



The Politics of Participation

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Professor Mike Saward:

The UK election in 2010 was historic in all sorts of ways and it raised a huge number of issues around participation that we need to discuss. My name's Michael Seward and I'm from the Open University and I'm here with my colleagues Paul Lewis, who's Professor of European Politics and Richard Heffernan who's Reader in Government, and Sarah Childs who's Professor of Politics and Gender at Bristol University.

I want to start off with this question, what was the headline issue as far as you're concerned about turnout in this election?

Richard Heffernan

well, we have a post war average in Britain of 75% and that's been declining in recent years, 70% in 1997, 59% in 2001, and then 61% in 2005. We went up this year to 65% so we've seen an increase...but we're still way off where we used to be which is 75 and I think that that's ground for some concern particularly because it was a competitive election and therefore we would've thought turnout would have risen higher and most people would've expected it to do so.

Professor Mike Saward:

So something about the numbers that's important, we'll come back to unpack that in a moment. Paul

Professor Paul Lewis:

Well it could've gone down a lot more because of the disgust over the expenses scandal for example. Also, there were plenty of people who tried to vote and were turned away as we saw on the television

Professor Mike Saward:

in terms of headline issue for you Sarah

Professor Sarah Childs:

I think that image of people queuing was quite a surprising one for the UK election. It did beg the question as to whether people had just turned up to the polling stations a little bit late and thought it would all be very quick. But I think, people have the opportunity to vote in the election, you can vote by post, you can have proxy votes, you can turn up. And I think the interesting question really is how did turnout effect different types of people, was the average the same across the country, were there areas where fewer people turned out, did it make distinctions by age or by class or by sex....we know for sex, for example, that actually men and women turn out at the same level.

Professor Mike Saward:

There's a lot of issues to unpack there and we'll do that in a moment. But first let's hear why some members of the general public voted the way they did, or indeed, did not vote

VOX POPS:

- I did vote, I think it's really important that we have an influence on who governs the country.
- Yes I did vote. I believe it's right to vote and everyone who's been given the right should do that otherwise you can't complain about the outcome.
- I didn't vote in this election. I didn't see any of the candidates or any of the parties offering anything worthwhile, they didn't seem very different to each other as well

- I did vote for the first time in ages. I saw all the television debates and in the end it did influence me as to what my vote was
- I didn't vote yesterday because I'm not really interested in politics. I watched the TV debate and I wasn't convinced that they reflect my own views about where the country should be and where we should roll
- I did vote in the election. I think it's important to be part of the democratic process, it's our right and it's our duty

Professor Mike Saward:

So there are lots of different reasons why people vote or indeed why they don't vote. Paul, why do people vote?

Professor Paul Lewis:

I think the vox pops gave us quite a good idea. Because it's our duty, which is quite interesting I think, because people want to have a say, because they have opinions. My fear before the election, and it was a fear, was that a lot of people wouldn't vote, there's so much animus against MPs and the system, the parliamentary system because of expenses etc. There were various dangers, one was they'd simply not vote at all or they'd vote for more extremist parties....i thought in democratic terms this was quite a reasonable outcome in the sense that turnout has been steadily going up since the low of 2001

Professor Mike Saward:

Sarah, should we be happy if we get a voting turnout of 65% which is a reasonable amount up on the previous UK election....is that a good outcome or is that not necessarily a good outcome?

Professor Sarah Childs:

I think I'd like to see it much higher actually, particularly among young people, a turnout out that reflects a buy in to the system because I think there's a real concern that if the younger generation don't get used to voting then those percentages will go back and decline over time again. We need to get that younger cohort voting again and being interested in politics, I think what this election did, perhaps surprisingly, through things like the leaders' debates on tele was to get people watching and listening again to politics.

Professor Mike Saward:

Do you think this is a case for votes at 16 by the way – which was an issue that came up just in the margins at the election

Professor Sarah Childs:

I think the problems with votes at 16 is that, if you introduce it, voting will go down because we know that young people are less likely to vote than older people. I think that debate isn't necessarily linked to turn out and perhaps shouldn't be linked to turnout because it will have the opposite effect to that of those who advocate votes at 16, it won't increase turnout. However I think it is a case for better citizenship education within schools which is about politicising young people to participate on issues and also on party politics, get them involved in party politics, not just issue politics.

