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Is There a Crisis of Political Participation?

*John Curtice and Ben Seyd**

There appears to be a crisis of political participation in Britain. Turnout at the last UK general election was, at 58 per cent, lower than at any other general election since 1918. Moreover, voters have been reluctant to go to the polls in every other kind of election held over the last six years. Unsurprisingly, then, politicians of all political persuasions have been asking themselves how they can ‘re-engage’ the public with the political process.

This decline in electoral participation might seem particularly surprising given one of the key social changes to have occurred in Britain over the last two decades – the expansion of educational attainment. Education is supposedly a ‘democratic good’, meant to encourage adherence to democratic values, a sense of political competence and thus a greater propensity to vote (Almond and Verba, 1963; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). As Almond and Verba’s study of *The Civic Culture* put it:

The educated classes possess the keys to political participation and involvement while those with less education are less well equipped.

As Table 5.1 shows, in the mid-1980s nearly half the adult British population had no educational qualifications. Now, less than a quarter are in this position. Over the same period, the proportion with a degree has more than doubled (to 16 per cent), while those with at least an A level or its equivalent now comprise well over two-fifths of the adult population (rather than just over a quarter as they did two decades ago). So Britain has experienced a substantial increase in overall levels of educational attainment, something we might expect to produce an increase in electoral participation. That the very opposite seems to have happened is nothing less than a ‘puzzle of participation’ (Brody, 1978).

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Table 5.1 Highest educational qualification reached, 1986–2002

	1986	1989	1991	1994	1998	2000	2002	Change '86-'02
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Degree	7	7	9	10	9	14	16	+9
A-level / other HE	21	24	25	26	30	26	29	+8
None	45	42	38	35	30	29	23	-22
<i>Base</i>	3100	3029	2918	3469	3146	3426	3425	

Of course, voting is not the only form of political participation open to individuals in a liberal democracy. They can also, for example, sign a petition, contact the media or go on a demonstration. Recent events, such as the fuel protests in September 2000, marches against the banning of fox hunting, and anti-war demonstrations prior to the onset of the Iraqi war in March 2003, have suggested that perhaps there *is* no puzzle of participation after all. Perhaps a better-educated and more politically competent society is more willing and able to participate in a range of political activities, activities that are seen as a more effective way of expressing one's view than simply putting a cross on a ballot paper (Inglehart, 1997).

However, if this is the case, then it raises different concerns about recent trends in participation in Britain. There is plenty of evidence that those who take part in non-electoral forms of political participation tend to be drawn disproportionately from the ranks of the better educated (Marsh, 1977; Marsh and Kaase, 1979; Heath and Topf, 1987; Parry *et al.*, 1992; Norris, 2002).¹ Consequently, if such non-electoral participation is becoming relatively more important, we might find growing social divisions in Britain between those who do and do not participate. Moreover, some argue that rising educational standards will mean that those without any qualifications will find it increasingly difficult to compete in the political market place (Dalton, 2002). If this is true, we should expect to find our divide widening still further. So perhaps we need to be concerned about a growing participation divide in Britain between, on the one hand, a group of well-educated 'super-activists' who are able and willing to engage in range of political activities, and, on the other, a substantial if diminishing group of the less well educated who are effectively excluded from the avenues of political participation.

These are the questions examined in this chapter. We begin by considering how it might have been possible for electoral turnout to have fallen despite rising levels of educational attainment. We then examine whether levels of non-electoral participation have indeed increased over the last twenty years. And, finally, we consider whether there is any evidence that education has come to matter more in determining who participates. In so doing, we are not aiming to provide a full account of the recent decline in electoral turnout (see Bromley

and Curtice, 2002), or to explain why people protest (Marsh, 1977; Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Parry *et al.*, 1992). Rather, we seek to examine what impact, if any, one of the major changes of the last twenty years has had on patterns of political participation.

Personal efficacy

One key assumption underpins the proposition that rising educational levels should result in higher levels of participation. This is that higher levels of educational attainment bring with them a stronger sense of 'subjective' political competence. By this, we mean the sense that one has the ability and confidence to take political actions that could be effective in changing a government decision. So we begin by considering whether education does bring with it a sense of personal political efficacy. We then examine what impact rising educational levels have had on overall levels of efficacy.

