



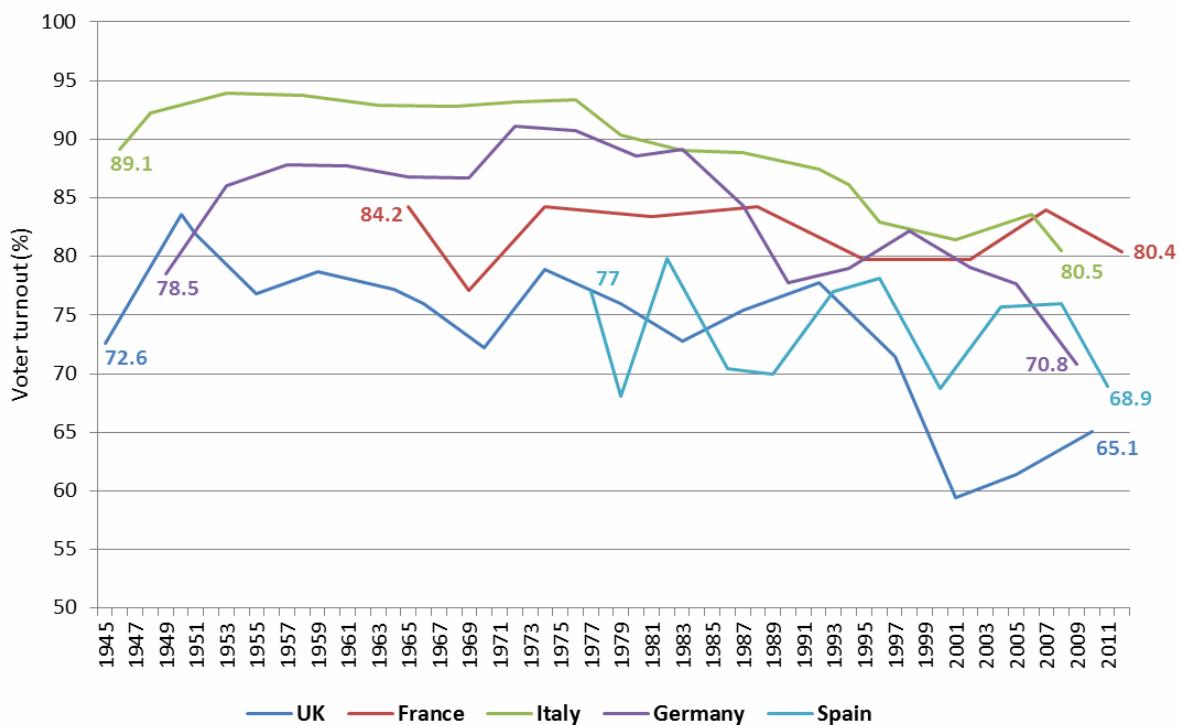
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GETTING TURNED OFF: LESSONS FROM EUROPE ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A BRAP BRIEFING PAPER
April 2013

Recently, think tanks from across Europe got together to talk about a graph.

This graph, in fact. It shows turnout in elections held in the continent's five largest countries:



As you can see, the graph shows a number of startling trends.

First, participation in elections is decreasing. Despite particular peaks and troughs, turnout in the five nations has fallen by an average of 9% since 1945. Generally speaking, elections occurring after the start of the financial crisis in 2008 have seen even greater drops in people voting. The exception to this is the UK, which saw a sharp spike in turnout for its 2010 election. But before we get carried away, the graph also shows that the UK fares particularly badly when it comes to voter disenchantment. There's been a 10% drop in turnout since 1974 and in the last election more than one in three people registered to vote chose not to – the lowest rate out of the five nations¹.

What are the causes of this disenchantment? And what about the related issue of increasing support for protest parties? As austerity bites are voters becoming more xenophobic, more ready to blame their problems on immigrants and foreigners?

The Open Society Foundation invited think tanks from across Europe to come together and debate these issues. Inevitably, the discussion was wide-ranging, but here are three key lessons that emerged.

¹ Data available at: www.idea.int/vt/. Turnout is parliamentary or presidential elections.

