	<i>Dissatisfied with Democracy</i>	<i>Satisfied with Democracy</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	41	29
<i>Voters</i>	59	71
Chi-squared = 52.6	Fisher’s Exact Test probability = .000	

Source: BES 2005. N=3979. Respondents were asked: ‘On the whole, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in this country?’

The BES asked its respondents a standard question about their degree of satisfaction with democracy. Table 5.7 presents the precise form of the question and the relevant evidence. The results are very similar, and carry similar implications, to those reported in Table 5.6. Among those dissatisfied with democracy, 41 percent are non-voters. This compares with a lower figure of 29 percent non-voting among those satisfied with democracy. As in Table 5.6, the relationship is again statistically significant, though not particularly strong.

The effects of party campaigning

All of the major UK parties are sensitive to the need to ensure that turnout in general elections does not decline too far. That way lies a possible loss of mandate for all of them. Although the core purpose of party campaigning at election times is to increase support for the campaigning party, if possible at the expense of competing parties, a consistent theme in the speeches of all the major party leaders during the 2005 general election campaign was the need for as many eligible voters as possible to turn out and vote.

Party campaigning in modern elections in fact takes two major forms – direct personal persuasion and indirect campaign exposure through the mass media. Parties only

bother with in-person canvassing and persuasion because they believe that personal contact matters and because they think person-to-person campaigning can make a difference to ‘getting out our natural supporters’. If this reasoning is correct, we would expect to find that exposure to in-person campaigning significantly increases the chances of an individual turning out to vote, regardless of which party or parties was doing the canvassing.

In terms of media effects, it extraordinarily difficult to determine the character and extent of the specific media messages to which individual voters and non-voters have been exposed. As a result, it is almost impossible systematically to assess the individual-level effects of media campaigns – either on vote choice or on turnout. However, it is fairly straightforward to establish whether or not a particular individual has been exposed to Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs). Although this represents a much more restricted focus than ‘media effects’, it nonetheless offers a clear relationship to consider: whether or not exposure to PEBs is associated with an increased propensity to vote rather than not vote.

The 2005 BES data allow for measures of both of these types of campaigning to be devised and their effects assessed. A series of questions in the post-election survey asked whether or not respondents were canvassed in their homes during the official four-week campaign, either in person or on the telephone, or whether or not they have been contacted directly by a party (or parties) on election day to remind them to vote. The responses to these questions allow us to distinguish between respondents who were personally contacted by a party during the campaign and those who were not. In terms of exposure to PEBs, we distinguish simply between those respondents who saw at least one PEB during the official campaign and those who saw none.

Tables 5.8 and 5.9 report the relevant findings. Table 5.8 shows, in line with previous studies, that exposure to personal campaigning is associated with a higher propensity to vote. As the table indicates, the incidence of voting increased from 63 percent among those not exposed to personal campaigning to 77 percent among those who were. A similar effect is observed with regard to exposure to PEBs. Among those people who did not see a PEB, 58 percent voted. Among those who did watch a PEB, the equivalent figure was 70 percent. These relationships are not particularly strong but they are statistically significant. In any event, they provide *prima facie* evidence that the election campaign itself did, albeit modestly, have a positive effect on voter turnout.

Table 5.8: Turnout by Exposure to Personal Campaigning by Political Parties, 2005

	<i>Not exposed to Personal Campaigning (%)</i>	<i>Exposed to Personal Campaigning (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	37	23
<i>Voters</i>	63	77
Chi-squared = 76.8	Fisher’s Exact Test probability = .000	

Source: BES 2005. N=3979. Exposure to Personal Campaigning, during the official campaign, defined as having received a telephone call from a party, been canvassed or contacted on election day.

Table 5.9: Turnout by Exposure to Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) by Political Parties, 2005

	<i>Not exposed to PEB (%)</i>	<i>Exposed to PEB (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	42	30
<i>Voters</i>	58	70
Chi-squared = 58.1	Fisher's Exact Test probability = .000	

Source: BES 2005. N=3979.

Interest in Politics

One very obvious potential influence on the individual turnout decision is a person's interest in politics. People who are interested in the political realm are clearly more likely, other things being equal, to know about party politics and to want to participate in the electoral process. This proposition is tested straightforwardly in Table 5.10. As the table shows, in bivariate terms, the relationship is strong and statistically significant. Among those with relatively high levels of interest, 75 percent voted in the general election. Among those with low interest, turnout was 47 percent. To suggest that people are more likely to vote because they are interested in politics is not much of an explanation in common sense terms. However, the strength of the relationship means that any multivariate model of turnout needs to control for political interest if it is properly to estimate the effects of other variables.

Table 5.10: Turnout by Interest in Politics, 2005

	<i>Not very much or none at all (%)</i>	<i>A great deal, quite a lot or some (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	53	25
<i>Voters</i>	47	75
Chi-squared = 282.3	Fisher's Exact Test probability = .000	

Source: BES 2005. N=3979. Respondents were asked: 'How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics?'

