

FT 4.0

Stirring up apathy?

Pippa Norris

Harvard University

One of the big fears about this election is that turnout, already severely anemic in 2001, will plummet still further on May 5th. About 26 million people voted in the last UK general election (59.4% of the total electorate), down from 31 million in 1997. This was the lowest turnout in Britain since the khaki election of 1918. Equally remarkable, it was also the lowest turnout recorded in any postwar election in any EU state.

Many believe that low turnout reflects (at best) widespread public disinterest in the campaign and citizen apathy with public affairs. Or even (at worst) lack of trust in the government and alienation with representative democracy. Hence the many worthy attempts to boost civic engagement such as Electoral Commission initiatives to make postal ballots easily available, to use a rolling register, and to launch public information campaigns among target groups such as the young.

But should turnout – whether falling or rising – be read as a direct symptom of the state of public opinion and hence a crisis in the legitimacy of British government?

There are many reasons why not.

The British public is not content with sitting apathetically on the political sidelines. Think of mass events such as the large anti-war marches over Iraq, the series of pro and anti-hunt rallies, the well-organized and effective fuel protests, and demonstrations over genetically-modified foods, trade, or meetings of the G8 and IMF. This is not accidental; in recent decades many rich nations have seen a similar big rise in demonstrations, signing petitions, consumer politics, and direct actions. Protest politics, once the preserve of the left-wing radicals and long-haired students, has gone mainstream.

True, there is good evidence in Britain and elsewhere that fewer join some traditional institutions. Party membership has been eroding, church pews are emptying, and unions are well down on their heyday. But this does not mean that the public is deserting politics, rather they are shifting their energies to alternative direct forms of expression.

But, we are told, low turnout is still a real problem because it shows that the public mistrusts Blair and indeed they are generally disenchanting, or even disgusted, with parties, parliament, and politicians.

In fact, attitudes such as political trust and confidence are fairly poor predictors of whether someone will vote. Not surprisingly political interest matters; dull campaigns are less likely to mobilize voters. People are also more likely to cast a ballot if they feel that their voice counts and they can influence public affairs. And the long-term slide in party loyalists has also eroded participation; core supporters are far more likely to vote.

But what matters even more is the perceived closeness of the race plus the institutional rules of the game.

Quite simply, there is a simple law: the closer the contest is believed to be, the higher the turnout. There has usually been a strong relationship in Britain between the percentage point lead for the

winning party in the final opinion surveys before polling day and national levels of turnout. For example, 77.7 percent of the British electorate voted in 1992, in a close-fought campaign with a nail-biter finish. Five years later Blair cruised to victory and turnout dropped 6%. The 2001 election did not fit these patterns too well, as turnout fell more than would be expected from a predictable contest alone. But the law explains quite a lot of the fluctuations in turnout over the years.

Similar patterns are found in many countries elsewhere. In the 2004 United States presidential race, for example, the wafer-thin edge of President Bush's victory in the popular vote meant that turnout was 6.4 percent higher than in 2000. Indeed the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate reported that the election saw 60.7 percent turnout, the highest level in America since 1968 and the largest surge in voter participation since 1952.

The rules also matter. Generally voter participation is usually higher in democracies with proportional representation systems, with smaller constituencies, with regular but infrequent elections, and with compulsory voting laws. Polling on a weekend also helps. None of which characterize Westminster contests. If the government really wanted to boost turnout, the next general election could easily be held over a Saturday and Sunday.