As the next table shows, those with no educational attainment certainly are less likely than the better educated to feel personally efficacious. Those with no qualifications are currently twice as likely as those with a degree to agree strongly with the view "people like me have no say in what the government does", and are no less than eight times more likely to agree strongly that "sometimes government and politics seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on". Moreover, while these differences have fluctuated somewhat from year to year, there is no evidence that the gap between the most and least well educated has consistently become any narrower in more recent years. So the reasoning behind Almond and Verba's claim that the educated possess the 'keys to political participation' appears to remain as valid as it has ever been.²

However, the next table also tells us something else equally important. This is that the rise in educational attainment over the last twenty years has not been accompanied by any systematic long-term increase in personal efficacy. The proportion who strongly agree that politics and government seem complicated is just as high now as it was in the 1980s, while the proportion who believe they have no say in what the government does is if anything higher now.

So, while at any one point in time higher levels of educational attainment are associated with a stronger sense of political efficacy, it is not the case that the increase in educational attainment has resulted in more people feeling efficacious. The impact of the increase in educational attainment has in fact been wholly negated by changes in the level of personal efficacy within our educational groups, changes that are perhaps a response to the drop that has occurred in the extent to which people believe the political system is able and willing to respond to demands for change that may be made of it (Curtice and Jowell, 1997: 153; Bromley *et al.*, 2001; Bromley and Curtice, 2002).³ And while none of this on its own points to any kind of crisis of participation, we can at least begin to see why a rise in educational attainment may not be sufficient to bring about a more participatory culture.

Table 5.2 Trends in personal efficacy and education level, 1986–2002

% strongly agree	1986	1987	1991	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
People like me have no say in what government does								
All*	23	14	16	28	24	17	25	26
Education level								
Degree**	14	3	7	18	9	10	17	16
No qualifications***	26	20	21	30	32	24	28	32
% strongly agree								
Politics and government so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand								
All	17	13	16	22	22	15	18	17
Education level								
Degree	4	2	4	3	6	4	3	4
No qualifications	23	18	26	31	35	32	25	32
*Base	1548	3414	1445	1137	1180	2071	2293	2287
**Base	113	284	112	110	124	179	300	342
***Base	689	1342	576	458	406	654	740	609

Source: 1987: *British Election Study*

Electoral participation

But does how efficacious someone feels make any difference to whether or not they vote in the first place? Table 5.3 suggests that those who feel personally efficacious are somewhat more likely to vote (Parry *et al.*, 1992; Pattie and Johnston, 1998). Thus, among those who *disagree* with the statement “people like me have no say in what the government does” (and who therefore can be seen as having high levels of political efficacy), nearly three-quarters reported voting in the 2001 election, compared with fewer than six in ten among those who agreed strongly with the statement. But the strength of this link seems to vary from election to election, and indeed is never particularly strong. This may help explain why sometimes researchers have doubted whether any link exists at all (Heath and Taylor, 1999; Pattie and Johnston, 2001). Our findings suggest that, although a link exists, it is only amongst the minority with the lowest possible levels of personal efficacy that turnout is noticeably different from the norm. We should remember too that in 1997, and again in 2001, turnout fell across the board, quite irrespective of how efficacious someone felt. So the level of turnout can certainly change irrespective of trends in levels of personal efficacy.

Table 5.3 Voting and personal efficacy, 1987–2001

People like me have no say in what the government does	% voted					
	1987	Base	1997	Base	2001	Base
Agree strongly	85	491	75	374	57	242
Agree	86	1149	80	1033	69	480
Neither agree nor disagree	88	537	78	488	66	118
Disagree/disagree strongly	88	1191	84	518	72	254

Sources: 1987 and 1997: *British Election Study*

Given this, it is not surprising to find that in Britain, as in much of the rest of Europe (but not in the United States), there is little relationship between educational attainment and turnout (Heath and Topf, 1986; Parry *et al.*, 1992; Pattie and Johnston, 1998, 2001; Topf, 1999a). As the next table shows, among those with no educational qualifications the level of reported turnout in the 2001 election was just five points lower than it was among those with a degree. A similar pattern has applied to each election over the last two decades. In short, there is no reason to expect that an increase in educational attainment should have much impact on the level of turnout one way or another.