The Iraq war and occupation

Even before Britain joined with the US in the invasion of Iraq in April 2003, the legal and moral basis of the UK's participation were hotly debated in both parliament and the media. Critics of the government's stance questioned both its judgement and its integrity. Some Labour supporters found themselves unable any longer to vote for the party with which they had identified for many years. There is certainly evidence to suggest that the war and occupation cost Labour votes in 2005. But did Labour's Iraq

policy actually have an adverse effect on turnout by turning significant numbers of eligible voters away from electoral politics altogether?

Table 5.11 distinguishes between respondents to the BES post-election survey who disapproved of the war in Iraq and those who approved of it. The evidence in the table shows a striking result. The percentages of voters (67 percent) and non-voters (33 percent) are identical among both approvers and disapprovers of the Iraq invasion. This is evidence of a clear ‘non-relationship’, in which approvers and disapprovers of the war are equally likely to vote (or not vote). The war may have cost Tony Blair a few points off his party’s vote share in May 2005. But there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever to indicate that the war had any effect on turnout or that the positions that individuals took on the war had any effect on their decisions to vote or not.

Table 5.11: Turnout by Approval/Disapproval of the Iraq War and Occupation, 2005

	<i>Disapprove (%)</i>	<i>Approve (%)</i>
<i>Non-Voters</i>	33	33
<i>Voters</i>	67	67
Chi-squared = .001	Fisher’s Exact Test probability = 1.000	

*Source: BES 2005. N=3979. Respondents were asked: ‘Please tell me whether you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of **Britain’s involvement in Iraq**’.*

A multivariate model of the turnout decision in 2005

The preceding tables in this section have shown that a series of potential explanatory variables all have robust bivariate associations with the individual turnout decision. The only variable of all those that we have reviewed that clearly has no effect is people’s attitudes to the Iraq war. Paradoxically, the clear absence of a relationship here helps to throw into relief the strength of all the other relationships that have been described.

It is well known, however, that bivariate relationships can mislead. Any statistical association between a pair of variables, Y and X, can disappear if appropriate statistical controls are applied for other relevant variables. This is one reason why a multivariate model specification is so important. Multivariate models of the sort we develop here have the added value of allowing the analyst to specify very precisely how the probability of the dependent variable changes (in our case, how much more likely it is that a given individual is a voter rather than a non-voter) as the values of the independent (or explanatory) variables change.

The model specification used here follows almost directly from the evidence presented in sections 3 and 5 above. The dependent variable we employ, at least initially, is a dichotomous ‘dummy’ variable, which scores 1 if a person voted in the general election and zero if s/he did not. The model has two sorts of independent

variables. The first set are what we regard as ‘explanatory variables’ in the sense that they refer to the hypothesised drivers of the turnout decision that were identified in Tables 5.1 to 5.4 and 5.6 to 5.10 – all of which were found to have a significant bivariate relationship with turnout. (The Iraq war approval term is dropped because it is clearly non-significant even at the bivariate level). The second set of independent variables consists of the socio-demographic correlates of turnout that were outlined in Section 3, which we include as ‘control’ variables. Specifically, these involve controls for age, gender, ethnicity, education, occupational class, country and disability status.

Two general sorts of amendment are made to the independent variables in the multivariate model. In the tables that were presented above, we deliberately simplified the categories of the various independent variables to clarify the exposition of the relationships involved. The first sort of amendment in the multivariate specification is that we use more differentiated, fine-grained measures, where they are available. Thus, for example, in our bivariate presentation of the impact of ‘duty’, we distinguished simply between those who believed they had a civic duty to vote and those who did not. In our multivariate specification we are able to use the much more differentiated answers of our respondents to two separate questions about civic duty, which result in a ‘sense of civic duty scale’ that ranges from 2-10. We are able to use similar, more differentiated measures for the ‘costs’ term (where we also have a 2-10 scale); for political interest (where we have a 0-10 scale); for age (where we can use chronological age rather than just cohort); and for the education (where we use a 6-point qualification scale rather than just pre/post A-level qualification level).

The second amendment relates to the ‘benefits’ and ‘efficacy’ terms. In the multivariate specification, we use the actual ‘benefits’ and efficacy measures as described in Tables 5.1 and 5.3, rather than the simplified measures that we reported in the cells of those tables, where we distinguished only ‘above average’ and ‘below average’ levels of benefits and efficacy. In addition, however, there is an important, second difference in the way that we use benefits and efficacy. In the discussion surrounding Tables 5.1 and 5.3 we presented them as separate variables – as separate influences on turnout. In fact, in theoretical terms the notions of benefits and efficacy are better viewed as a single interaction variable rather than as separate variables. The key idea is that benefits from voting can only accrue to a rational individual to the extent that s/he believes her/himself to be politically efficacious, to have some political influence on the political process. This implies that benefits need to be ‘discounted’ by efficacy. In practical terms this means that each individual’s benefits term needs to be multiplied by her/his efficacy term and the resultant single ‘discounted benefits’ expression used in the model specification. This means, for example, that someone who perceives huge benefits from voting and also feels very efficacious gets a huge score on the ‘discounted benefits’ variable. In contrast, someone who also perceives huge benefits but who feels so lacking in influence that s/he scores zero on the political efficacy scale will score zero on the ‘discounted benefits’ scale. The precise calculations and the ranges of the variables involved are shown in Appendix 2. The discounted benefits index used in the models reported here ranges from 0 to 73.