Richard Heffernan:

The difficulty there of course is that you need to turn the issue on its head which is why people don't vote – it helps you understand why they do. And there are 2 principle reasons why they don't vote as I can see. One is apathy "I don't care", which, given the fact that we've never got much beyond 80%, ever, since universal suffrage at 21 in 1928. And then alienation, people are angry and disaffected and disaffiliated and they can be sometimes mobilised to vote as they can voted against something as oppose to for something. So apathy may be kind of....

Professor Mike Saward:

There's also, there's too much the same. One of the voices earlier can't tell the difference between the parties.

Richard Heffernan:

Yes, why vote, they all pee in the same pot and they didn't like the pot. So I think apathy is a bad thing but it can sometimes be a good thing after all there are some people we wouldn't want to see vote regularly but they're a small amount of people.

Professor Sarah Childs:

I'm not sure if apathy is a good enough answer actually because if we look at where turnout is high and who votes and who doesn't, we see big issues around social exclusion. The kind of constituencies that have lower turnout are often those that are very poor and working class and marginal and I'm not convinced that therefore they're happy with what's going on. Apathy can be problematised, we need to unpack why people are apathetic.

Professor Mike Saward:

Ok so we have a figure of 65% turnout, might be a good thing or a bad thing depending on how you look at it, but you need to dig underneath that, there's a class dimension to that so...

Professor Paul Lewis:

Can I just say something about turnout, the lowest turnout in the UK is in one of the most deprived areas of Liverpool, there's no sense that apathy is about satisfaction

Professor Mike Saward:

a geographic dimension as well

Professor Paul Lewis:

Indeed.. I'm thinking about measures, we know about trust in politics, trust in democratic performance and trust in parties. Denmark has one of the highest turnouts and one of the highest levels of trust. We, by and large, don't trust the parties, we have over time a decreasing turnout...it's not a good sign at all I think.

Professor Mike Saward:

Aren't countries like Denmark and Sweden, don't they stand out from all other democracies.....in terms of trust in parties, trust in politicians and those usual measures?

Professor Paul Lewis:

but we were up there with them several decades ago – our high point in the 1950s was pretty high, pretty the same level actually.

Richard Heffernan

But if you take the united states which is a pretty class ridden society, turnout in presidential elections has been rising considerably since 1988 when 50% voted and we've gone up now to 64%. They had a better, higher rate than we did in 2005 in their 2004 presidential election, so there it is rising because people are mobilised and interested and of course it's a supply and demand scenario because people will be motivated to vote if they agree that the choices on offer to them is something they find meaningful. Bear in mind we'll never ever get 100% turnout. Even in places like Australia where it's compulsory, where you're fined if you don't vote, they only ever hit 95%, which is dramatic, but still 5% don't vote. Same in Greece

Professor Mike Saward:

So how strong is the democratic case for compulsory voting then? Compulsory voting in the UK, you exercise your citizens' rights, you know Jean Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher said we had to force people to be free sometimes. Compulsory voting is more democratic, Sarah what do you think?

Professor Sarah Childs:

I think there's a lot to be said for that. Whether it's democratic or not is probably not the question I'd pose, it's whether the outcome or the effect of introducing it would be a good thing. And I think I'd have a lot of sympathy for that because that whole package of introducing it would require citizenship education it would require parties to actually go out and try and garner the votes that would be out there because people would be forced to go and vote. So in that sense it might transform the dynamics of political campaigning, it might

change the nature of political parties, it might actually make politics more meaningful to many more people. So whether or not the actual imposition is democratic or not, would it have actual benefits for the politics, and I think there's quite a lot to be said for that.

Richard Heffernan:

I'm against it. It's like making someone interested in politics compulsory vote for Big Brother or for I'm a Celebrity, Please Get The Out Of Here or whatever these programmes are called, we don't vote in them because we don't want to. Though I think one initiative would be that on each ballot there should be a box that says "none of the above" so that you can actually go down to the polling station, register your abstention, that will be counted, there will be a vote tally for "none of the above"...and that would be a way in which you get people...often people go along, don't like any of them, they're alienated rather than apathetic and just spoil their ballot – I do that regularly in European Parliamentary Elections because I think it's an absurdity – but I'm registered when I do that as somebody who's just a fool or just can't fill out their ballot paper whereas actually I'd like to have my abstention registered and I think a lot of people would be of that mind

Professor Mike Saward:

I'm quite a fan of the European Parliament myself but, Paul, France is one example of where turnout is significantly higher, so is this really just a contextual thing, it's about the degree of motivation that politicians and parties can inspire in voters in different countries? It's a matter of different political cultures, is that what this boils down to?