Table 5.4 Turnout and education level, 1987–2001

Education level	% voted			
	1987	1992	1997	2001
Degree	87	93	82	77
Base	305	255	301	497
No qualifications	85	85	79	72
Base	1560	1263	908	899

Source: 1987 and 1997: *British Election Study*

Still, we might ask why this should be the case, given the lower level of personal efficacy that exists amongst those with no educational qualifications? One of the key explanations that has been offered is that trade unions in Britain (as in much of the rest of Europe) have been able to mobilise the less well educated and persuade them of the merits of going to the polling station. This, it is argued, distinguishes Britain from the United States, which has both a weaker trade union movement and a more pronounced gap in turnout between more and less well-educated groups (Dalton, 2002: 54).⁴ However, if this were the case,

we might have anticipated an educational divide in levels of turnout to have opened up over the last twenty years as trade unions have declined.

In fact, there is little to substantiate this theory. As the next table shows, over the last twenty years, trade union membership has consistently been *higher* among the better educated than among the less well educated. And, at the same time, the decline in membership has occurred at more or less the same rate among all educational groups. So there is no reason here to anticipate that the decline in trade union membership should have opened up an educational divide in electoral participation.

Table 5.5 Trade union membership by education level, 1986–2002

	% belong to a trade union				
	1986	1991	1994	1998	2002
All	24	21	22	19	18
<i>Base</i>	3100	2918	3469	3146	3435
Highest education level					
Degree/other HE	32	28	32	27	24
<i>Base</i>	576	666	759	870	1015
A level	26	22	22	22	18
<i>Base</i>	266	280	419	311	440
O level/CSE/GCSE	23	20	20	16	14
<i>Base</i>	829	783	925	888	979
None	21	17	18	13	12
<i>Base</i>	1392	1134	1300	1009	895

So perhaps we should stop looking for explanations as to why education makes no difference to turnout and instead accept that, in Britain at least, voting is not after all that demanding an act, and is certainly one that the less well educated can undertake perfectly well. However, if we accept this line of argument, it not only means that rising levels of educational attainment are no guarantee of *higher* turnout, but that they are also little defence either against other forces that might discourage electoral participation (Heath and Taylor, 1999; Bromley and Curtice, 2002; Franklin, 2002). And, if this is so, one may question how far innovations such as the inclusion of classes in civic education on the English national curriculum can be expected to increase turnout either.

Non-electoral participation

The picture is, however, very different once we move beyond the ballot box and look at trends in non-electoral participation. The next table shows, using our 2002 survey, the proportion of those with a degree and those with no qualifications who report ever having done each of eleven possible actions that might be undertaken by someone in response to a government action they believe is unjust and harmful (or in the case of stopping buying goods as a way of protesting against something a country or company has done). Graduates are far more likely than those without qualifications to have undertaken each of the activities. In fact, among those with no qualifications, few report ever having done anything other than sign a petition or boycott something in the shops.

5.6 Non-electoral participation by educational attainment

% saying they had	Education level	
	Degree	No qualifications
Stopped buying goods as a protest	70	34
Signed a petition	60	26
Given money to a campaigning organisation	34	7
Gone on a protest or demonstration	31	6
Contacted MP	29	9
Got involved in a campaigning organisation	29	8
Raised the issue in an organisation they already belong to	17	2
Contacted government department	12	2
Contacted the media	11	4
Spoken to an influential person	11	3
Formed a group of like-minded people	4	1
<i>Base</i>	342	609

