Young Adults and Electoral Turnout in Britain: Towards a Generational Model of Political Participation

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Abstract

Since 1992 the proportion of young citizens turning out to vote at British general elections has declined dramatically. This paper argues that there is a strong case to suspect that long-term factors are involved, not just those factors associated with life-cycle explanations of political participation. What makes this issue important is that if the electoral characteristics of today's young people adhere to them as they age, then through cohort replacement their participatory characteristics are likely to become the norm rather than the exception. The second part of the paper tests civic voluntarism, equity fairness, social capital, cognitive mobilisation and general incentives models of electoral turnout revealing factors specific to *young* citizens decision to vote. The findings show that in 2001 and 2005 young citizens decision to vote was conditioned by their social class position, levels of political knowledge and social capital.

Young Adults and Electoral Turnout in Britain: Towards a Generational Model of Political Participation[1]

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The issue of participation in politics has received increasing attention in the period bridged by the last three UK general elections due to the magnitude and sustained character of the decline in turnout. In 2001 just 59.1% of the electorate voted. Not only did this represent a drop of over 12% on the turnout in 1997, but it was the lowest level of voting participation since 1918. Given that many troops were still abroad in that first post-Great War election, it is probably the case that more of the electorate abstained voluntarily in 2001 than in any previous election since the advent of the mass franchise (Curtice 2005). The unprecedented declines suggested that the British political class had become seriously disconnected from its public, raising some important questions about the effectiveness of British democracy. We might have expected turnout to recover more than it did in 2005, due in part to an increase in electoral competition. But whilst there were signs of a recovery, it was a very slight one; up only 2.1% to 61.2% and the figure remained well below the average figure for British general elections. This was despite various initiatives by the Labour government seeking to reengage citizens, including the revision of electoral procedures and an increase in postal voting.

A disconnected generation?

Recent research has suggested that the young people that entered the electorate during the Thatcher and Blair decades constitute a distinct political generation whose levels of civic mindedness and likelihood of voting are lower that those of previous cohorts (Clarke et al 2004, Park 2005, Phelps 2004; 2005). Amongst the youngest group of

[1] I would like to thank Tim Bale, Paul Webb and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on an earlier draft. The sole responsibility for the paper remains my own.

voters, those aged 18-24, only 39% managed to vote in 2001 and despite most age groups recovering, albeit slightly in 2005, the figure dropped still further for 18-24 year olds to around 37%. Researchers have pointed out that for many young people politics has become a dirty word (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995). The media have frequently portrayed young people as politically inactive, with commentators talking of a growth of an 'apathy generation' or 'Thatcher's airheads' (e.g. Toynbee 1997; Hiscock 2001). It is also now routinely observed that young people are more likely to vote in the reality TV show Big Brother than in local, European or general elections (BBC 2002; Coleman 2003; Mulvey 2003). The government, concerned with the issue of declining political and civic engagement among young people, commissioned the Crick Report to consider the teaching of democracy in schools. The report published in 1998 recommended that citizenship education should be compulsory for secondary school pupils in order to tackle problems of declining political and civic participation among young people (Crick 1998). The government subsequently introduced citizenship education classes, making up 5 per cent of the national curriculum from September 2002. A variety of other initiatives have targeted young people, encouraging volunteering and youth consultation within democratic institutions.

Recent studies have argued that quantitative research in the area tends to use a definition of politics which is too narrow to encompass the kinds of activity young people are involved in (Henn at al 2002; O'Toole et al 2003; Henn et al 2005). These studies have uncovered participation in a wide range of social actions including formal voluntary work, informal community networks, caring work at home and in the community and have shown that young people are concerned about political issues but that these issues tend not to be recognised by mainstream political science as 'political' (Henn et al 2005). Whilst much of the research on political participation has focused on a relatively narrow set of traditional activities, these studies tend to be making a specific point about conventional politics, rather than inferring from low electoral turnout that young people have no social or political interest. Participation in conventional politics is changing and whilst other types of political activity are undoubtedly important, it remains a central task of political science to understand political change, and in this case, *why* young people are no longer as involved in conventional politics as previous generations were. Alternative types of political activity are at the same time distinct from conventional politics and run parallel to it.

Distinct in that involvement in protests or environmental groups does not necessarily indicate a desire to be involved in conventional politics which would manifest itself if politics become more inclusive and attractive. Parallel because many people are both involved in conventional politics and participate in a range of other activities. New forms of political engagement are not necessarily simply a substitute for declining engagement in conventional politics. Instead there is a gap between those who are broadly engaged in a myriad of both new and traditional channels and those young people who are not engaged at all (Norris 2002, Grenier and Wright 2006).

The first part of this paper details changing turnout amongst six age groups in Britain. The paper suggests that differences in turnout between older and younger cohorts appear to be such that they cannot be attributed purely to a life-cycle effect. The second part of the paper tests a series of competing explanatory models of electoral turnout used in the literature on voting behaviour, which have not so far been applied specifically to younger adults. The results of the data analysis show that social class, social capital and political knowledge were key predictors *specific* to young people's decision to vote in 2001 and 2005.

Methods and data

The British Election Study constitutes the longest academic series of nationally representative probability sample surveys in the country. In the absence of sufficient panel data, which is needed to track individuals as they age, the first part of the paper utilises cross-sectional data.[2] The data used to test explanatory models of electoral turnout is a unique merge of the 2001 and 2005 BES cross sectional data sets. This significantly increases the number of respondents included in the analysis and enables conclusions to be drawn over a wider period than one election allows.

[2] The disadvantage of such an approach is that it does not follow the same people as they age, this is only possible with panel data. However, using the cross-sectional data it is possible to follow people in the same age groups. A criticism levelled at the use of British Election Survey data to examine turnout is that it under-estimates the number of abstainers at elections, as there is always a discrepancy between those who when asked say they did vote at an election and the actual turnout figures (e.g. Kimberlee 2002). However, this problem is largely overcome, as the trajectories of reported and actual turnout are very similar. See (Phelps 2004).

The paper utilises longitudinal methods informed by the need to investigate whether young people's participatory characteristics are distinct from those of their counterparts in previous generations. It is acknowledged that until the youngest cohorts progress into the later stages of their lives it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions as to the extent of generational change. However, the cohort analysis enables us to make more reliable conclusions about life-cycle and generational effects as it allows us to compare the starting point of each cohort's turnout lifecycle and to estimate the age at which the effects of youth dissipate within the life-cycle.