Professor Paul Lewis:

I think it's something very practical as well, it's a matter of having a meaningful choice, I mean the big choice in this election was about economic policy and all the major parties said very little about it so it was very difficult to know who to vote for in that case to make your choice.

Richard Heffernan:

Comparative politics literature suggests there are 2 variables in explaining declining turnout. One is if the horse race, the campaign, is predetermined. If we all know who's going to win, so we all knew in 2001 that the Blair government would be re-elected – that's going to depress turnout because people say "there's no point in me going to vote because I know the result". The 2nd one is if it's an uncompetitive election in that, the horse race is boring and there's no difference between the parties. In this last election, just gone, it was a very very competitive election, we had no idea who had won and of course in a hung parliament we can argue that nobody had won in terms of the majority of seats in the Commons, yet turnout was only marginally up. I would've expected to see turnout a lot higher last time and I had a large bet to demonstrate that point – I lost

Professor Mike Saward:

Why wasn't turnout much higher

Richard Heffernan:

Well I think for that reason. I think in spite of it being a competitive election, in spite of the fact that the horse race was interesting and there were divisions between the parties, I think it's down to alienation and apathy. It's also people resigning from the choices on offer, and not feeling mobilised to vote as we heard some people say in the vox pops earlier on.

Professor Mike Saward:

Is this a hangover from the expenses scandal? House of Commons, back over the past few months, there was a curse on all of your parties. And this was from a lot of voters, and if you watch BBC's Question Time, if you watch a whole range of media outlets, this was of historic proportions was it not, this was deep levels of quite specifically aimed alienation from the political system?

Professor Paul Lewis:

I think it goes further back than that. People are being punished for a massive banking crisis that was not their fault at all, they're going to be punished in the future. I think the MPs took

the backwash from that in a sense, what do you do with bankers, what do you do with banks, they're a fact of life.

Professor Mike Saward:

Can our politicians in the UK win back the trust of the citizen

Professor Sarah Childs:

I think they can because I think we need to distinguish between a general sense of critique of member of parliament, you know, do you trust parliament, do you trust MPs and if you take something like the Hansard Society democratic audits, what people will say is that "My MP's pretty good, I like my MP, they work hard, they're doing a good job". So you need to distinguish between a generic criticism – I think people were very very unhappy with the fallout from the expenses scandal but I mean there are two things to note about that. One – globally, in comparative terms, this expenses scandal wasn't that significant in financial means. And secondly lots of people still value the work their local MP does. And I think that's why that event hasn't had a massive impact on that decline of trust, that decline was already occurring, it was pre-existing as Paul said and actually we haven't yet seen a massive turn away from electoral politics.

Professor Paul Lewis:

They don't trust the electoral system then, this is the point, so we have to have a change in that

Richard Heffernan:

I mean didn't take much, Hazel Blears, who was implicated, held her seat. Heacote Avery who was implicated lost his seat in Wales, there wasn't too much of a spin in terms of the way in which the votes were cast. Luton South was held for Labour despite the intervention of Esther Rantzen, who ran on a ticket of probity and got no votes whatsoever – I suppose "That's Life" for her really, what can you do? But I don't think it had any effect in terms of how the election went

Professor Mike Saward:

I want to move on at that point and talk about another aspect of participation and, possibly, exclusion in the election campaign. Now people focussed very closely and there was a great deal of interest and a surprisingly big audience for the first of the leaders' debates. Slightly less perhaps for the 2nd and 3rd of the leaders' debates. Who was watching these debates? What was the audience? And what impact did they have? Sarah, what do you think?

Professor Sarah Childs:

Well I think with the first one, you know, being a politics academic, you're sitting down thinking, my goodness, I've got to watch this for an hour and a half, so I was very surprised both by the size of the audience and by this idea that people actually watched politics for an hour and a half.....but it clearly caught the public imagination. I think some of the ways in which the media used very immediate polling kind of set the then secondary discussion of these debates was really quite interesting. But I think my concern about the way in which these leadership debates had an impact is that they perhaps just focussed their campaign on these 3 men over a period of 3 weeks and policies that perhaps we should've been discussing, whether that's the economy, but whether it's also issues around the public sector were just lost from the campaign ...so it really narrowed the focus to one of personality and style rather than perhaps the issues we should've been discussing. So there's debates about it being a good thing in that it mobilised many more people perhaps but I'm convinced about the extent to which it was good for the content of the debate

Professor Mike Saward:

Ok, would we have had more policy debate if we'd not had the leader's debates?