So, once we move beyond the ballot box, educational attainment does make a considerable difference to the likelihood that someone will ever be involved in political activity. But why is this so? Is it, as Almond and Verba would suggest, simply because these groups are more efficacious? After all, whatever may be true about voting, virtually all other forms of political action are sufficiently demanding to require a degree of confidence in one's ability. Or is the process more complex than this? Inglehart's theory of cognitive mobilisation suggests that rising educational standards tend not only to increase people's sense of their own political abilities, but also to lower their regard for the political system itself, and in particular for 'hierarchical political institutions' (Inglehart, 1997). As a result, they have a greater *motivation* to engage in protest activities,

as well as the confidence to do so. Similarly, Marsh has argued that the most politically active people are those who are both personally efficacious and disinclined to trust governments to do what is right. These ‘efficacious cynics’, he claims, believe in their own ability to effect change, but also “feel that politics is far too important to be left solely to the politicians, most of whom they actually mistrust” (Marsh, 1977: 123).

In practice, the simpler explanation proves to be the more convincing (see also (Parry *et al.*, 1992; Curtice and Jowell, 1997). The next table uses the same information as Table 5.6 but shows the average number of actions reported (excluding boycotting products as this is not an action directed at a domestic government) broken down by respondents’ political efficacy and levels of trust in government. Efficacy clearly matters. Someone who strongly *disagrees* with the view that politics is too complicated to understand (and who is thus very efficacious) has, on average, undertaken nearly three activities, a sharp contrast to the figure of 0.8 actions undertaken by someone with the lowest level of efficacy. But these figures are not higher if people have low levels of trust in government – indeed for the most part they are slightly lower. In so far as it matters at all, it seems that, far from giving people the motivation to become involved politically, lack of trust promotes the feeling that getting involved is unlikely to be worth the effort.

Table 5.7 Non-electoral participation by personal efficacy and trust in government

Mean no. of actions taken	Trust governments to place the needs of the nation above party interest			
	Just about always/most of the time	Base	Some of the time/ almost never	Base
Politics and government so complicated that a person like me cannot understand				
Strongly agree	0.8	73	0.8	339
Agree	1.3	230	1.0	768
Neither agree nor disagree	1.3	59	1.2	158
Disagree	1.9	163	1.9	322
Strongly disagree	3.0	38	2.8	78

But what has happened to levels of non-electoral participation over the last twenty years? Has it increased in line with the rise in educational attainment? Or has it been held back by the failure of personal efficacy to increase during that period? Is non-electoral participation perhaps becoming a substitute for the ballot box? Or is the decline in electoral turnout part of a wider decline in political participation and engagement?

We have two sets of measures we can use to examine these questions. For most of the activities listed in Table 5.6 we have data going back twenty years. This shows both the extent to which people *would* take a particular action if “a

law was being considered by parliament which you thought was really unjust and harmful”, and the extent to which people had ever done so. So the first of these measures is an indication of apparent inclination or potential to engage in non-electoral protest activity; the second, an indication of the degree to which that potential has been realised in practice.

We begin with our measure of inclination or potential. The next table shows the proportion who said they would do each thing were an unjust or harmful law being considered by parliament. We also show a summary of the total number of things people said they would do.

Table 5.8 Trends in potential non-electoral participation, 1983–2002

% saying they would	1983	1986	1989	1991	1994	1998	2000	2002	Change '83-'02
Sign a petition	55	65	71	78	68	67	68	63	+8
Contact MP	46	52	55	49	58	59	49	51	+5
Contact media	14	15	14	14	22	21	22	27	+13
Go on protest or demonstration	8	11	14	14	17	21	16	18	+10
Speak to an influential person	10	15	15	17	15	18	17	19	+9
Form a group of like-minded people	6	8	19	7	10	9	7	8	+2
Raise the issue in an organisation they already belong to	9	10	11	9	7	9	10	11	+2
No. of actions									
None	12	10	8	6	7	7	7	7	- 5
One or two	72	65	61	64	58	54	59	58	- 14
Three or more	14	25	30	29	33	37	32	33	+ 19
<i>Base</i>	<i>1761</i>	<i>1548</i>	<i>1516</i>	<i>1445</i>	<i>1137</i>	<i>2030</i>	<i>2293</i>	<i>2287</i>	

As the last column of table 5.8 shows, in every case, more people say they would take a particular action now than said they would twenty years ago. Particularly noteworthy is a near doubling in the proportion who say they would contact the media (a reflection perhaps of the recent growth in opportunities for ‘ordinary people’ to get their views across to the media). True, the growth in reported willingness to take action has not followed a simple linear trend. Much of the increase happened in the 1980s (a period in which rising levels of educational attainment were *not* being counteracted by falling levels of personal

efficacy). But at least some of the dividend that might have been expected from the rise in educational attainment appears to have been reaped.