Stage two uses multivariate analysis (logistic regression) to examine the impact of a range of important demographic, participatory and attitudinal variables on the decision to vote. The models require the testing of indirect effects in order to avoid missing interactions between the variables. There are a number of methods for assessing indirect effects in multivariate analysis. In this case it is possible to conduct the data analysis with one model for the whole sample, including a battery of interaction terms, including age. However modelling the relationship between age and other relevant variables would involve a large number of interactions, which tend to produce problems of multicolinearity. There is a strong case for conducting an analysis of separate age groups. However this method has been criticised on the grounds that if a coefficient is statistically significant in one group but not in another, the conclusion that x is more important for one group than another is flawed because the researcher never performs a formal statistical test of the difference between the coefficients for each group (Jacard 2001). In order to avoid the problems associated with both methods, the paper conducts a separate analysis of age groups as it is the differences between the youngest and older groups that is of interest. The paper then uses the whole sample to model interaction terms between age and those variables that were significant in the split models. The analysis is restricted to the 2001-2005 pooled data as all the variables required for the analysis are not available in previous data sets. It is acknowledged that this renders it impossible to investigate the relative importance of the variable for different generations. However, this is justified by the need to examine the unprecedented decline in turnout since 1997.

Trends in youth turnout 1964-2001

Table 1 details reported turnout at British general elections between 1964 and 2005. It shows that turnout remained remarkably stable between 1964 and 1992, consistently around 85%.[3] But since 1992 this figure has declined markedly. We can see that between 1992 and 2001 levels fell by over 14.4% among all age groups, but this masks important differences between ages. The declines were most pronounced among the youngest two age groups, with levels falling by 26% and 31.5% for 18-24 and 25-34 year olds, respectively. Although turnout was widely reported to have recovered in 2005, the disparity between youngest and older age groups remained. Table 1 shows that whilst most age groups recovered from the 2001 low, the figure for the youngest group continued to decline.

Table 1 *Reported Turnout at British General Elections (%) 1964-2001 by Age Group*

Year	**<25**	**25-34**	**35-44**	**45-54**	**55-64**	**>64**	**All groups**
1964	88.6	81	91.7	90.5	89.9	88.2	88.6
1966	67.1	78.5	88.4	88	86	83.8	83.4
1970	73.6	75.4	82.5	84.9	84	87.5	81
1974	78.2	86	87.7	91.4	91.6	88.3	87.8
1979	70.1	81.2	85.5	91	91.3	87.1	84.8
1983	73.1	77.5	87.4	88.8	88.6	83.8	83.3
1987	76.2	84.7	85.6	91.6	90.2	86.9	86.1
1992	75.4	86.6	87.7	91.6	87.4	89.4	87
1997	59.7	68.6	77.5	84.3	88.2	85.4	78.7
2001	49.4	55.1	68.2	77.4	78.3	85.8	72.6
2005	44.3	55.2	71.3	75.9	84.1	86.1	74.1
Mean 1964-1992	75.3	81.3	87	89.7	88.6	86.8	83.3
Decline 1992-2001	26	31.5	9.5	14.2	9.1	3.6	14.4
Recovery/decline 2001-2005	-5.1	0.1	3.1	-1.5	5.8	0.3	1.5

Source: British Election Survey data

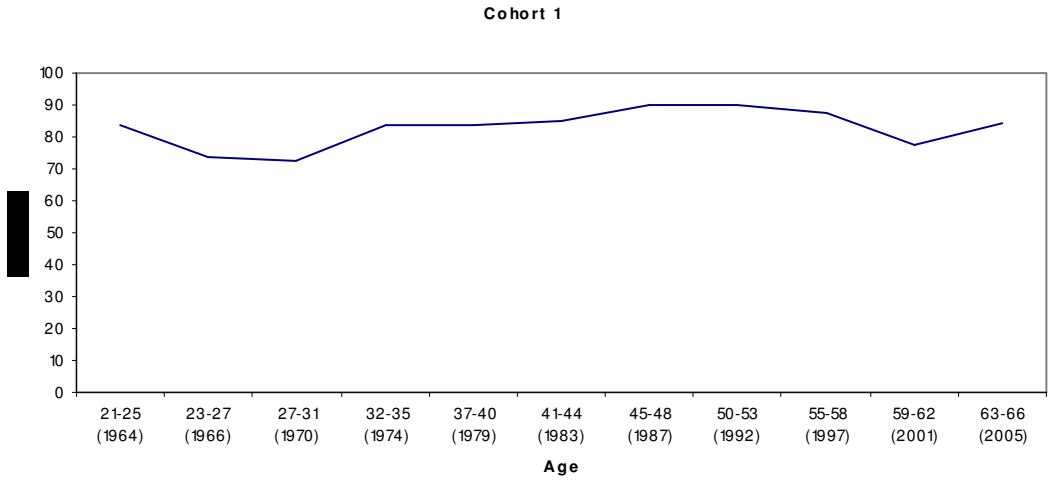
[3] The average *actual* turnout figure was 75.2 in the same period.

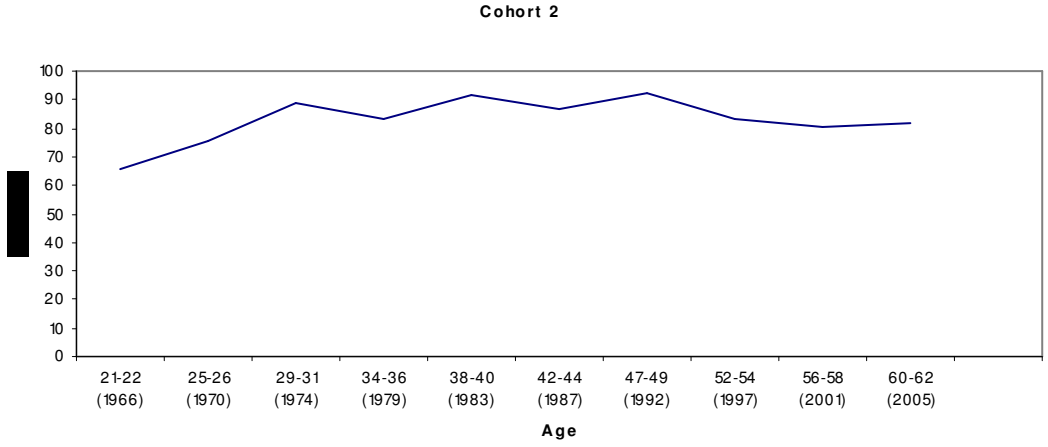
Table 2 *Reported turnout at British General Elections for twelve cohorts*