Table 5.12: Logit Regression Model of the Individual Turnout Decision, 2005

Dependent Variable: Voted/Not

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Probability</i>
Explanatory Variables			
Discounted Benefits of Voting	.04	.01	.000
Perceived Costs of Voting	-.23	.03	.000
Sense of Civic Duty	.46	.02	.000
Valence Calculation	.19	.09	.044
Democracy Satisfaction	.29	.09	.002
Exposure to Personal Campaigning	.37	.09	.000
Exposure to Party Election Broadcasts	-.04	.10	.700
Interest in Politics	.03	.02	.124
Approval/Disapproval of Iraq War	-.03	.09	.713
Control Variables			
Age	.04	.00	.000
Gender (male)	-.18	.09	.045
Ethnicity (white)	.80	.15	.000
Occupational Class (non-manual)	.13	.10	.193
Poverty	-.26	.18	.156
Education	.11	.03	.000
Disabled	-.30	.12	.017
Scotland	-.04	.15	.786
Wales	.14	.20	.471
Constant	-4.63	.36	.000
Pseudo R ²	.30		
N	3799		

Source: BES 2005. Variable definitions as in previous tables or as defined in the text.

Table 5.12 reports both the precise specification of our initial multivariate model and the results of estimating it. The results are extremely informative in the sense that they tell us which variables have significant effects and which fail to have significant effects on the turnout decision controlling for other relevant variables. The following inferences can be drawn from the table.

1. Of the nine ‘explanatory’ variables, six are statistically significant and correctly signed. As anticipated, ‘discounted benefits’, ‘sense of civic duty’, ‘valence calculation’, ‘satisfaction with democracy’ and ‘exposure to personal campaigning’ all significantly increase the chances that an individual will vote. The ‘perceived costs’ of voting, as expected, significantly reduce the chances of individual turnout.

2. Three of the nine ‘explanatory’ variables are not statistically significant. This means that, controlling for the other variables in the model, these terms do not affect the individual probability of voting. As far as the Iraq war approval term is concerned, this lack of an effect in the multivariate model is entirely to be expected –

as we saw in Table 5.11, there was no bivariate Iraq effect anyway. The loss of significance of the ‘exposure to PEBs’ term is also not surprising given the evidence from other studies that has shown that exposure to PEBs has no effect on turnout. The failure of the political interest term to achieve significance is noteworthy as an example of how a variable that displays quite a strong bivariate relationship with the dependent variable in question can lose significance in a multivariate specification. In substantive terms, its loss of significance is relatively unimportant. As noted earlier, to say that people tend (not) to vote because they are (not) interested in politics is not much of an explanation of turnout anyway.