Professor Sarah Childs:

What we would have had is not the media running the electoral campaigning agenda, what we would've seen is many more, on a daily basis, each of the parties putting out their manifesto commitments. Now, it may not have worked to the degree that I may have wanted it to, but I different issues would've been on that grid day after day . And what happened was, it was really a question after the first debate of who agrees with Nick and who doesn't agree with Nick!

Professor Paul Lewis:

One of the interesting things about the debates, especially the first one, was the great explosion of the popularity of the Lib Dems after it. Apparently a third of viewers had never heard of Nick Clegg before, so there's a novelty factor which is quite interesting and I think, seriously, a lot of people mistook it for the X Factor, they thought, you know, we kind of rate people on their performance rather than what they're talking about. I seriously think that 's what it was because there was this great explosion of popularity for the Lib Dems which then didn't translate into anything at all!

Professor Mike Saward:

So whether we like it or not our imaginations force us to look at the political horse race, as it were, through the filter of the X Factor

Professor Paul Lewis:

Something that was on TV before which was more interesting, was the Chancellors' debate because they were talking about something much more concrete....as you said, the international affairs debate really wasn't about international affairs at all.

Richard Heffernan:

The trouble is the great advantage of the media the 24/7 news agenda is that it provides a public space in which politics is done, which allows us as citizens to see further and farther than we ever could without it. But the trouble is, and there's no way round it, is that the media are simultaneously occupying that public space and participating in the process. I found what was most disturbing about the debates is that, within 4 minutes you found out from the instant polls, who won and who lost and I was always determined as someone who tries to earn a living studying politics, to watch the debate myself, because I didn't want the media telling me who won without me having made my own judgement. And of course Gordon Brown always came 3rd, I mean the trouble with Brown is that he doesn't have many of the media skills that you need communication skills to operate as a modern politician – if he had turned water into wine live on television in the debates, people would've said that win is poor quality, what are you thinking, what are you doing. So there's this narrative that the media fit into and they are participants, the spotlight showcases them as much as it showcases the leaders. And the problem with the leaders' debates, which is why as a citizen I was against them, I think in democratic politics we have too much attention on leaders and we actually need more attention on the candidates and policies and parties, not just 3 men, or even, if there were, 3 women, telling us what they think and us spectating their process.

Professor Mike Saward:

Paul, I'm wondering about social class in the leaders' debates and indeed in the outcome of the election of course with the new Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister both expensively educated in private schools....we talked about gender, in terms of social class and political leadership has the UK taken a backward step or is this just....is this just at the top rung we're looking like it might be a backward step from there.

Professor Paul Lewis:

We're going back 20 years I think in terms of backgrounds.....is it over 50% of Tory MPs went to private schools, 54% I seem to think. Another interesting thing which is about breaking into the political sphere is this whole notion of internship which we hadn't heard of until relatively recently I think, in that you need a fair bit of money, you work for nothing...

Professor Mike Saward:

Is this a reference Paul to young men and women, work for the party, work in think tanks...

Professor Paul Lewis:

.....and the contenders say for the Labour leadership who've been in politics since in their 20s, straight out of school, straight out of university, special advisors....advisor here, advisor there, in the next work placement, very closed off.

Professor Mike Saward:

There's no place for ordinary people in parliament?

Professor Sarah Childs:

Well that's an issue that the Speaker's conference, special commission that was set up in the last parliament to look at the underrepresentation of various groups actually addressed, and one of its recommendations looks towards this idea of internships and actually looking at a way of providing fair opportunities for people to have chances not just through your familial links and who can get you an internship in the House of Commons...because I think you're right, some of those informal benefits that are available to certain kinds of people....

Professor Paul Lewis:

Because you don't even hear about it unless you're in the know!

Professor Sarah Childs:

No so it's worth looking at the extent to which Parliament does create something that will have opportunities for all kinds of people to actually participate

Richard Heffernan:

The class is so narrow that one family is providing two candidates for the Labour leadership, the Millibands, it's unheard of since the Simmonds in the 1920s and 30s! I mean they're probably talented people, they are talented people, but it's that narrow, both very talented people of course. But I think the interesting thing is 7% of the population are privately school educated, 75% of the cabinet are privately school educated, but of course they come from the top private schools.

Professor Mike Saward:

Is it true that there are more graduates of Eton than there are women in the cabinet?

Richard Heffernan:

It's 6 of one and 4 of the other, so yes, there are more.