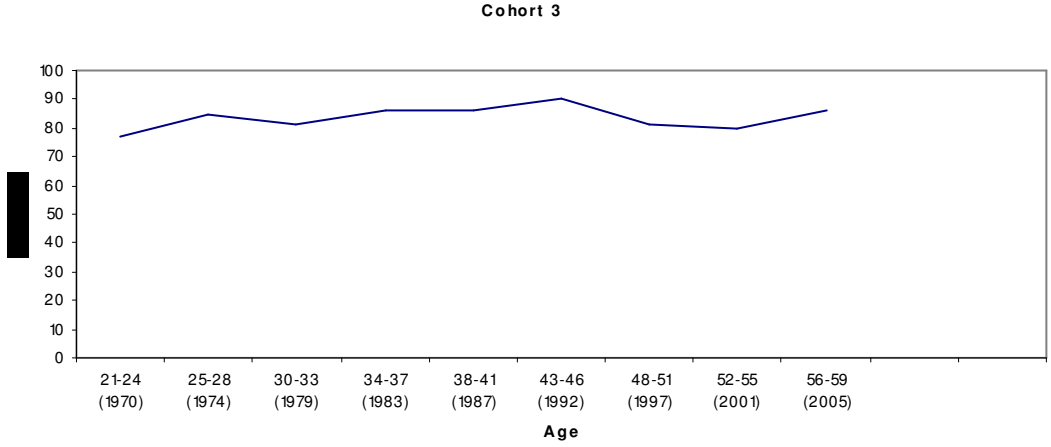
Cohort 1		Cohort 2		Cohort 3	
21-25 (1964)	83.6	21-22 (1966)	65.7	21-24 (1970)	77.2
23-27 (1966)	73.9	25-26 (1970)	75.4	25-28 (1974)	84.4
27-31 (1970)	72.8	29-31 (1974)	88.6	30-33 (1979)	81
32-35 (1974)	84	34-36 (1979)	83.2	34-37 (1983)	85.9
37-40 (1979)	83.6	38-40 (1983)	91.7	38-41 (1987)	85.9
41-44 (1983)	85	42-44 (1987)	86.6	43-46 (1992)	90
45-48 (1987)	90	47-49 (1992)	92.1	48-51 (1997)	81.4
50-53 (1992)	90.2	52-54 (1997)	83	52-55 (2001)	79.8
55-58 (1997)	87.7	56-58 (2001)	80.1	56-59 (2005)	86.4
59-62 (2001)	77.3	60-62 (2005)	81.7	% Change 1992-2001	10.2
63-66 (2005)	84.4	% Change 1992-2001	12	% Recovery 2001-2005	6.6
% Change 1992-2001	12.9	% Recovery 2001-2005	1.6		
% Recovery 2001-2005	7.1				
Cohort 4		Cohort 5		Cohort 6	
18-20 (1970)	69.4	18-21 (1974)	79.7	18-22 (1979)	72.5
22-24 (1974)	76.7	23-26 (1979)	78.2	22-26 (1983)	72.9
27-29 (1979)	77.7	27-30 (1983)	77.7	26-30 (1987)	83.4
31-33 (1983)	77.4	31-34 (1987)	87.5	31-35 (1992)	85.9
35-37 (1987)	84.5	36-39 (1992)	86.9	36-40 (1997)	74.3
40-42 (1992)	89	41-44 (1997)	82.7	40-44 (2001)	71.7
45-47 (1997)	88.7	45-48 (2001)	74.3	44-48 (2005)	72.4
49-51 (2001)	78.2	49-52 (2005)	76.8	% Change 1992-2001	14.2
53-55 (2005)	79.6	% Change 1992-2001	12.6	% Recovery 2001-2005	0.7
% Change 1992-2001	10.8	% Recovery 2001-2005	2.5		
% Recovery 2001-2005	1.4				
Cohort 7		Cohort 8		Cohort 9	
18-21 (1983)	74.1	18-21 (1987)	72.8	18-22 (1992)	75.3
22-25 (1987)	80.7	23-26 (1992)	79.7	23-27 (1997)	63.2
27-30 (1992)	87.4	28-31 (1997)	70	27-31 (2001)	54.3
32-35 (1997)	70.6	32-35 (2001)	62.9	31-35 (2005)	61.5
36-39 (2001)	65.5	36-39 (2005)	69.9	% Change 1992-2001	21
40-43 (2005)	75.1	% Change 1992-2001	16.8	% Recovery 2001-2005	7.2
% Change 1992-2001	21.9	% Recovery 2001-2005	7		
% Recovery 2001-2005	9.6				
Cohort 10		Cohort 11		Cohort 12	
18-22 (1997)	59.4	18-21 (2001)	52.2	18-21 (2005)	44.1
22-26 (2001)	42	22-25 (2005)	42.9		
26-30 (2005)	52.3	% Change 1992-2001	n/a		
% Change 1992-2001	n/a	% Decline 2001-2005	9.3		
% Recovery 2001-2005	10.3				

Table 2 and Figures 1-11 provide information for twelve age cohorts entering the electorate between 1964 and 2005. The figures illustrate the extent of turnout decline amongst the youngest groups in 2001 and confirm the findings that there were signs of a recovery amongst most age groups in 2005. Cohorts 8-10, whose turnout levels fell most in 2001, show encouraging signs of a recovery. This indicates that period effects were important and that these might simply have had a greater impact on the younger groups who are always less inclined to vote. However, although turnout rose amongst these groups, their levels of turnout are still lower than those of previous generations. It remains to be seen whether the recoveries continue at a more closely fought election.

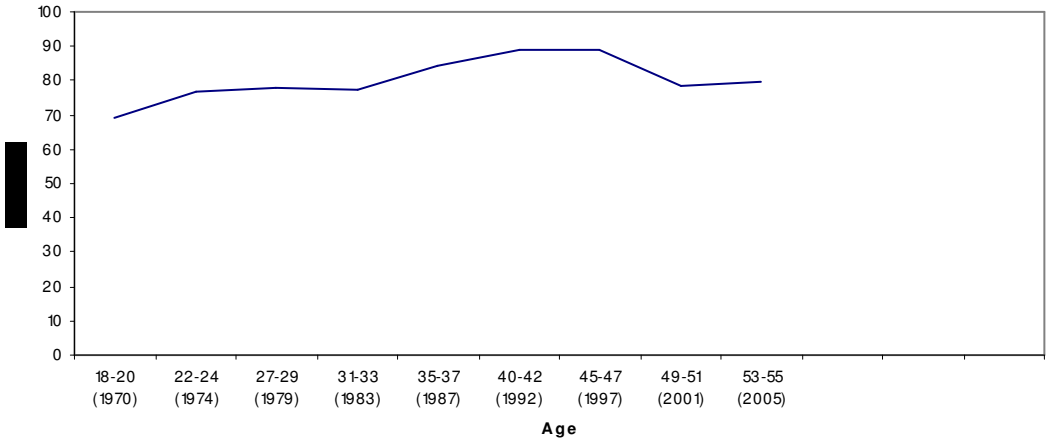
Figures 1-11 *Cohort turnout life-cycles*



