

Government Effectiveness and Political Participation in Britain

Paul Whiteley

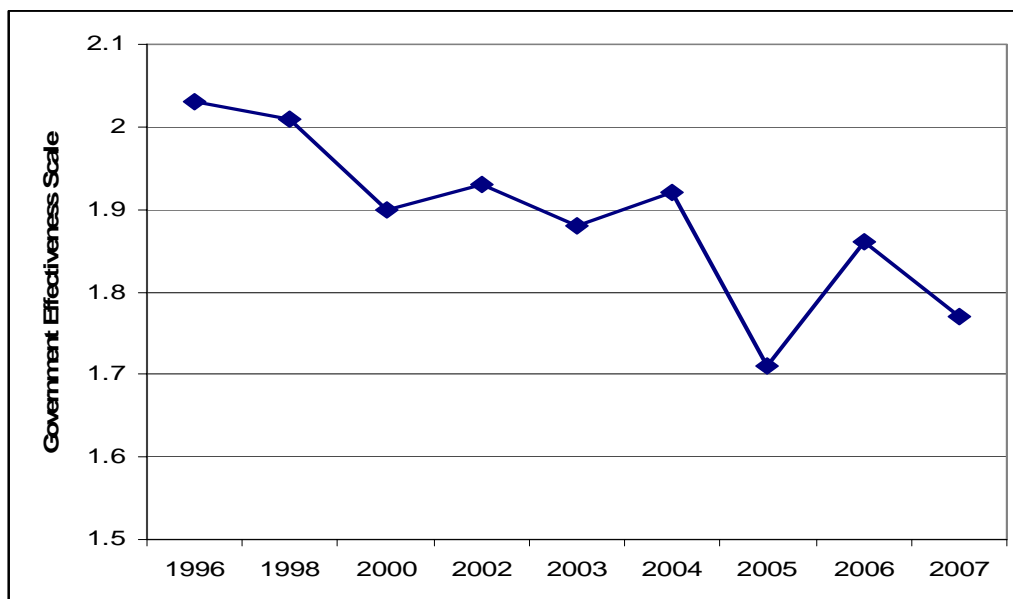
(University of Essex)

Introduction

Something is happening to the effectiveness of British Government – it is declining over time. We know this from data supplied by World Bank economists who have been carefully mapping the correlates of good government across the world as part of their efforts to understand economic development. One of their measures is called ‘Government Effectiveness’ and it is defined as:

‘The quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressure, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to such policies’ (Kaufmann, Kray and Mastruzzi, 2006: 4).

Figure 1. Trends in Governmental Effectiveness in the UK



This concept is measured by a variety of indicators, the details of which can be found on the World Bank website (<http://www.govindicators.org>). If we look at the data for Britain,

the trends in government effectiveness over the last ten years appear in Figure 1. We don't know what happened before 1996, since the data starts in that year, but it is fairly clear that effectiveness has been declining over this period.

There are a number of explanations for this development, including:

- An over-ambitious state which is trying to do too much, tackling problems which are hard to solve by government action.
- The continuous election campaign promoting headline chasing as a substitute for effective policy-making.
- The weakening of accountability in public services caused by the growth of quangoes and other unelected policy-making bodies
- A failure to deliver on electoral promises, breeding cynicism among citizens, making it difficult to govern them. (In 2001 80% agreed with the statement that 'There is a big difference between what parties promise and what they do after winning an election').
- The targets and indicators culture in the public services potentially corrupting policy implementation
- The permanent revolution of organisational change in UK administration – re-organisations become a substitute for effective action
- The decline of accountability of central government caused by the marginalisation of the House of Commons
- The individualisation and marketisation of society – individuals are increasingly difficult to govern because of the decline in the institutions of collective action such as parties, trade unions, and voluntary organisations

This is not a comprehensive list and it is certainly possible to think of other explanations for the trend. In this paper, I want to concentrate on one important explanation which is often unrecognised in debates about the effectiveness of government. This is the role of political participation and public involvement in the policy-making process. Thus the argument is that a decline in political participation is an important factor in explaining the decline in government effectiveness because it weakens civil society, which supports effective government.