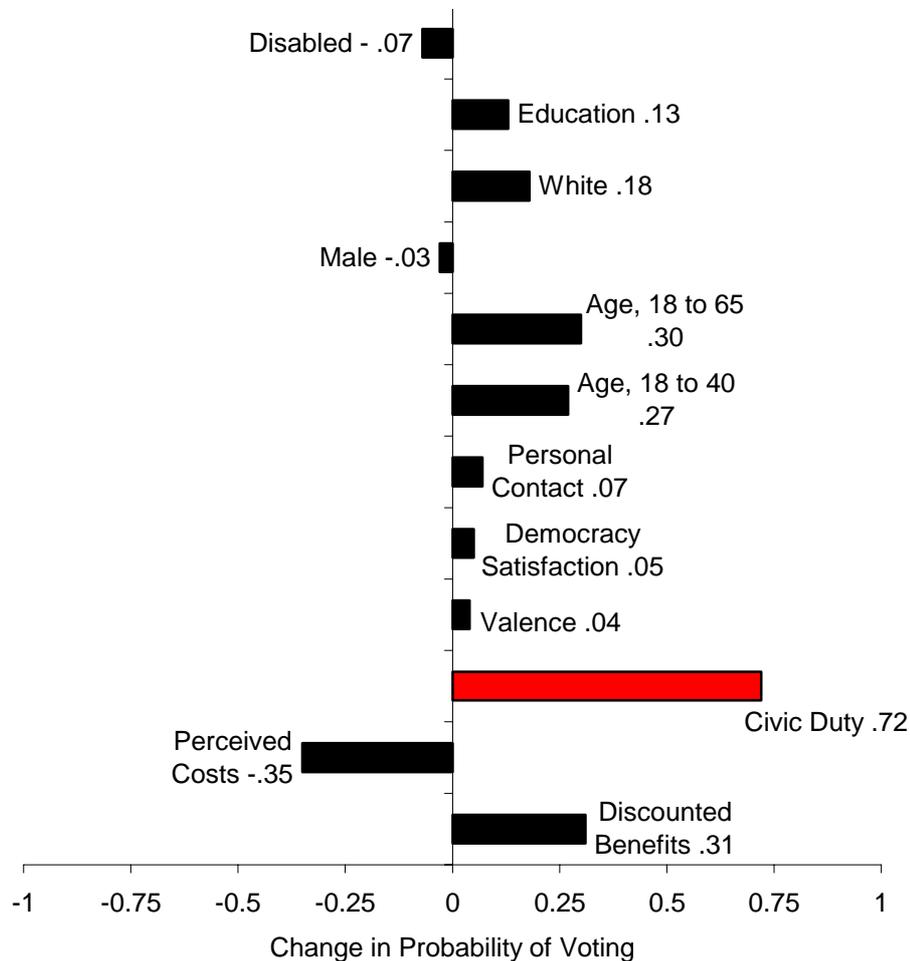
3. Of the nine demographic control variables, four are non-significant. The non-significance of the Scotland and Wales terms confirms the conclusions of the bivariate analysis – that Scots and Welsh voters are neither more nor less likely to vote in general elections than those in England. The non-significance of the occupational class and ‘poverty’ terms indicates that these variables – which in any case were relatively weakly related to turnout in the bivariate case – do not affect the turnout decision when appropriate controls are made for other relevant variables.

4. The five demographic control variables that yield significant coefficients are all correctly signed. The probability of individual turnout increases with age and educational attainment. Ethnic minority respondents are less likely to vote than their white counterparts. Men are slightly less likely to vote than women, though this effect is at the margins of statistical significance. Net of all other effects, the disabled are less likely to be voters than the non-disabled.

The comments on Table 5.12 above refer to variables having significant positive or negative effects on the chances that an individual will vote. However, they do not indicate how much of an effect any given variable will have. Figure 5.1 provides the results of a well-established simulation technique that allows the analyst to estimate the change in probability (in turnout) that occurs as we move from the minimum to the maximum value of each independent variable. Consider, for example, the age variables. The simulation technique allows us to estimate the probability that an 18-year-old will vote, holding all other variables constant at their means. The simulations show, in fact that this probability is $p=.60$. Keeping all other variables constant, we can then estimate the probability that a 65-year-old would vote. This probability turns out to be $p=.90$. So the ‘change in turnout probability’ (dp) that we get as we move from an 18-year-old to a 65-year-old is $dp=(.90-.60)=.30$. Similar operations are performed in Figure 5.1 for each of the significant variables indicated shown in the Table 5.12 model. The results in Figure 5.1 demonstrate that duty is overwhelmingly the strongest driver of individual turnout. A person who has a very strong sense of civic duty is $dp=.72$ more likely to vote than someone who is identical in all other significant respects but who has no sense of duty. The figure shows that there are also very powerful roles for discounted benefits ($dp=.31$); for costs ($dp=-.35$); and for age ($dp=.30$).

One of the attractive features of the simulations that produced Figure 5.1 is that different individual profiles can be explored in order to see how different combinations of characteristics affect the chances of voting. Consider, for example, an 18-year-old from an ethnic minority, who has no educational qualifications and no sense of civic duty. The chance that such an individual would vote in the general

Figure 5.1: Effects of Significant Predictors of Turnout on the Probability of Voting, 2005



Source: Model shown in Table 5.12

election is only $p=.06$. However, if we adjust the simulation so that the same individual has a very strong sense of civic duty, then the probability that s/he will vote is $p=.74$.

The key feature of the evidence reported in Figure 5.1, however, is the story that it tells about the causes of individual voting turnout. There are four aspects to this story. First, the ‘discounted benefits’ and ‘costs’ terms reflect classical ‘Downsian’ rational calculation about the benefits and costs of voting. As Figure 5.1 indicates, these two terms have powerful effects on the probability of voting and as such they show that Downsian **rationality** plays an important part in individual turnout decisions. Rationality, however, does not stop with estimated costs and benefits. Valence calculations – the idea that one of the parties on offer can handle the most

important problems facing the country – also play a part, albeit a lesser one, in the turnout decision. Second, in addition to rationality, **normative concerns** also play a significant role. People’s moral sense of civic duty is hugely important as a driver of electoral participation – and, as we have seen, this is strongly related to age. Third, **contingency** is also important. Being contacted personally by a political party during the campaign increases the probability that an individual will vote by $dp=.07$. This is a modest effect, but it nonetheless demonstrates the importance of the role that political parties themselves can play in maintaining and strengthening the overall level of turnout. Finally, **demography** matters. The effects of gender, class and country are minimal or non-existent. But age, education, ethnicity and disabled status all exert important effects on the individual turnout decision. And of all those effects, the most profound – and perhaps the most disturbing for the long term future of turnout – is age.