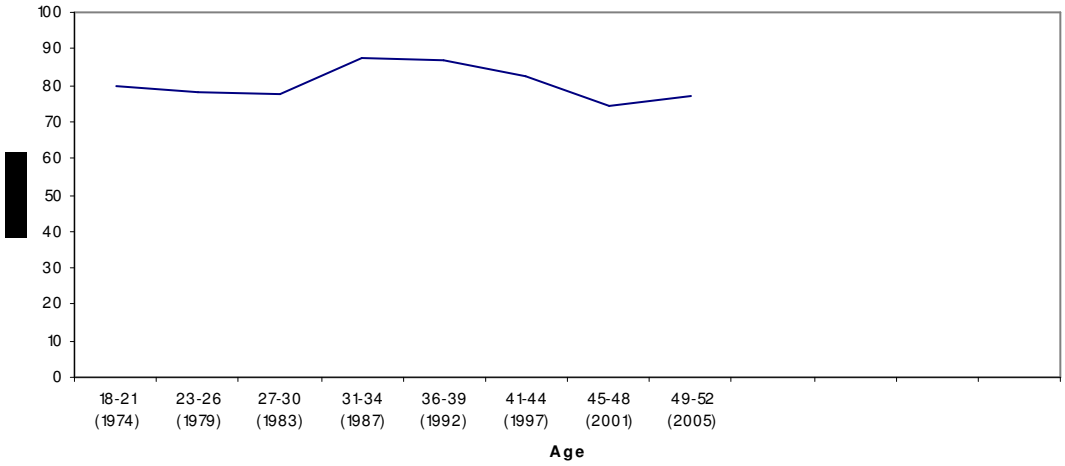




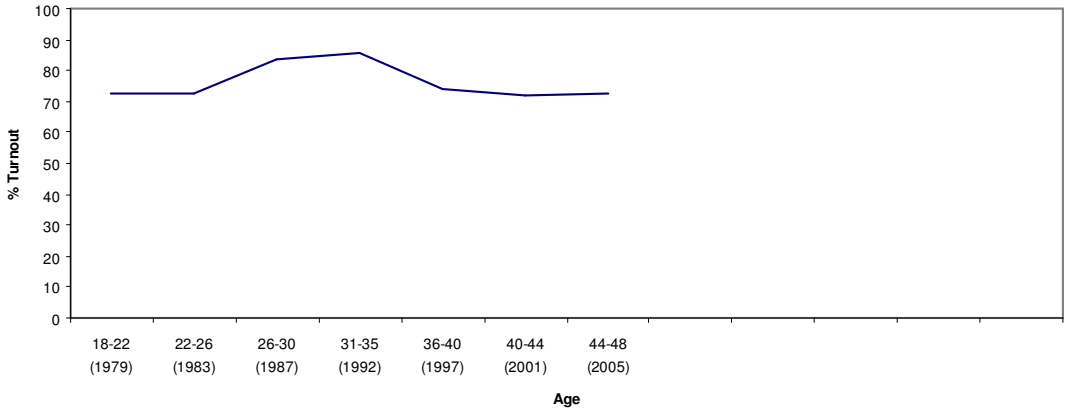
Cohort 4



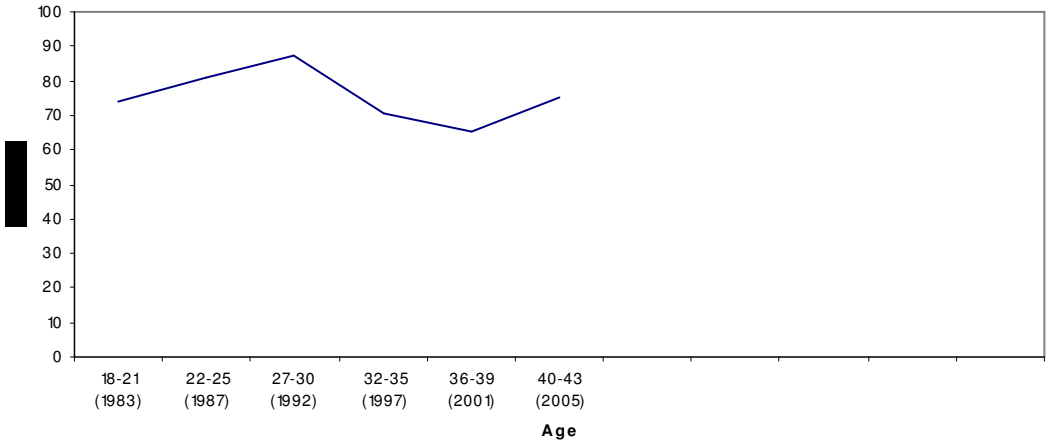
Cohort 5



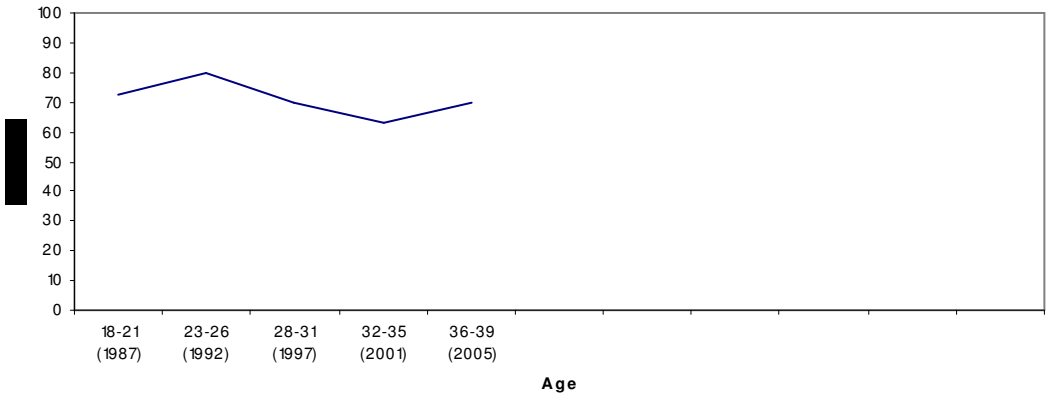
Cohort 6



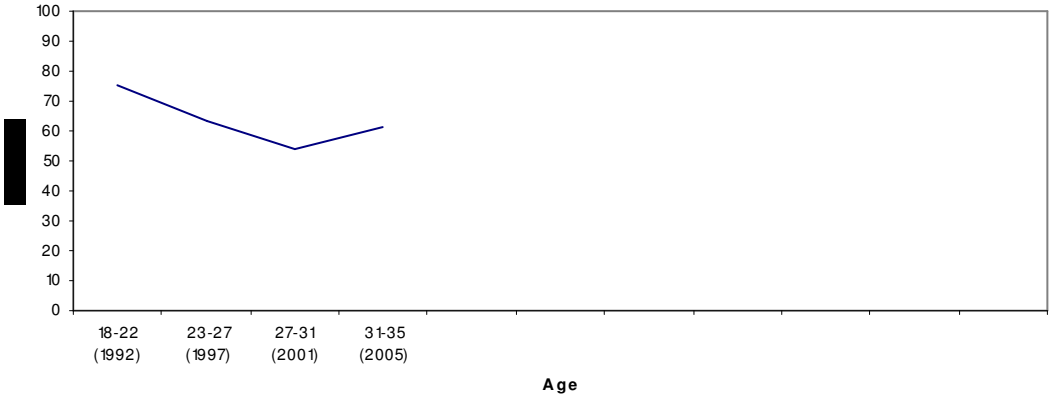
Cohort 7

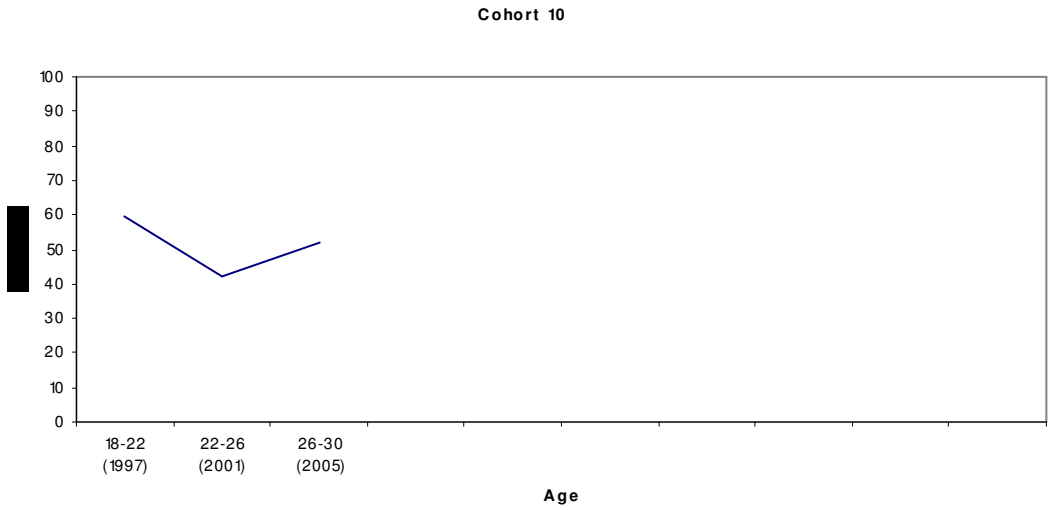


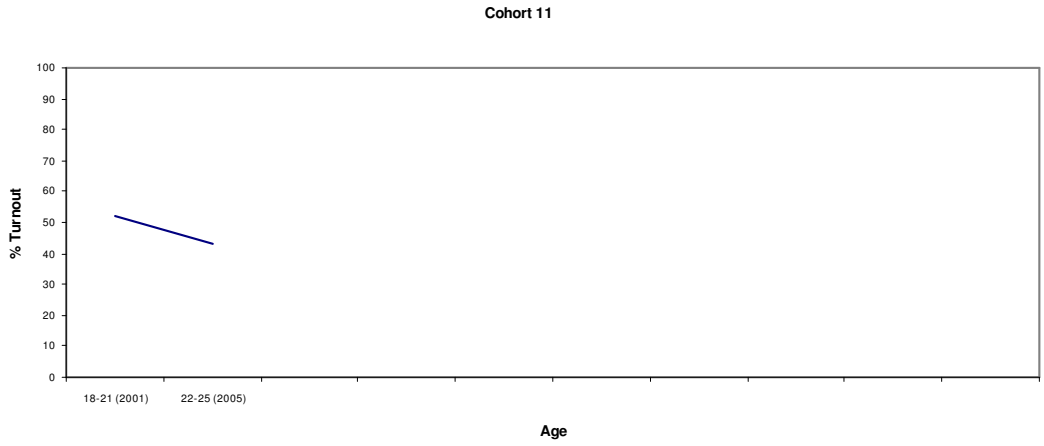
Cohort 8



Cohort 9







Whilst these are encouraging signs, the proportion of those newly enfranchised in 2001 and experiencing their second general election in 2005 fell almost 10%. Only 42.9% reported having voted in 2005. Whilst the figure was slightly higher for cohort 12, those entering the electorate in 2005 (44.1%), this figure represents the lowest level of reported turnout for first-time voters in the British Election Study, and the first under 50%.

One explanation for low turnouts at the last three general elections is that the results were a foregone conclusion. Turnout at general elections has tended to reflect the closeness of the result. It was low in 1983 (73%) when Labour were widely expected

to lose. It was high in 1951 (82%) when a close result was expected and it was high in February 1974 (78%) and in 1992 (78%) when polls fed media speculation about hung parliaments. The average lead in the final polls approaching the 1997 election was 16 points and in 2001, 14 points (Curtice 2005) and few saw the Conservatives as having any chance of winning at either election. However, electoral competition alone is not able to account for increases in abstention at second order elections where the outcomes were less certain and opinion polls do not figure. 2005 provided voters with a more competitive election with the final poll lead in the run up to the election down to an average of 5 points. However when the poll findings were projected into seats they were typically represented as pointing to a third three figure Labour victory (Curtice 2005). Whether or not most voters were able to make this calculation, or whether they watched it on TV or listened to it on radio, we might expect the effect of a closer competition to be fairly uniform across age groups, but it seems that the youngest groups continued to abstain, and in greater numbers.

It is crucial to bear in mind those differences associated with the stage in the life course individuals occupy. Traditionally political science has tended to see young voters low levels of electoral participation as the result of their age, something they will shed as they come to have families and responsibilities associated with work and housing (e.g. Verba and Nie 1972, Parry et al 1992). Recently, however, research has provided some tentative evidence of a more pervasive generational impact, whereby low turnout characteristics adhere to the young as they age and look like they could become the norm rather than the exception (Phelps 2004, 2005, Park 2005). Life-cycle effects are those that dissipate with age and are usually associated in turnout studies with low levels of turnout among young adults; period effects represent the outcome of a particular period on voters behaviour and will also tend to dissipate as these fade; whereas generational effects refer to a more robust set of changes that tend to adhere to voters and they age.