The paper proceeds, firstly, by showing that political participation is quite important for explaining good governance. This is a necessary starting point for the analysis, and it is followed by a section in which we examine trends in party support and voting, the two key measures of participation which are particularly important for civil society. It should be

stressed that not all forms of political participation in Britain have declined, and some have increased over time. However the core forms of participation which underpin civil society and support state action have declined quite precipitously, and these will be fully examined. Following this discussion we consider some remedies for this state of affairs in the context of the agenda for constitutional reform.

Political Participation and Government Effectiveness

It is not at all obvious that high levels of political participation influence effective governance. In fact one can think of scenarios in which ‘excessive participation’ such as widespread protest behaviour, for example, might paralyze decision-making, and undermine government. However the importance of participation in supporting and stimulating democratic governance has been a key theme among democratic theorists for many years (Dahl, 1971; Lijphart, 1977; Przeworski, 1991; Putnam, 1993).

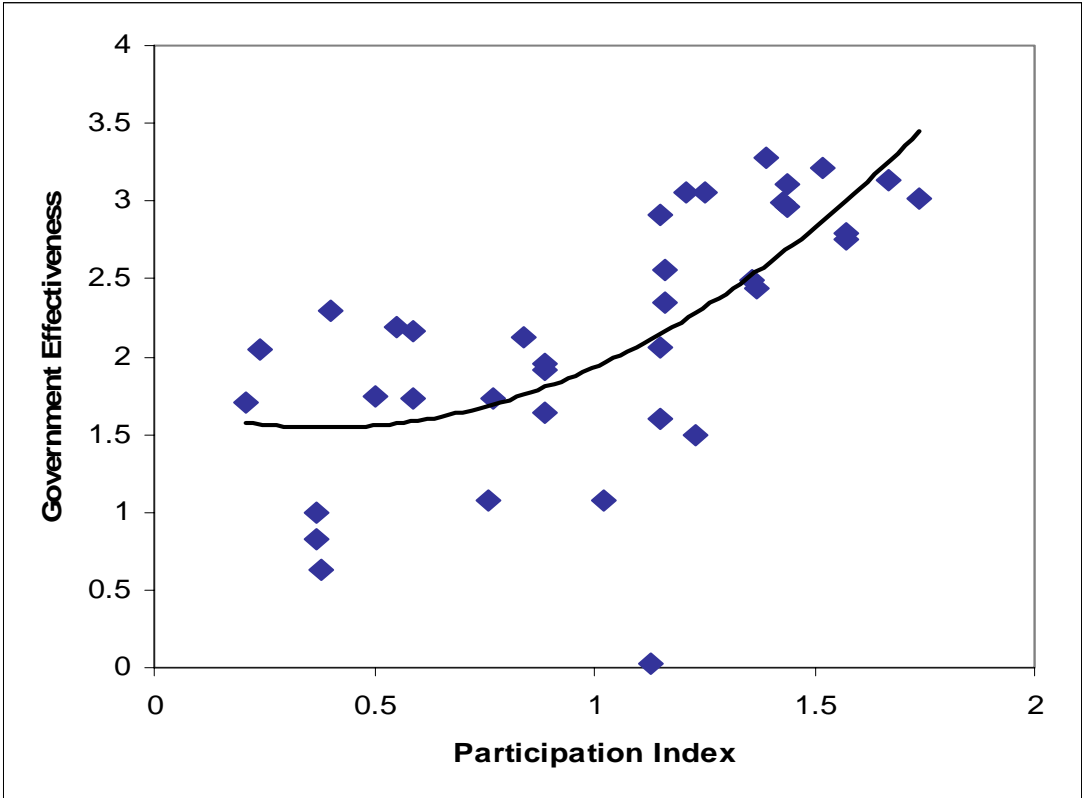
What is the relationship between governance and political participation? To see this requires a comparative analysis across many countries, since relationships cannot be observed in only one country at a given point of time. The International Social Survey Programme conducted a study of citizenship in 37 countries in 2004, and their surveys included a lot of questions about political participation (<http://www.issp.org>). It is possible to combine this data into an index of participation for each country and then compare it with the measure of government effectiveness from the World Bank, examined in Figure 1. The questions in the surveys asked about the following forms of participation:

*Signing petitions; Boycotting certain products; Taking part in demonstrations;
Attending political meetings; Contacting politicians; Donating money or raise funds for
political causes; Contacting the media; Joining an Internet political forum.*

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the Government Effectiveness Index and the political participation scale constructed from the responses to the questions in the

International Social Survey Programme surveys (see also Whiteley, 2007). Each diamond represents a different country, and the curve summarizes the relationship between the two variables. The countries are all democracies, like the US or EU member states, or ‘near’ democracies like Russia and the Phillipines. The figure shows clearly that high levels of participation tend to go with high levels of government effectiveness.

Figure 2 Government Effectiveness and Political Participation in 37 Countries



In Figure 2 there is a group of countries with relatively low levels of participation, and the curve suggests that a modest increase in public participation in these would have little effect on governance. But once participation rates go beyond the median level on the scale (of 1), then governments become more and more effective as additional people get involved. Figure 2 covers a lot of political activities, but it nonetheless omits the two key forms of participation which are particularly important for governance mentioned earlier. The first of these is party involvement.

Figure 3 Government Effectiveness and Partisanship in 37 Countries

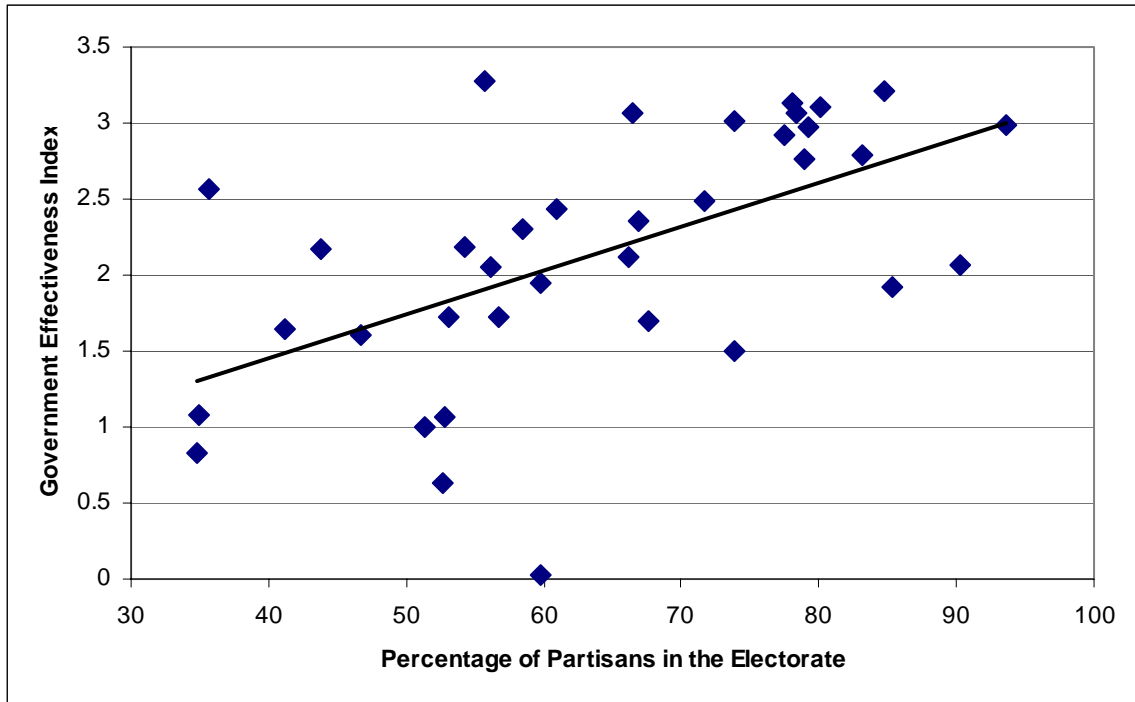
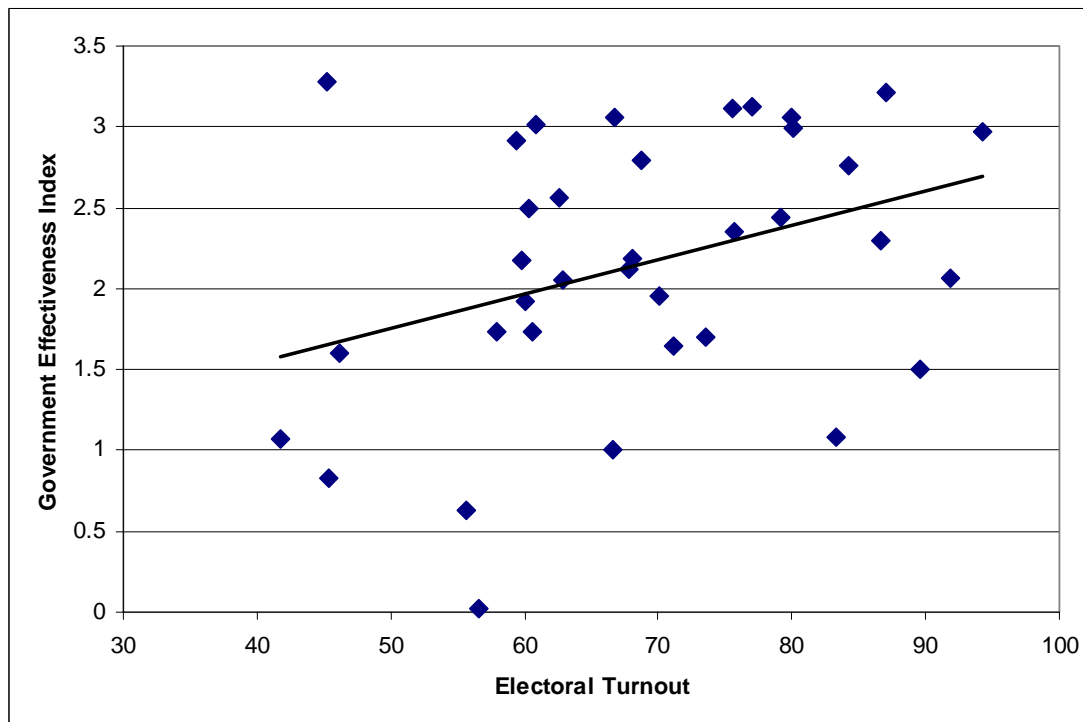