One final comment on the model presented in Table 5.12 is necessary. That model distinguishes only between voters and non-voters. An analogous (multinomial logit) model can also be developed that makes a three-way distinction between in-person voters, postal voters and non-voters. The results (not reported here) show that in-person and postal voters are indistinguishable from each other in terms of almost all of the characteristics that are measured in Table 5.12. The only exceptions are age and disabled status. Unsurprisingly, the model shows that older people and the disabled are more likely to vote by post than their younger and non-disabled counterparts.

6. The election as an ‘intervention’ in public attitudes

The primary system-level function of a general election is to elect a government that can put an agreed policy programme into effect. However, this is not to say that elections cannot perform other functions for the political system. One other possible function is to provide a public affirmation of the democratic political process by holding the existing government to scrutiny and account. Viewed in this light, a potential latent function of elections is to reinvigorate people’s confidence that the democratic system is working and that they have a role to play in it. The BES survey, as noted earlier was conducted in two waves – one immediately before the official election campaign and one immediately after the general election itself. Certain questions designed to tap the operation of this latent, ‘reinvigorating’ function were asked in both the pre- and post-election waves of the survey. These questions give a perfect opportunity to assess the extent to which people’s attitudes changed, purely as a result of the ‘intervention’ represented by the election itself. Note, crucially, that this is a panel survey and exactly the same group of respondents was asked for its views both before and after the election.

Table 6.1: The Effects of the 2005 General Election as an ‘Intervention’ on Public Attitudes to Voting and Democracy

	<i>Pre-election Survey Wave</i>	<i>Post-election Survey Wave</i>
When people like me vote, they can really change the way that Britain is governed (percent agreeing)	48	52
I feel a sense of satisfaction when I vote (percent agreeing)	55	63
The Government generally treats people like me fairly (percent agreeing)	35	41
Most of my family and friends think that voting is a waste of time (percent agreeing)	25	20
Satisfied with Democracy (percent)	65	68
Average score on 11-point political efficacy scale	3.61	3.69

Source: BES 2005. Variable definitions in the text. N=2747. The number of cases is lower than in some previous tables because it includes only respondents were interviewed in both survey waves.

Table 6.1 reports the pre- and post-election summary responses. The results suggest that the election did indeed perform some sort of positive, if modest, latent function. The percentage of respondents who were satisfied with democracy increased from 65 percent before the election to 68 percent afterwards. The percentage that agreed with the proposition that ‘voting can change the way that Britain is governed’ increased from 48 percent to 52 percent. The percent claiming to find voting satisfying increased from 55 to 63 percent. Those believing that ‘government treats people like me fairly’ rose from 35 to 41 percent. Those whose family and friends considered

voting to be a ‘waste of time’ fell from 25 percent to 20 percent. Finally, the average score on a 1-11 personal political efficacy scale increased from 3.61 before the election to 3.69 afterwards. All of these changes imply that the election itself gave a small boost to the public’s confidence in the value of voting and in the democratic process generally. Further research will be necessary to see if this boost was anything more than temporary. Nonetheless, the fact that all this group of indicators experienced modest upsurges lends credence to the idea that the election represented a positive intervention in the evolution of public attitudes.

Table 6.2: The Effects of the 2005 General Election as an ‘Intervention’ on Public Attitudes to Voting and Democracy, by ‘Winners’, ‘Losers’ and Non-Voters

	<i>Winners</i>		<i>Losers</i>		<i>Non-Voters</i>	
	<i>pre</i>	<i>post</i>	<i>pre</i>	<i>post</i>	<i>pre</i>	<i>post</i>
When people like me vote, they can really change the way that Britain is governed (percent agreeing)	62	66	51	57	33	33
I feel a sense of satisfaction when I vote (percent agreeing)	70	81	63	75	33	33
The Government generally treats people like me fairly (percent agreeing)	55	63	26	31	32	37
Most of my family and friends think that voting is a waste of time (percent agreeing)	18	14	18	13	41	34
Satisfied with Democracy (percent)	81	84	60	64	55	61
Average score on 11-point political efficacy scale	4.32	4.35	3.64	3.81	2.99	3.05

Source: BES 2005. Variable definitions in the text. N=2747. The number of cases is lower than in some previous tables because it includes only respondents were interviewed in both survey waves.