Has this growth in protest potential been realised in action? Table 5.9 suggests it has. In six of the seven actions listed in the table, more people now report having done them than was the case in 1986. However, the increases are mostly small and, as we saw earlier, many of them largely occurred in the 1980s.

Table 5.9 Trends in actual non-electoral participation, 1986–2002

% saying they had	1986	1989	1991	1994	2000	2002	Change 1986- 2002
Signed a petition	34	41	53	39	42	43	+9
Contacted MP	11	15	17	14	16	17	+6
Contacted media	3	4	4	5	6	7	+4
Gone on a protest or demonstration	6	8	9	9	10	12	+6
Spoken to an influential person	3	3	5	3	4	6	+3
Formed a group of like-minded people	2	3	2	3	2	2	0
Raised the issue in an organisation they already belong to	5	4	5	4	5	6	+1
No. of actions							
None	56	48	37	53	47	46	-10
One or two	38	43	53	38	43	42	+4
Three or more	5	7	8	8	9	11	+6
Base	1548	1516	1445	1137	2293	2287	

Moreover, apart from the relatively undemanding activity of signing a petition, most people have not engaged in these forms of protest activities most of the time.⁵ Still, it is quite clear that the decline in turnout at recent British elections is not part of any wider refusal by the public to become involved in the political process. Rather, it seems that other forms of political participation are now somewhat more common than they once were.

This coincidence of a decline in electoral participation and an increase in non-electoral participation obviously raises questions as to whether the two are connected. Is the latter, perhaps, replacing the former? Are some turning away from the ballot box and demonstrating on the street instead? In truth, there is no evidence to support this. Rather, those who do take part in non-electoral political activities are actually *more* rather than less likely to vote in elections. In our 2002 survey, as many as 80 per cent of those who had undertaken three

or more protest actions said they had voted in the previous general election, compared with just 65 per cent of those who had not engaged in any actions. The same finding applies among younger people, the group for whom the claim that non-electoral activity is a substitute for electoral activity is most common. So, among those aged under 35 who had *never* undertaken any form of non-electoral activity, reported turnout was 46 per cent; among those who had undertaken three or more, turnout was reported at 58 per cent. Consequently, non-electoral participation should be seen as an *add-on* to voting, and not as a substitute (Marsh, 1977; Bromley *et al.*, 2001).

What, however, we can also note from Tables 5.8 and 5.9 could be happening is that a new breed of ‘super-activists’ is emerging who engage in a much wider range of non-electoral activities than was commonly the case in the past. Certainly, the proportion of people who say they have undertaken three or more actions has more than doubled since 1986. Is this perhaps a sign that the education divide in non-electoral participation is widening, and that Britain now has an educated elite that is becoming even more active while perhaps those with no qualifications are being left behind?

It seems not. In Table 5.10, we show the number of actions reported by those with degrees and those with no qualifications on a number of occasions over the last two decades. We also show the ‘education gap’, which is simply the difference between the proportion of those with a degree reporting having undertaken three or more activities and the proportion of those with no qualifications doing so. This education gap proves to be largely the same in most years and certainly shows no evidence of a trend over time. So while non-electoral participation is far higher amongst the better educated, this is no more the case now than it was twenty years ago.