Figure 3 examines participation in political parties in the form of the percentage of people in the electorate who think of themselves as party supporters. This is a psychological rather than a behavioural measure, but it has important influences on political participation. It is clear that governance is more effective in countries with high levels of partisanship in comparison with countries where partisan attachments are weak.

Figure 4 examines the relationship between government effectiveness and electoral turnout, which is perhaps the most important form of participation for supporting civil society. The picture is rather similar to that of Figure 3. High levels of turnout tend to be associated with effective governance. This is in part because turnout and partisanship are related to each other, with high levels of partisanship in a country producing greater electoral participation.

Figure 4 Government Effectiveness and Turnout in 37 Countries



But why should parties and voting should be so important to governance? We know from a wealth of comparative evidence that political parties are essential to the effectiveness of all types of governments across the world, but this is particularly true for Parliamentary democracies like Britain. This is because parties fulfil a large variety of important functions, much of which were spelt out in detail in the Houghton Report (HMSO,1976), an enquiry into political parties conducted more than a generation ago. The committee was tasked with the function of examining financial support for political parties, but it was anxious to spell out why parties are generally very important. It argued that:

‘(Parties) provide the framework within which different political views can be formulated, debated and translated into practical political programmes, and the many demands and efforts of smaller groups in society can be aggregated and merged into a small number of workable alternative political programmes (HMSO, 1976: 18).