Table 6.2 adds a final gloss to the ‘election as an intervention’ picture. Previous research has shown that the voter who are on the winning side in an election tend to be more supportive of the democratic process and to view the election itself more favourably than those on the losing (or on neither) side. Table 6.2 divides out panel respondents into three groups: those who voted Labour (and who are therefore on the winning side); people who voted for any other party (the losers); and people who didn’t vote at all. The results are highly instructive. On the one hand, they show the obvious pattern that ‘winners’ tend to view everything more favourably than either ‘losers’ or non-voters. So, for example, 81 percent of winners in the pre-election survey were satisfied with democracy, compared with 60 percent of losers and 55 percent of non-voters. Exactly the same rank ordering is evident in relation to all the other sets of responses shown in the table. Even more intriguing, however, is the fact that the election has a positive effect on all three categories of voter – winners, losers

and non-voters – across all six of the attitude items assessed. So, for example, just as the winners become more satisfied with democracy (81 percent satisfied pre; 84 percent satisfied post), the same pattern is evident for both losers (60 percent satisfied with democracy pre; 64 percent satisfied post) and non-voters (55 percent satisfied pre; 61 percent satisfied post). Again, this sort of change pattern occurs across all of the items shown in the table. The remarkable consistency of this overall pattern indicates that the 2005 UK general election did not just make Labour voters feel that the democratic process was working better. It certainly did that, but it had the same (modest) effect on people who had voted for other parties and on people who had not voted at all.

Conclusions

1. Turnout in British general elections has trended downwards slowly since 1945. Coincident with this trend, though not necessarily a cause of it, has been a decline in people's attachments to the main political parties, in 'party identification'. However, there has been no commensurate fall in the British public's interest in politics, which has never been high. The sharp fall in turnout in 2001 can be partly explained by the one-sided nature of the national party contest during the 1997 parliament. The closer contest in 2005 predictably saw a modest increase in turnout. Closer contests in the future are likely to see further modest rises in turnout, though should be no complacency over this.
2. People who vote in general elections are likely to vote in other sorts of election too. Non-voters in general elections are not likely to vote in other elections. However, non-voters are not more likely than voters to engage in extra-electoral politics. On the contrary, voters are more likely than non-voters to engage in a range of political and community activities such as protest activity, community action projects and boycotts of goods. There is not even a measurable, distinctive, hard-core of non-voters who are dissatisfied with democracy but who are prepared to engage in non-electoral actions to a greater degree than are voters who are dissatisfied with democracy.
3. There is a distinctive socio-demography of non-voting. Age, gender (marginally), ethnicity and disabled status are all consistently associated with patterns of voting/non-voting. Occupational class and country of residence (Scotland, Wales and England) are unrelated to the individual turnout decision. Men, disabled people, the poorly qualified and people from ethnic minorities are less likely to vote, respectively, than their female, non-disabled, well qualified and white counterparts. But the huge socio-demographic driver is age. Non-voting is more prevalent among the 18-24 cohort than voting. The position gradually shifts towards voting among the older age groups. The pattern is so robust over time that the impact of age looks very much like a cohort effect rather than a life cycle effect. Currently young non-voters seem likely to carry their non-voting forward with them through time unless fairly radical action is taken to change the calculus of voting in other ways.
4. There were high levels of satisfaction with the administration of the election among both voters and non-voters in 2005. The registration process and the guidance provided for both sorts of voting received positive ratings from the public. A significant minority of postal voters expressed reservations about the safety of postal voting from fraud and about the difficulties of preserving the secrecy of postal ballots.
5. Voters' explanations of their own voting behaviour emphasised the importance of voting as a civic duty as well as the rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship. The most common explanation among non-voters for their own non-voting was that they had intended to vote but that they were prevented from doing so by circumstances on the day. It is possible that these sorts of statement were post hoc rationalisations. However, if they given any credence whatsoever, they suggest that turnout might be increased by a few percentage points simply by holding the ballot over two days.

6. The individual decision to vote or not derives from the operation of a range of factors. The four socio-demographic variables identified above – age, gender, disabled status and ethnicity – all play predisposing roles. The key drivers, however, are a combination of rational calculation, moral sensibility and exposure to personal campaigning by political parties. The rational calculation primarily involves a putative voter recognising that there are differences between the parties and then weighting those differences by her/his own sense of political efficacy. The resulting ‘discounted benefits’ of voting are then weighed against the cost – in terms of time and effort – of actually casting a ballot. The moral sensibility aspect of the voting decision relates to notions of the duties of the citizen. Large numbers of British voters are (still) very strongly influenced by their sense that it is their duty to vote. However, the distribution of this sense of duty is very heavily skewed towards middle and old age. The single most powerful way in which turnout in British general elections could be increased would be to increase the sense of civic duty among the young, particularly among the under 40s. A civic education propaganda campaign in the media could yield dividends in this regard. The effects of exposure to campaigning are clearly strongest when they are delivered in person, either on the telephone or on the doorstep. The political parties themselves have it in their own hands to increase turnout, if they can find the capacity to do so in the future.

7. A key manifest function of a general election is to (re) elect a government. A key latent function of elections is to reinvigorate voters’ commitments to the value of voting and the democratic process. The 2005 general election achieved this latent objective to a modest but significant effect. Crucially, this reinvigoration effect was evident among ‘winners’ (those whose party won the national election), ‘losers’ (those whose party lost) and non-voters alike.