Table 5.10 Trends in number of actual non-electoral activities undertaken by education level, 1986–2002

No. of protest activities undertaken by...	1986	1989	1991	1994	2000	2002
... people with a degree						
None	28	28	22	23	26	27
One or two	47	34	56	54	49	48
Three or more	22	35	22	23	25	26
<i>Base</i>	113	88	141	110	300	342
... people with no qualifications						
None	62	58	49	69	58	63
One or two	34	37	46	27	38	34
Three or more	2	3	3	3	4	3
<i>Base</i>	689	622	593	458	740	609
Education gap	+20	+32	+19	+20	+21	+23

At the same time Table 5.10 also shows that the levels of participation within the two groups has not varied a great deal either. This suggests that the rise in non-electoral participation over the last two decades has been no less – but also no more – than we might have expected given the increase in educational attainment and the strength of the relationship between educational attainment and non-electoral participation. In fact, participation levels are somewhat higher now than they were in 1986 in some of the intermediate educational groups not shown in Table 5.10. So in truth, modest though it has been, the rise in non-electoral participation has been somewhat greater than accounted for by the rise in educational attainment alone. Evidently it is a mistake to believe that the rise in educational attainment has been sufficient to transform the pattern of non-electoral participation.

Conclusions

We began this chapter with a crisis and a puzzle. Britain appeared to be suffering a crisis of political participation and this appeared to be a puzzle given the expansion that has occurred in educational attainment over the last twenty years. Yet it seems that we have neither a crisis nor a puzzle. True, electoral participation may have fallen, but it has been accompanied by an increase in non-electoral participation, an increase that cannot itself be regarded as the cause of the decline in turnout. So the participation crisis in Britain is confined to the ballot box, and it is not part of a wider decline in the willingness of citizens to engage with the political system.

These divergent trends are perfectly compatible with the increase in levels of educational attainment that has occurred over the last twenty years. Educational attainment has never had, and continues not to have, much influence on electoral participation and so its expansion cannot be expected to insulate levels of turnout against whatever other forces that may be helping to depress them. On the other hand, education has always been associated with non-electoral participation, levels of which have duly risen by more or less the (modest) amount that we would expect given the extent of the rise in educational attainment.

What messages do our findings tell us about how levels of political participation in Britain might change over the next twenty years, particularly as the proportion of adults with educational qualifications continues to rise? One possible danger, that the less well educated will become increasingly politically marginalised, is not perhaps as great as we might have feared. Their relative chances of being involved in politics outside the ballot box do not seem to show any signs of becoming any lower than they are already. But, even so, voting remains the only form of political activity where levels of participation between groups from different educational backgrounds approach equity. So, if voting continues its recent decline, and non-electoral participation its increase, then there is an increased danger that the voices of the less well educated will become quieter still.

Certainly, a further rise in non-electoral participation seems quite likely, although in part this depends on there not being a decline in levels of personal efficacy. And a better-educated public would seem more likely to engage with the increasing attempts being made by government to consult with the public in the formulation of public policy. But, even so, and even amongst graduates, most forms of political activity are the preserve of a small minority, and are likely to remain so in the near future. Britain may become more like a participatory democracy in future, but most people, for most of the time, will still be relying on their elected representatives to make the right decision for them.

Notes

1. However, in contrast, Topf has argued that the relationship between education and protest may be weakening. Across west European countries, he reports a steady “de-skilling of political activism”, as more and more people with low educational levels become involved in some form of protest activity (Topf, 1999b).
2. In addition to the trends shown in the table it should also be noted that there has been a decline in personal efficacy amongst all those whose level of educational attainment lies in-between that of the two groups shown in the table.
3. There is no evidence in our data to support the claim by Parry *et al.* (1992) that it is those with *middle level qualifications* that have the highest level of efficacy. For example, the proportion of those whose highest educational qualification is an ‘A’ level (or its equivalent) who strongly agree that “people like me have no say in what government does” is, at 23 per cent, in-between the equivalent figure for those with a degree and those with no qualifications at all.
4. The decline in mobilising agencies such as trade unions is also often used to explain why, in the United States in particular, voter turnout has declined in spite of increases in educational attainment (Inglehart, 1990).
5. However, no less than 50 per cent say they have stopped buying goods in protest against the actions of a particular company or country.

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