It then went on to say that parties provide ‘the essential basis for a stable government in an elected Parliament’ (HMSO, 1976: 18). In this respect the committee report echoed the words

of Benjamin Disraeli spoken more than a century earlier. In a speech to the House of Commons made on August 30th 1848 he argued:

‘You cannot choose between party government and Parliamentary government. I say you can have no Parliamentary government if you have no party government; and therefore when gentlemen denounce party government, they strike at the scheme of government which in my opinion, has made this country great’. (Platte, 1991).

The clear implication of this is that if parties are weakened then governance will suffer.

Mancur Olson (1982) argued that democracies tend to stimulate the growth of special interest groups which seek benefits for themselves and their supporters, while at the same time seeking to transfer the costs of these activities to society as a whole. He cites tariffs on imported foods of the type traditionally sought by farmers as an example of such interest group activity. Farmers get the benefits of tariffs in the form of reduced competition for their products and consumers pay for it with higher prices. Since farmers are organised and consumers are not, this kind of exploitation of the majority by the minority is commonplace in democracies. Olson suggested that the proliferation of such groups eventually creates ‘institutional sclerosis’ as they all seek to capture benefits at each others expense, while avoiding the costs. This has the effect of slowing economic growth and innovation and promoting political gridlock.

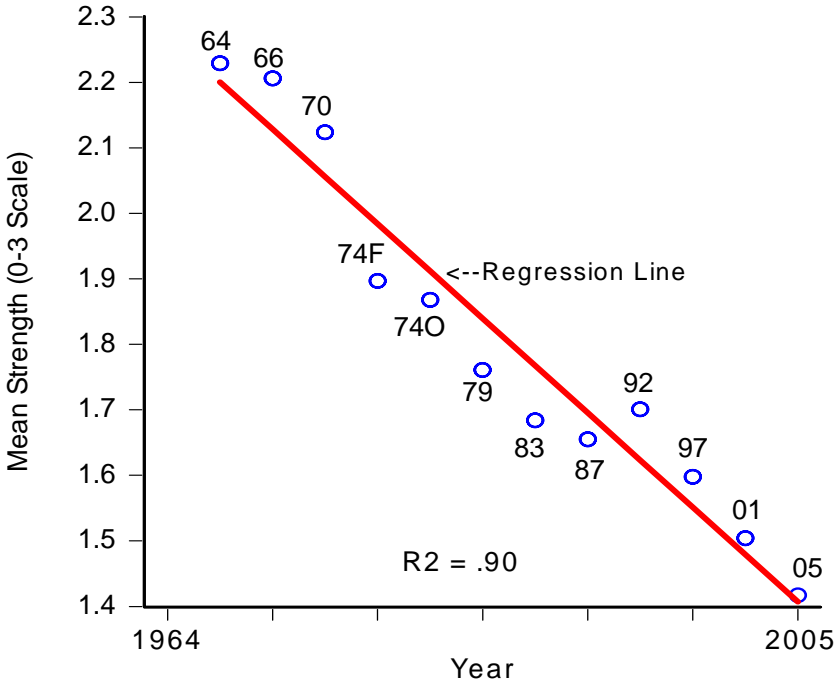
Political parties are different, since unlike interest groups they have to obtain majority support to win power. This means they have to promote policies which benefit the majority rather than unrepresentative minorities. Thus a strong party system acts as a check on this type of special interest politics. As parties seek to build majority coalitions they have to persuade their supporters to accept the costs of collective action along with the benefits. Thus one of the most important functions of parties is to share the costs of governing widely and get people to accept these costs.

In Britain partisanship has been weakening and electoral participation has been declining rather rapidly over time, opening up opportunities for growing special interest politics. If Olson’s analysis is correct this will undermine effective government. To see this process more clearly, we examine trends in partisanship and voting in the UK in the next section.