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Appendix 1

Modelling Trends in Turnout

The 2001 and 2005 BES surveys asked large numbers of questions to gather the data needed to test rival models of electoral participation. It would be desirable to use the data from earlier BES surveys conducted over the 1964-1997 period to investigate the general applicability of various models, and to assess which factors have been most important in accounting for long-term trends in turnout. Unfortunately, previous BES surveys paid precious little attention to turnout, and question batteries similar to those used in 2001 and 2005 were not included. Given these data limitations, we follow the approach used by Clarke et al. (2004) and employ aggregate data gathered since 1945 to operationalize one of the key models of turnout. This is the $T = P*B - C + D$ model where T stands for turnout, P = voters' perceptions that they can influence the outcome of an election, B = perceived difference in collective benefits that will occur should one party rather than another win the election, C = the costs of voting, and D = sense of civic duty and associated system-level benefits that prompt people to participate in elections.

To operationalize an aggregate-level version of this model, T is measured directly as the percentage voting in one of the 17 general elections held since 1945. Other terms must be proxied. P is measured as the (log of the) absolute average distance between the leading two parties in public opinion polls conducted over the three months preceding a general election. The assumption is that voters experience an enhanced sense of political efficacy in situations where party competition is close. In contrast, the sense of efficacy is diminished in situations where one party is seen as a "sure bet" to win. B, the differential benefits term, is measured using the (log of the) sum of pairwise absolute distances on a summary left-right ideology/policy scale between the Conservative, Labour and Liberal (Democrat) parties. The data for this measure are taken from the party manifestos data base assembled by Budge et al. (2001, 2005). C is the costs of voting. Recent innovations in postal voting aside, methods of voting are essentially changed. Thus, without undue heroism, C can be assumed to be a constant. Finally, D is captured by linear and quadratic time counters designed to mimic long-term trends in the incidence of civic duty and related beliefs about the system-level benefits of voting.

Parameters in this model are estimated using OLS regression analysis. The results, shown in the two panels of Table A.1, indicate that each of the predictor variables behaves as hypothesized. Net of long-term trend, close party competition boosts turnout (Models A and D), and ideological proximity inhibits it (Models B and E). As also expected, the interaction between party competition and ideological proximity is statistically significant (Models C and F). Turnout is highest in situations when competition is intense and parties are relatively far apart on the left-right ideological continuum. This result is consonant with the frequently articulated argument that the electorate reacts to a close fight with high stakes. As King (2001) states: '[j]ust provide the voters with a closely fought election at which a great deal is at stake and, make no mistake, they will again turn out in their droves.'

The significant negative linear and quadratic trend terms in all of the models cautions that such a strong version of the argument is unwarranted. Controlling for levels of party competition and ideological proximity among the parties, there clearly are long-term trends working to suppress turnout. Perhaps most important is the relatively weak sense of civic duty among younger groups in the electorate discussed earlier in this report. Although data limitations make it difficult to disentangle life-cycle from age-cohort effects, available evidence suggests that the sense of civic duty that does much to propel people to the polls will remain relatively impoverished among presently younger members of the electorate. Unless their successors have a significantly stronger sense of civic mindedness, there will be continuing downward pressures on turnout in the years ahead.

The aggregate turnout models help one to appreciate how these downward pressures may operate. First, it is noteworthy that the quadratic trend model (Model F in Table A.1) does a good job in anticipating 2005 turnout. If one estimates this model for the 1945-2001 period, and forecasts 2005 turnout, the result is 62.8% -- just 1.5% above the actual figure. Assuming levels of party competition and ideological proximity among the parties remain at 2005 levels, Model F indicates that turnout will be 60.7% in a 2009/10 election. Of course, this forecast is conditional on the perpetuation of political conditions that obtained in 2005, and those conditions may change. In the run-up to the 2005 contest, party competition as measured by opinion polls was quite intense, a condition that works to produce higher turnout by bolstering voters' sense of efficacy. However, the Manifestos data (Budge et al., 2005) show that the three major parties remained quite close together on the left-right ideological continuum, a condition that militates against high turnout by minimizing perceptions of differential benefits (i.e., that it matters which party wins). Assuming parties become more ideologically polarized -- say at levels witnessed during the 1992 election -- the forecast turnout in the next general election is 63.7% (see Figure A.1). Thus, even a combination of close competition and enhanced ideological/policy distance among the parties does not bring turnout back to pre-2001 figures. Given the continuing presence of these long-term negative forces, restoring electoral turnout to the impressive levels that characterized Britain's 'civic culture' (Almond and Verba, 1963) in the 1950s and 1960s will be a daunting task.