Important cross-national work provides evidence that voting is a habit and that these habits engendered in young people during their first opportunities to vote best explain declining turnout (Franklin 2004). This research suggests that turnout decline will accelerate as newly eligible cohorts, set in their non-voting ways, replace older cohorts whose turnout habits were formed in periods of higher turnout. Franklin

argues that it is the character of elections and in particular electoral competition that determines levels of turnout. With this in mind it is possible to answer the obvious criticism that any decline in turnout among young people could simply be explained by the fact that they are always less likely to turnout, especially at uncompetitive elections. Whilst this is likely to be the case, we know that these declines are unprecedented in their magnitude. We also know that no cohort has managed a recovery of the scale that would indicate a life-cycle or period effect rather than a generational effect (Phelps 2004). But most importantly we know that voting has a strong habitual element. Today's young voters have experienced a unique political socialisation during the Thatcher, Major and Blair premierships. They also came of age in an era where the sources of political socialisation were very different to those of previous generation. Declining party membership and party identity amongst young adults and their parents have meant they are less shackled to political parties and identify less with the social groups that have traditionally provided voters with a political identity. At the same time there has been a decline in partisan political information through which voters receive their cues to vote. With these influences weakened young voters are particularly susceptible to other influences.

A second important explanation is that people don't vote when they can see little or no difference between the political parties (Heath and Taylor 1999, Pattie and Johnston 2001). Firstly, Tony Blair's abandonment of traditional Labour policies and his move towards the centre reduced the number of policy positions on which the Labour and Conservative parties differed. In comparison to the 1980s where there was a distinct difference in policies between the parties, Tony Blair's new policy positions were designed to compete with the Conservatives on economic performance and competence. We can see from Table 3 that the number of those perceiving there to be 'a great deal of difference' between the main parties has fallen since 1987, when the policy distances between Labour and the Conservatives were considerably more distinct. This trend in the public perceptions of party differences is supported by manifesto data research showing the actual differences between political parties at a number of different levels (Budge and Bara 2001, Webb 2000: 113).

Table 3 *Perceived differences between the Conservative and Labour Parties (%)*

All respondents (18+)

	BES 1979	BES 1983	BES 1987	BES 1992	BES 1997	BES 2001
A great deal of difference	45.9	82.2	83.5	54.5	32.5	26.7
Some difference	29.1	10	10.6	30.5	42	44.2
Not much difference	21.5	6.3	4.5	12.9	22.7	26.2

Respondents aged 18-24

	BES 1979	BES 1983	BES 1987	BES 1992	BES 1997	BES 2001
A great deal of difference	39.6	74.2	75.7	42.5	22.4	17.4
Some difference	31.6	16.2	16.2	40.9	54.9	54.1
Not much difference	24.1	6.6	6.3	13.4	18.6	18.4

Source: British Election Survey

Another reason that modern voters are unable to see a significant difference between the political parties is that in the past voters could easily distinguish the parties in terms of the social groups they stood for. The Conservatives represented middle class Britain, whilst Labour was the party of the workers. But New Labour's embrace of business and middle class voters has served to cloud the distinction between the political parties. There is good reason to suspect that this may be one reason for declining party identification in the period since 1992. Table 4 shows that there has been a marked jump in those with no party attachment between 1992 and 2005, a period that spans New Labour's emergence and time in government. This is most noticeable among young adults aged between 18-24, 24% of whom fell into this category in 2005, almost four times more than did so in 1992.

Table 4 *Party attachment 1983-2003 (%)*

	BES 1964	BES 1966	BES 1970	BES Feb 1974	BES Oct 1974	BES 1979	BES 1983	BES 1987	BES 1992	BES 1997	BES 2001	BES 2005
Aged 18-24	3.7	0	8.3	3.6	5.4	11	7.9	9.1	6.5	13.1	18.6	24.8
All Adults	3	3.4	5.4	3.5	3.9	5.5	5	5.2	5.1	7.1	10.9	16.1

One reason to suspect that there is a generational change taking place in voter turnout is that the erosion of the traditional anchors of political support, which also served as a strong source of group identity and of political information, leaves the youngest voters susceptible to other types of political influence and rudderless in opaque political waters.

Modelling Voter Turnout

Having discussed some of the key explanations for declining electoral turnout, I proceed to test the explanatory significance of a variety of important demographic and attitudinal variables on voting behaviour. The analysis will test five competing models of voter turnout from sociological and rational choice approaches that have exerted heavy influence on research on party choice and voter turnout.[4] The literature on electoral turnout has long emphasised the prominence of socio-economic factors. Those more likely to vote are older, more affluent and better educated, while those more likely to abstain are younger, poorer and less well educated (eg. Parry et al 1992) Sociological explanations of voting behaviour are based on the idea that social characteristics such as class, gender and race condition political preferences. Social contexts condition these characteristics and the experiences, environments and interests of members of the same social group become matched to policies and programmes advanced by a particular political party. Other explanations posit that early socialisation experiences imprint political psychological attachments, most notably party identifications. Identifications once formed tend to serve as starting

[4] The operationalisation of the models is based on Clarke et al's (2004) and Pattie et al's (2004) operationalisations.

point which continually influences political beliefs, attitudes and behaviour (Clarke et al 2004). If these identifications have been weakened we might reasonably suspect other influences to have a greater effect on today's young citizens. Alternatively, for want of partisan identifications, voters may lack the necessary cues to incline them to vote at all.

The civic voluntarism model

The civic voluntarism model has its origins in the work of Verba and Nie (1972) in America but the model has also been used to explain participation in a number of other countries, including Britain (e.g. Parry et al 1992). The idea at the centre of the model is that resources facilitate participation. Essentially, the model states that 'people may be inactive because they lack resources, because they lack psychological engagement with politics, or because they are outside of the recruitment networks that bring people into politics' (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995:269). People with educational resources are more likely to vote as education increases access to information and the ability to process it. Social class also estimates skills which are useful political resources. Recruitment by political parties or by other agents will also increase the likelihood of voting. Political interest, strength of partisanship and political efficacy are seen as aspect of psychological engagement in politics (Clarke et al 2004). The civic voluntarism is specified as follows:

Resources:

- Education is measured using a summary variable asking whether the respondent has any educational qualifications.

- Social class is measured using the market research schema and recoded into two categories: working class and middle and upper classes.

- Available time (leisure time) is measured by asking how much leisure time respondents have.

- Political mobilisation is measured by respondents answers to four questions:

Over the past few years has anyone asked you to get involved in politics or community affairs?

Did anyone try to convince you how to vote in the recent general election?