Partisanship and Electoral Turnout in Britain over Time

The strength of support for political parties has been declining remorselessly in Britain over the last half century. This can be seen in Figure 5, which uses data from the British Election Study surveys conducted since 1964. As the figure shows the relationship between the strength of partisanship and the number of years since 1964 is remarkably strong. The vertical axis in Figure 5 is a measure of the strength of partisanship which varies from 0 to 3¹ and it has weakened by about 40 per cent over this period.

Figure 5 Changes in the Strength of Partisanship, 1964-2005 in Britain

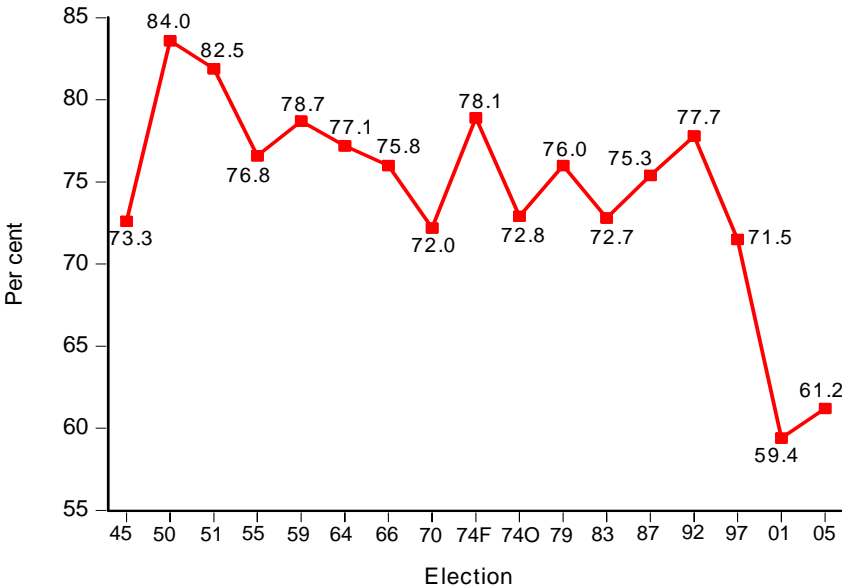


¹ 0= non-supporter; 1=not very strong party supporter; 2= fairly strong party supporter; 3=very strong party supporter.

There are other indicators of the decline of political parties in the UK as well. Party membership and party activism has declined rather dramatically over the last twenty years or so (see Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). Another symptom of the same thing, which is more obviously related to the effectiveness of governance, is the growth of party rebellions in the House of Commons (Cowley, 2005). There has been a trend increase in these for both major parties. What this means for a Parliamentary system is that if partisanship weakens beyond a critical point, then governance is likely to get much more difficult. In the worst case scenario each decision will require government to carefully construct support coalitions of interests, and these coalitions are likely to be fairly unstable. It is a system likely to produce gridlock.