1 NEW DEFINITIONS OF LEADERSHIP

If you think our politicians are one-dimensional megaphones mechanically repeating the party line, you're not alone. A common complaint from voters in a number of countries is that political parties have become divorced from the general public. Even before the fear and anxiety resulting from austerity measures began to take hold, politicians had a difficult time understanding and engaging with the emotions of voters. This is one reason why populist parties have taken centre stage: radical alternatives are better at connecting with and capitalising on voters' basic, human concerns. There is an increasing feeling that politicians need to develop a new set of skills. Instead of 'selling' voters solutions, they need to see themselves as people who don't always have the answers and demonstrate this through clear leadership qualities: flexibility, responsiveness, and honesty. Challenging times demand challenging responses.

2 AVENUES FOR ACTIVISM

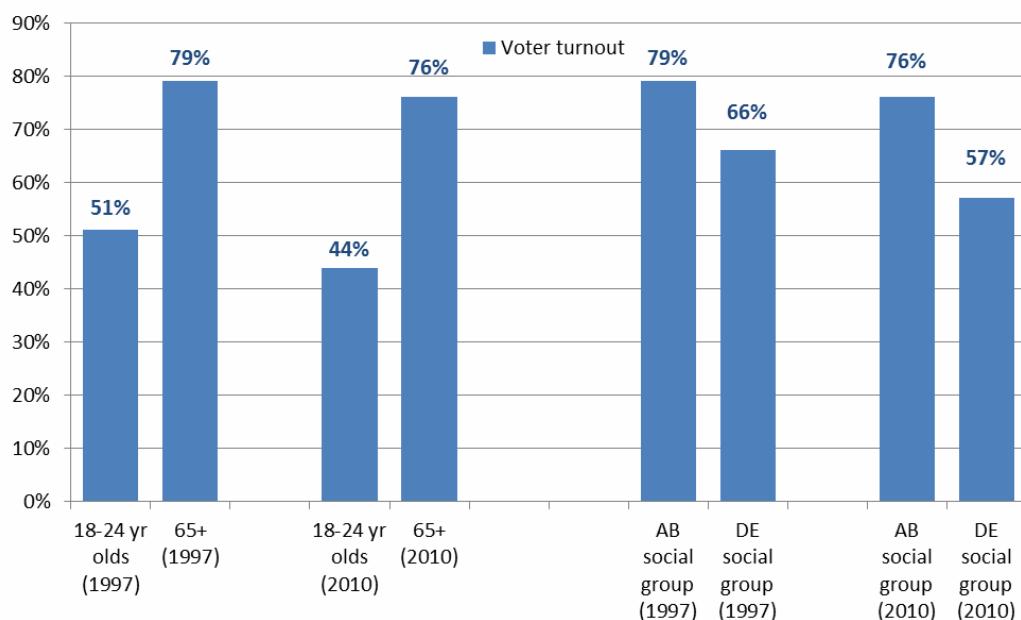
Across Europe, governments have attempted to devolve power through a number of state-appropriated volunteering initiatives. In the UK, for example, successive governments have introduced community budgets and allowed organisations to take over unused council assets. The trouble is, very few of these activities actually allow people to change things that are important to them. Examples of voters being turned off by these initiatives are numerous: people in major cities recently voted against publicly elected mayors, for example, and turnout for elections for a new American-style Police Commissioner reached historic lows (just under 12%). In Europe too, people are increasingly seeing that the institutions which actually affect their lives – central banks, big businesses – are remote, unaccountable, and not operated in the public interest. The lesson is clear. Call it empowerment, liquid democracy, or anything else: if you're going to give people power, make sure they can use it to make a difference to the things that are actually important to them.

3 EMPTY HEARTS

Distinctions between mainstream left and right parties are becoming increasingly blurred across Europe, leaving space for populist parties to emerge. The growing indistinguishability of the main parties is certainly a reason for the low electoral turnouts in the UK. In 2005, 44% of people thought there was 'not much difference' between Labour and the Conservatives (up from 12% in 1992). Politics doesn't have to be about blind ideology, but it does have to be about ideas and conviction. Unfortunately, rather than engage with people about what discourse would excite voters and reinvigorate the public debate, politicians have outsourced their thinking to spin doctors, pollsters, and clever campaigners. So the current disenchantment with politics is partly a failure of internal democracy: political parties do not demonstrate that they are open to influence and voters recognise that their engagement doesn't change anything.