Table A.1

**Effects of Inter-Party Competition and Ideological Proximity
on Turnout in 1945-2005 General Elections**

A. Linear Trend Models

Model A	Model B <i>Coefficient</i>	Model C <i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>
<i>Predictor Variables</i>			
Constant	82.08*** (2.20)	64.40*** (7.72)	63.88*** (6.88)
Party Competition	-0.69* (0.37)		
Ideological Proximity		2.67** (1.12)	
Competition*Proximity Interaction			0.030** (0.01)
Time (Linear Trend)	-0.80*** (0.22)	-0.80*** (0.20)	-0.79*** (0.20)
Adjusted R ²	.43	.58	.62
D.W.	1.35	1.89	1.88

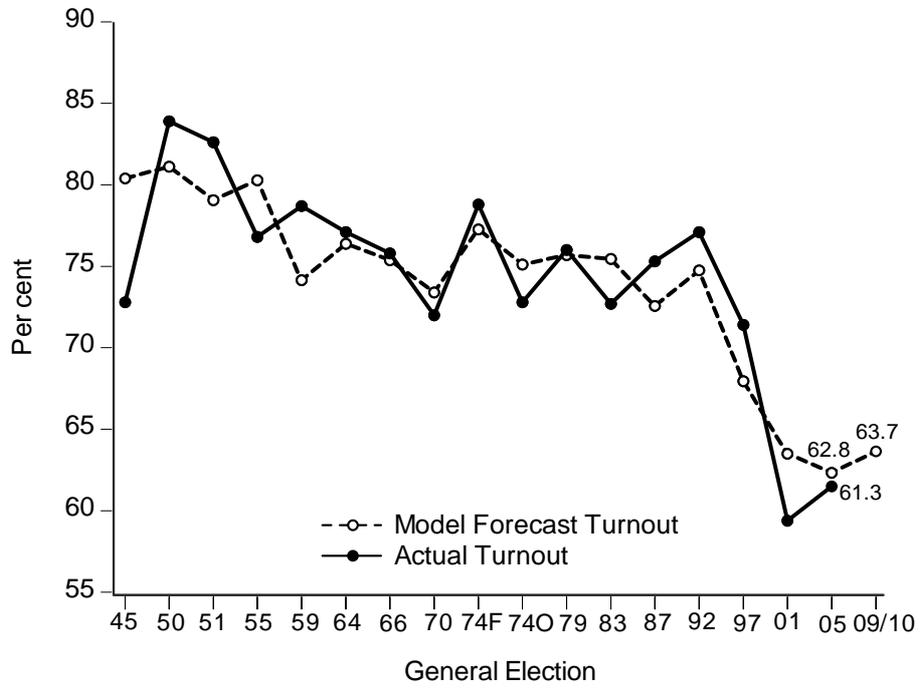
B. Quadratic Trend Models

Model D	Model E <i>Coefficient</i>	Model F <i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>
<i>Predictor Variables</i>			
Constant	79.99*** (1.39)	63.85*** (6.95)	62.89*** (6.03)
Party Competition	-0.74* (0.32)		
Ideological Proximity		2.40** (1.03)	
Competition*Proximity Interaction			0.028** (0.01)
Time (Quadratic trend)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)
Adjusted R ²	.65	.65	.69
D.W.	1.75	2.14	1.22

*** - $p \leq .001$; ** - $p \leq .01$; * - $p \leq .05$; Standard errors in parentheses.

Sources: Budge et al. (2001, 2005); King and Wybrow (2001); UK Election Statistics 1918-2004, House of Commons Research Paper 04/61, p. 17; General Election 2005, House of Commons Research Paper 05/33, p. 1; MORI, ICM and YouGov Polls- February-April 2005.

Figure A.1: Actual and Forecast Turnout in 1945-2009/10 General Elections



Appendix 2

Operational Measures of Discounted Benefits

Benefits measure for England

Absolute difference between Liking for Labour and Liking for Conservatives plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Labour and Liking for Liberal Democrats
plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Conservatives and Liking for Liberal
Democrats
*divided by three

Benefits measure for Scotland

Absolute difference between Liking for Labour and Liking for Conservatives plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Labour and Liking for Liberal Democrats
plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Conservatives and Liking for Liberal
Democrats plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Labour and Liking for SNP plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Conservatives and Liking for SNP plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Liberal Democrats and Liking for SNP
*divided by six

Benefits measure for Wales

Absolute difference between Liking for Labour and Liking for Conservatives plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Labour and Liking for Liberal Democrats
plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Conservatives and Liking for Liberal
Democrats plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Labour and Liking for Plaid Cymru plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Conservatives and Liking for Plaid Cymru
plus
Absolute difference between Liking for Liberal Democrats and Liking for Plaid
Cymru
*divided by six

Efficacy measure for all

Self-rated score on 0-10 political influence scale, converted to 1-11 scale by adding 1.

*Discounted Benefits = Benefits score * efficacy score*

Range of Benefits variable	0 to 6.67
Range of Efficacy variable	1 to 11
Range of Discounted Benefits variable	0 to 73.33