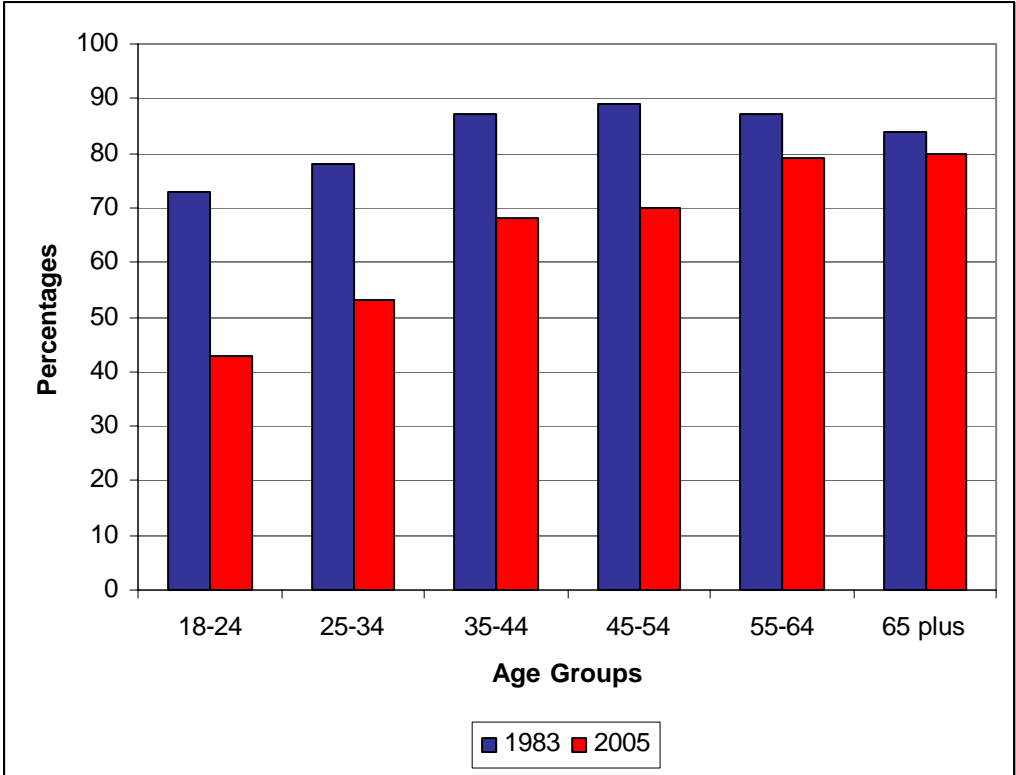
Alongside weakening partisanship is a trend decline in electoral turnout, although this follows a rather different trajectory. Figure 6 shows trends in turnout in the seventeen general elections between 1945 and 2005. It can be seen that turnout reached a post-war high in 1950, in the first fully peace time election after the Second World War. After the 1950 general election turnout started to decline, albeit rather slowly at first, with a brief revival occurring in the 1970s. But following the 1997 election it declined precipitously.

Figure 6 Turnouts in General Elections, 1945-2005



One of the most disturbing aspects of this trend is the very rapid decline in the electoral participation of the young. This can be seen in Figure 7, which compares turnouts by age in the 1983 and 2005 general elections. According to the British Election Study survey of 1983, 73 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds claimed to have voted in that election². But by 2005 only 43 per cent of this age group made the same claim. In the literature on electoral behaviour it is argued that young people have to learn to vote early on in their lives if they are to acquire the habit and continue to participate into middle age (Franklin, 2004). It is fairly clear that the younger generation of today is actually learning *not* to vote, suggesting that this decline in electoral participation is likely to continue into the future.

Figure 7 Turnouts by Age Groups in the 1983 and 2005 General Elections



The argument developed in this paper can then be summarized as follows. Voting and partisanship are key measures which support civil society and influence effective government.

² Respondents have a well known tendency to exaggerate their electoral participation, but there is no evidence to suggest that this has changed very much over time so it is unlikely to have affected the gap between youth participation in these two elections.

They have been declining rather rapidly in recent years, and this is contributing to the decline in government effectiveness.

What Can be Done?

The Constitutional Reform Bill appears to be an attempt to address the problem of public disengagement with largely token rather than substantive changes to UK constitutional arrangements. In their discussion paper Hay, Stoker and Williamson (2008) make the point that the thinking behind many of the initiatives in the reform agenda is very often ‘anti-political’, in the sense of advocating that decision-making should be ‘taken out of politics’ and given over to experts. They argue that a belief in public choice theory has contributed to this and other developments in public administration. This may be true, but if so it is based on a perverse reading of public choice theory on the part of politicians since the biggest villains in that theoretical approach are the ‘rent-seeking’ bureaucrats rather than the elected politicians (see Mueller, 2003). Public choice theory wrongly assumes that there is no such thing as the public interest, so that bureaucrats will seek to maximise their own budgets, salaries and perquisites, rather than pursue the welfare of society. If one really believes in the public choice model, the last thing one should do is to give power to unelected bureaucrats.