Before we look at the implications of this for the UK, it might be useful to look at exactly who isn't voting. In the past, brab's work in this area has focused on people's ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age. The national data paints a clear picture of how each of these factors affects people's propensity to vote:

- ethnicity: generally, people from a BME background are as likely to vote as White British people. In the 2010 election, 78% of registered White British voters visited the polling stations, compared with 79% of Bangladeshi voters (the highest turnout rate), and 72% of Black African voters and 65% of multiple heritage voters (the lowest turnout rates). It should be noted, though, the BME people are less likely to register to vote than White British people²
- socioeconomic status: in 2010 76% of people classified as having ‘high’ or ‘intermediate’ managerial or professional roles turned out to vote, compared with 57% of semi and unskilled workers and the unemployed. The equivalent figures for the 1997 election were 79% and 66% respectively³
- age: by far the best indicator of whether someone is likely to vote. In 2010, just 44% of 18-24 year olds voted. This is compared with 37% in 2005 and 39% in 2001⁴



So what does all this mean for the UK context? What can we do to increase turnout in this country, fight the rise of populist, extremist parties, and help engage with decision-making more generally?

It's clear there is a lot that could be learnt from the ground upwards – from understanding and working with real people. This is a twofold process: political agencies need to get better at assimilating people's views *and* at helping people put their point across. We've talked a bit about the first point above. In terms of the second, the skills people need and the manner in which they can be imparted are no great secret. Recent research suggests that training, where it exists, has three elements: confidence building (perhaps through

² www.ethnicpolitics.org

³ www.ipso-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive.aspx

⁴ www.ipso-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive.aspx

exposure to meetings and debates); learning about meeting protocols (communications skills, knowing what minutes are, etc); and understanding what particular services do⁵.

Of course, this is a particular skills set for a particular task. There is also the wider question of helping people understand their role in politics, what is at stake and how this might affect their lives. Certainly, more needs to be imparted from an earlier age. But it's equally important that people are viewed as future citizens that have a stake in society on a day-to-day basis: not just future voters that turn up every five years for a general election! Some have argued that civic education in Europe has sometimes missed the mark. We should be wary of repeating the same mistakes here.

Finally, we need to reinforce the message that democracy can be the great 'leveller'. At election time it provides the most vulnerable and least powerful in society with just as much power as anybody else to challenge the injustice and inequality that affects them. This includes the power to affect stringent welfare reforms and failures of the health and social care sector to protect people's human rights – both of which have generated significant public outcry in the UK of late.

Yet people still feel there is a disconnect between who they vote for and changes to the laws, policies, and regulations that affect their lives. If we are to bridge this gap we need a much simpler language that helps people see how politics can impact upon what is most valuable to them. At brab we've done a great deal of work identifying the things that are most important to people and a lot of them centre around key human rights: dignity, respect, privacy, fairness. The challenge is to translate these concerns and values into clear actions, policies, and protections at a local, national, and EU level.

To give a simple example, we've had a number of scandals in the UK recently involving standards of healthcare. This is a live issue which a number of people care passionately about it. Unfortunately, our political system doesn't allow people to express their concerns on this in any meaningful way and political parties haven't spelled out, in simple terms, what they think should be done to prevent scandals like this in the future. Discussions about the root causes of these failures are few and far between. If history is anything to go by, there'll be a lot of talk, a lot of blame, but no solution that draws on the basic standard of care people expect and the fact the public are united in their desire for this.

If we can translate into practical terms people's desire for dignity and respect in key areas of their lives – health, housing, education, employment – not only would we have a framework in which to make difficult decisions, but a framework people could refer to in trying to build mass movements of common concerns.

⁵ See brab (2012) *Interculturalism: a breakdown of thinking and practice*

April 2013

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