Did a canvasser from any party call at your home to talk with you during the campaign?

Did anyone from a political party telephone you during the election campaign to ask you how you might vote?

- Psychological engagement in politics:

Political efficacy was measure by asking: how much influence do you feel you have in politics and community affairs?

Interest in the election: how interested are you in the general election that is likely to be held soon?

Strength of partisanship: would you call yourself very strong, fairly strong or not very strong?

The equity fairness (relative deprivation) model

A key criticism of the civic voluntarism model is that it does not take into account incentives to political participation. Equity-fairness theories (e.g., Runciman 1966) argue that members of traditionally disadvantaged groups who feel that they are treated unfairly in comparison to other groups (relative deprivation) and that they cannot get their voices heard through conventional political participation, are more likely to vent their frustrations in other types of political participation such as protest. According to this model individuals react to and are motivated by a sense of disadvantage. In this model, unlike the civic voluntarism model, a lack resources inhibits conventional participation but promotes un-conventional activity. The core

idea in this model is that peer group comparison influences political participation (Clarke et al 2004).

- Perceptions of relative deprivation are measured by respondents agreement to two statements

The government generally treats people like me fairly

There is often a big gap between what people like me expect out of life and what we actually get

- Perceptions of economic deprivation are measured by responses to 2 questions, one retrospective and one prospective:

How does the financial situation in your household now compare with what it was 12 months ago?

How do you think the financial situation in your household will change over the next 12 months?

- Emotional reactions to personal economic conditions are measured by asking respondents which of the following feelings describe the feelings about the financial conditions of your household?

    1. Angry
    2. Disgusted
    3. Uneasy
    4. Afraid

- Policy dissatisfaction is measured by asking respondents how well do you think the present government has handled each of the following issues?

    1. Crime
    2. Education
    3. The NHS

4. Transport

The Social Capital model

The social capital model popularised by the work of Putnam (1993; 2000), but taking an earlier form in the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1976, 1997) and Coleman (1988, 1990), emphasises the importance of associational activity in community life. The key idea is that 'people who trust their fellow citizens volunteer more often…participate more often in politics and community organizations, serve more readily on juries, give blood more frequently, comply more fully with their tax obligations, are more tolerant of minority views, and display many other forms of civic virtue' (Putnam 2000: 137).

- Social trust and perceived fairness of others are measured using responses to two questions:

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful dealing with people? Please use a 0-10 scale to indicate your view, where 0 means 'cant be too careful' and 10 means 'most people can be trusted'.

Do you think that most people you come into contact with would try to take advantage of you if they had the chance or would they try to be fair? Please use the 0-10 scale again where 0 means 'would try to take advantage' and 10 means 'would try to be fair'.

- Volunteering and having been asked to participate in politics or community affairs are measured using the following two questions:

Over the past few years, have you volunteered to get involved in politics or community affairs? Affirmative answers are scored 1 and other answers are scored 0.

Over the past few years has anyone asked you to get involved in politics or community affairs? Affirmative answers are scored 1 and other answers are scored 0.

Rational Choice Models

A second set of theories drawing on the work of Downs (1957) argue that an individual's choice to participate will result from the weighing up the benefits of an action or activity in relation to the costs. If the costs are too great, or the benefits too few, then they are less likely to participate. The decision to vote according to rational choice accounts has three key elements. *Pivotality* is the calculated probability of casting a deciding vote that enables a preferred party to win and prevent a less preferred party or parties from doing so (Clarke et al 2004). With regard to turnout this can be simplified as the calculation of whether casting his or her vote will make a difference. If voting is unlikely to achieve anything or result in any benefits to the voter, why should he or she vote? The voter is interested, according to rational choice theory, in making a decision based on 'utility' and therefore seeks to determine which party has implemented or proposed policies that will be of perceived *benefit* to him or her. Pivotality interacts with benefits as any benefits are discounted by the probability that that an individual can exert a crucial or pivotal effect on the outcome. The voter must also assess the *costs* associated with voting; the time needed to vote and to acquire the information to make an informed choice (Clarke et al 2004).

Various options are available to the prospective voter when making these assessments. If the voter feels that parties differ in the benefits they offer, he or she will opt for the party that offers the most utility. But pivotality and costs are taken into account and the individual may decide not to vote. The voter may think that all parties are equal in the benefits they offer. As the benefits derived from voting are equal he or she may decide not to vote. Secondly, if the individual thinks that the probability of casting a vote that makes a difference, a pivotal vote, is small, even if the benefits are large, then the cost associated with voting may prevent the individual from voting. This is crucial for rational choice models of turnout as the probability of casting a pivotal ballot at an election will usually be very small (Clarke et 2004). This raises the paradox of voting. Why do so many people vote when it would seem irrational to do so?

The general incentives model

The general incentives model addresses the paradox of voting by incorporating ideas about why rational actors might engage in collective action. The theory is a synthesis of rational choice and psychological accounts of voter turnout (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 2002, Whiteley and Seyd 2002, Clarke et al 2004). The core idea is that individuals need incentives and cues in order to vote. It supplements rational choice accounts of political behaviour by arguing that individuals take into account a wide range of incentives when they are considering when to vote and who to vote for rather than simply considering the individual incentives discussed above. The incentives in this decision are individual, group, system and expressive benefits. Group benefits are not just those that flow to one's family but to people who are viewed as similar to oneself or those in need of help. System benefits are benefits that accrue to a political system when citizens vote. The recognition that a healthy democracy requires citizen involvement makes people vote. Expressive benefit is the sense of satisfaction that people receive when they demonstrate their support for political actors, institutions or processes. Social norms are also included in the model. These are parts of the socio-political context in which people make choices about whether to vote, or not to vote (Clarke et al 2004). If other people in one's social environment think that voting is important then you are also more likely to. To operationalise the model:

- Pivotality is replaced by efficacy, the sense that an individual has that he or she is influential in politics or community affairs

- Perceived costs of voting are measured by two variables that measure individuals agreement with two statements:

- Political activity is too much time and effort and People are too busy to vote

- Benefits are measured using an eleven point party like/dislike scale to measure the utility voters expect to receive from political parties: How do you feel about Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats*?*

- Additional individual benefits are measured by two variables which measure individuals agreements with two statements:

I feel a sense of satisfaction when I vote and I would feel very guilty if I did not vote

- Groups benefits are similarly measured by answers the following:

Being active in politics is a good way to get benefits for groups that people care about like pensioners or the disabled

When people like me vote, they can really change the way Britain is governed

- System benefits are measured by two variables:

It is every citizens duty to vote in an election and Democracy only votes properly if most people vote

- Social norms are measured by an additional two variables:

Most of my family and friends think that voting is a waste of time and Most people around here voted in the general election

The cognitive mobilisation model

The cognitive mobilisation model argues that education, media exposure and political awareness have vastly expanded since the 1950s contributing to a 'growth in the public's overall level of political sophistication through a process of cognitive mobilisation (Dalton 2003: 19). Citizens are now capable of processing large amounts of politically relevant information due to enhanced access to higher education resources. Secondly, it is now easier and less costly for citizens to find information through print and electronic forms. According to this model people are now more interested and knowledgeable about social and political issues and are more aware and concerned about politics and a functioning democracy. As a result of these developments citizens are more likely to be critical of governments and their policies

and are more likely to be dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction may lead to abstention from electoral politics.