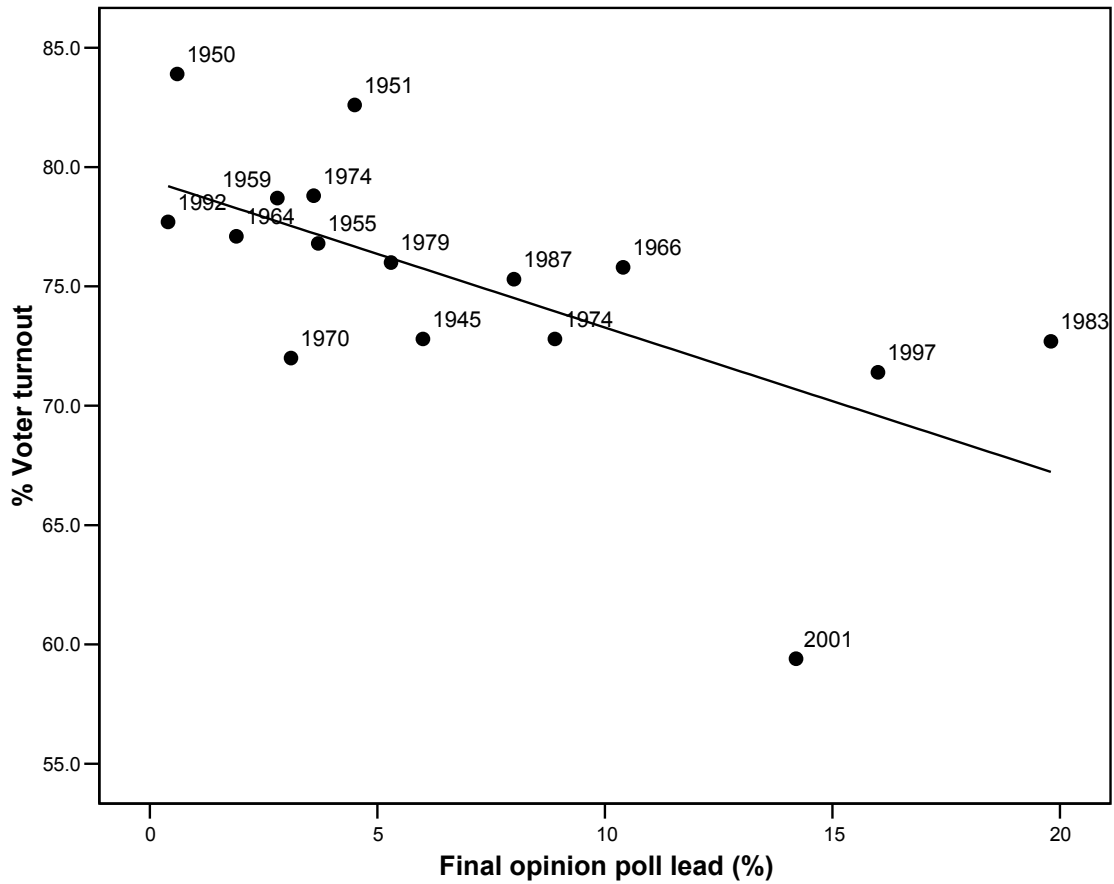
So what are the prospects for May 5th? The picture is complicated by various facts.

- The latest series of polls report a Labour lead ranging anywhere from a close 3 points to a safe 9 points.
- The cognoscenti may also calculate the probable outcome in parliamentary seats, not just votes.
- People will also consider also the perceived marginality of their constituency, not just the national picture. Turnout tumbled most sharply during the last election in the safest Labour seats – places like Liverpool Wavertree, Stockport, and Bootle.
- There are also issues of differential turnout if one party proves better at getting-out-the-vote. MORI polls report that Labour voters were initially more reluctant to participate than Conservatives, but the early campaign has reduced or eliminated this turnout gap.

The bottom line is that if the final polls suggest a slim Labour (or Conservative) lead, then this will probably help to galvanize slightly higher turnout than in 2001.

But if the headlines suggest another Labour cruise to victory, and the Conservatives fail to put up a decent fight, then many may well be tempted to stay home on May 5th and turnout could plummet still further.

Pippa Norris is the McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics at Harvard University.



Note: *Voter turnout*: The number of votes cast as a proportion of the registered electorate.
Opinion poll lead: The average lead between the major parties in the final national opinion polls published closest to polling day.

Data used to construct this figure:

	UK Turnout	Poll lead
1945	72.8	6.0
1950	83.9	0.6
1951	82.6	4.5
1955	76.8	3.7
1959	78.7	2.8
1964	77.1	1.9
1966	75.8	10.4
1970	72.0	3.1
1974	78.8	3.6
1974	72.8	8.9
1979	76.0	5.3
1983	72.7	19.8
1987	75.3	8.0
1992	77.7	0.4
1997	71.4	16.0
2001	59.4	14.2