Professor Mike Saward:

There's one other aspect of participation which was highlighted a lot during the campaign but I know there's some scepticism about it whether this really makes a difference or represents and advance in terms of citizen participation – Twitter, Facebook, new media, young people, inspired by Clegg in the first debate, we are told, or we were told at one point. Sarah, what do you make of that, is this an Obama moment of new media coming of age as it were in democratic politics?

Professor Sarah Childs:

I'm probably going to say something that's not very fashionable which is I don't think it is, I think for most people these things pass them by. I think there's probably a small group of politically active and technologically aware people for whom this may well have represented the first, if you like, internet kind of election but I think for most people, no. I think if anything this was an election that returned people back to the televisions. I think the focus on the leadership TV programmes and also subsequently on the coalition negotiations in fact made newspapers redundant in some way because we had to keep up with what was going on by the hour. So perhaps, the internet was important in that sense as a going to the BBC website or something to see what was going on, but actually it made people watch tele and that's perhaps old fashioned media.

Richard Heffernan:

I mean internet politics means you often have to pull things out of it, so if you're not sufficiently motivated to go and find things to pull, you're not likely to...it's not a push technology...not like television news is. Television news is your pushed information, even newspapers to a certain extent because you see the headlines, you're aware of the story.

Professor Mike Saward:

Maybe, or maybe once you're in YouTube and you're fishing around, stuff kind of gets pushed at you there as well.

Richard Heffernan:

But you have to be looking for it I suspect, to a large extent...and of course more people are. I mean, there's obviously a digital divide between old people and young people, young people are more likely to twitter than the old people, but more politicians twitter in order to push information out in the hope that some people will pull it at the other end. This was a very information rich election and the new media forms played a very important role in that, but it's at its infancy and it's going to develop over time. I think certainly newspapers had a bad experience in terms of sales because we all read newspapers free online now and we don't need to buy newspapers in the way we used to.

Professor Mike Saward:

So we have to do politics in real time now, we need realtime newspapers....what they will be, what they will become, we don't know.

Professor Paul Lewis:

What about mumsnet, that was a novelty wasn't it, that seemed to have some influence?

Professor Sarah Childs:

I think it did early on, I think the parties perceived it to have an influence which was why it was interesting. It goes back to the idea that women are less likely than men to be strongly attached to political parties, much more likely to make their mind up towards the election date and therefore the political parties saw votes up for grabs and therefore wanted to access those mediums. But again, it really did get displaced – it was looking like it was going to be a mumsnet election, it looked like the big debates were going to be over these kind of issues.

Professor Mike Saward:

In terms of participation then, that we've talked about from various angles, in terms of the media that we've linked to participation, I've got one final question which is this....did democracy win or did democracy lose as a result of this, in many ways fascinating, UK election? Paul

Professor Paul Lewis:

I think it held on, basically, without any great problems. I think it might have a little more vigour in the future by virtue of the fact that we've actually, the British electorate has faced the need for some more radical reform simply than just changing the government.

Professor Mike Saward:

Richard?

Richard Heffernan:

Er, the dude abides....it prevails....it neither wins nor loses, we change the government. Bear in mind this only the second time since 1979 that the party government has changed – we had 18 years of Conservative rule, followed by 13 years of Labour rule. And we change seamlessly and peaceably and things are as they say. And turn out is up – for the first time ever, incidentally, in terms of vote share, we have a coalition government which commands over 50% of the votes in terms of its representation in the Commons and that's a first, because normally you get mid 40s will give you a parliamentary majority and this hung parliament has produced a more representative government, but I think things are much as they were.

Professor Mike Saward:

My feeling is as long as local government remains ignored, hamstrung and irrelevant as it is then democracy will stay as it is. But Sarah, last word to you.

Professor Sarah Childs:

Gosh, well I think the point you just made is quite interesting. In order to answer your question I'm interested to what extent is this coalition government actually going to take on the issue of electoral reform and perhaps electoral systems reform and to what extent will that regenerate the British population and politics so actually....the coalition government is supposed to be in favour of localism and local government so maybe you'll get your desire fulfilled in the next six months or a year.

Professor Mike Saward:

I might get a strong society if I don't get a big society. I wait to see what both of those mean! And in that and many other respects there will be much to debate as the coalition either settles down or breaks up or does a bit of both over the coming weeks, months and years. My thanks to Sarah Childs, Paul Lewis and Richard Heffernan for this lively discussion