There is also another feature of recent constitutional debates which is curious, namely the attraction of direct forms of democracy such as citizen juries, deliberative polls and local referenda. Some of these can be useful aids to policy-making, but there is always the risk that these forms of direct democracy will empower un-representative groups of people or those who are willing to be mobilised by public relations campaigns. Moreover there is always a nagging question mark hanging over such initiatives – are they genuine attempts to empower the public, or public relations exercises which are ignored when they produce the wrong answer?

The key to revitalising political participation and by implication government effectiveness is to reinvigorate the party system in Britain. It has become fashionable to argue that mass parties are a thing of the past and the hollowed out vessels we observe today are likely to work as well as their mass organisation predecessors. This is profoundly wrong and if nothing is done to reverse the slide we are going to see collective forms of participation decline further with all the implications that has for policy making and governance.

Reviving the Party System

So how do we revive the party system? There are a number of reforms that would help to do this, but the single most important one is to radically devolve policy-making to the local level. The key principal is that if one wants people to take an active part in governing then they have to be given incentives to do so. If local government was an arena in which a great deal was at stake with local people raising and spending significant resources, rather than a set of public agencies which are largely focused on implementing directives from Whitehall this would provide an enormous stimulus to the revival of political parties. It would become worthwhile for local people to build strong local parties and to seek meaningful careers in local politics.

Alongside this is the need to revive the principal of electoral accountability at the local level. Local people need to be able to hold decision-makers accountable, rather than have the present situation of the hypothetical but largely illusory accountability of unelected bodies through Parliament. The basis of a revival of mass party politics in Britain is healthy and thriving local politics, in which citizens can make a real difference to what happens in their own communities by their own actions.

Eric Oliver (2001), the American political scientists has shown that local participation is more vibrant and effective in heterogeneous communities in which real resources are at stake and real differences of interest exist. He shows that in homogenous communities where

people have similar incomes and ethnic backgrounds, individuals have incentives to free-ride on their fellow citizens, because there is little at stake in such communities. In effect citizens can rely on their neighbours to look after their interests, because these interests are broadly the same. Only in diverse communities where non-participation can mean that an individual's interests are ignored, do people have a powerful incentive to get involved. This research shows that the underlying driver of democratic participation is the incentive to get involved. At the moment in Britain few people have an incentive to vote in local elections or to get involved in local politics, because local government is so marginalised in the political process.

Such a reform agenda would mean reversing a persistent trend towards marginalising local government in Britain that has been going on for half a century or more. It would mean raising significant amounts of resources for local spending at the local level, rather than relying almost entirely on block grants from Whitehall. This could be done most equitably with a local income tax. It would mean ignoring persistent complaints by some of 'postal code' lotteries in policy outcomes as a justification for yet more centralisation in favour of encouraging diversity and experimentation at the local level. Actually, post code lotteries in the delivery of services are a good thing, since they give aggrieved citizens an incentive to participate if they want to change things.

The Labour government has sought to revive local democracy by promoting regional government and regional assemblies. In part it did this with the idea of solving the well known 'West Lothian' question³ after devolution to Scotland and Wales was introduced. But the policy failed largely, because the voters in the North East of England showed that they did not want another layer of professional politicians running things from a remote regional

³ This is the problem that Scottish MPs can vote on issues in the House of Commons which affect English citizens, but which are matters for the devolved Scottish Parliament when it comes to their own constituents. In contrast English MPs do not have the same privilege.

assembly. Genuine devolution means bringing power right down into the communities at a level at which people can make a difference, that is, to parishes, wards and local authorities.

Conclusions

The revival of political participation in Britain is often seen as a mechanism for promoting social capital in communities, and for legitimising the existing institutions of policy-making.

It has seldom been seen as a means to improve the efficiency of government. But the effectiveness of British government is increasingly in doubt, and a revival of the party system and local democracy can potentially reverse the 'effectiveness gap' which is opening up.

Ultimately reviving participation can improve the effectiveness of government, something which at the moment appears to be increasingly in doubt.

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