- Education is measured using a summary variable asking whether the respondent has any educational qualifications

- Political knowledge is measured using a quiz with respondents asked to answer true or false to standard political knowledge questions.

- Exposure to information about politics and the election is measured by using two variables: Newspaper readership was used to measure general exposure to political information. The amount of attention respondents paid to television coverage of the 2001 election is used to measure information about the election

- Reactions to the content of information were measured using two variables:

Interest in the election campaign and Dissatisfaction with the performance of the government

Results and Discussion[5]

The evidence for the civic voluntarism model in Table 5 shows that the 18-24 year olds were less likely to vote if they were from a working class background but were significantly more likely to vote when they had been asked to do so by someone else. The beta coefficient shows that the probability of voting was 2.174 higher for those who had been asked to participate, moreover this was uniquely important for the youngest group. R square values suggest that the model has a stronger fit to the

[5] Residual diagnostics for each model were examined to ascertain if there were any additional factors that should be considered in each model specification. No common characteristics were found in these cases and as the number of these cases was relatively small we can reasonably conclude that these cases are simply those that deviate slightly from the majority. Colinearity diagnostics for each model were also examined. Menard (1995) suggests that a tolerance value of less than 0.1 and VIF values of over 10 may also be cause for concern. The figures for all models fell within these limits.

youngest age group compared to the other five groups, however the fit remains a fairly weak one.

Table 5 *Comparison of the performance of the civic voluntarism model*

Model fit	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Correctly classified	70.6	67.8	73.5	82.1	78.9	85.1
Non voters correctly classified	79.2	41	18.1	0	0	0
Voters correctly classified	62.2	84.4	94.6	100	100	100
Omnibus test	0	0	0	0.037	0.176	0.001
Hosmer and Lemeshow test	0.003	0.015	0.498	0.16	0.6	0.229
Cox and Snell R square	0.188	0.101	0.094	0.061	0.053	0.072
Nagelkerke R square	0.251	0.137	0.136	0.1	0.083	0.127
Predictor variables	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Educational qualifications	0.672	-0.441	-0.696***	0.261	-0.369	0.157
SE	0.415	0.345	0.332	0.363	0.351	0.35
Social class	.635*	-0.032	0.979***	.979***	-0.024	-0.018
SE	0.298	0.212	0.266	0.342	0.338	0.32
Leisure time	0.286	.265*	0.047	-0.323	-0.669	-0.15
SE	0.163	0.129	0.154	0.181	0.174	0.162
Asked to participate	2.174***	-0.253	0.586	0.158	0.179	0.166
SE	0.528	0.26	0.353	0.396	0.406	0.483
Anyone convince to vote	0.544	-0.479	0.128	0.771	-0.191	0.308
SE	0.376	0.27	0.382	0.833	0.564	0.861
Party mobilisation: home	-0.315	0.359	-0.028	0.305	-0.021	0.058
SE	0.343	0.242	0.27	0.36	0.352	0.354
Party mobilisation:telephone	-0.923	1.386	0.5	-0.276	0.134	2.7
SE	0.683	0.676	0.455	0.485	0.562	1.522
Voluntary activity	-0.136	-0.159	-0.35	0.217	0.084	-0.149
SE	0.137	0.095	0.114	0.131	0.139	0.166
Political efficacy	-0.044	0.2	0.07***	.043***	.089***	0.42***
SE	0.076	0.045	0.06	0.078	0.087	0.076
Interest in campaign	0.202	-0.712	-0.525***	-0.568*	-0.568*	-0.292
SE	0.246	0.163	0.196	0.226	0.225	0.208
Strength of partisanship	0.403	0.226	-0.015	0.311	-0.56	.446*
SE	0.27	0.172	0.192	0.246	0.232	0.22
N	413	785	727	751	745	1032

Table 6 shows that the equity fairness model also has a weak fit to the data, although, again, the fit is strongest for the youngest age groups. Controlling for other factors, the model suggests that a youthful dissatisfaction with ones financial position make is less likely those in the youngest group will vote. Beta values indicate a decreased probability of voting of 1.656 for those reporting to be 'angry' about their financial decision, but an increased probability of 1.038 for those feeling 'disgusted' with their situation. This would seem to point to an understandable contradiction whereby some decline to vote in protest whereas others decide to vote, both in frustration at their financial situation. These measures may also be proxy indicators of lower social class given that we might expect those from lower social class backgrounds to be more likely to have negative feelings about their financial status.

Table 6 *Comparison of the performance of the Equity fairness model*

Model fit	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Correctly classified %	70.6	67.8	73.5	82.1	78.9	85.1
Non voters correctly classified	79.2	41	18.1	0	0	0
Voters correctly classified	62.2	84.4	94.6	100	100	100
Omnibus test	0	0	0	0.037	0.176	0.001
Hosmer and Lemeshow test	0.003	0.015	0.498	0.16	0.6	0.229
Cox and Snell R square	0.188	0.101	0.094	0.061	0.053	0.072
Nagelkerke R square	0.251	0.137	0.136	0.1	0.083	0.127
Predictor variables	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Educational qualifications	0.672	-0.441	-0.696***	0.261	-0.369	0.157
SE	0.415	0.345	0.332	0.363	0.351	0.35
Social class	.635*	-0.032	0.979***	.979***	-0.024	-0.018
SE	0.298	0.212	0.266	0.342	0.338	0.32
Leisure time	0.286	.265*	0.047	-0.323	-0.669	-0.15
SE	0.163	0.129	0.154	0.181	0.174	0.162
Asked to participate	2.174***	-0.253	0.586	0.158	0.179	0.166
SE	0.528	0.26	0.353	0.396	0.406	0.483
Anyone convince to vote	0.544	-0.479	0.128	0.771	-0.191	0.308
SE	0.376	0.27	0.382	0.833	0.564	0.861
Party mobilisation: home	-0.315	0.359	-0.028	0.305	-0.021	0.058
SE	0.343	0.242	0.27	0.36	0.352	0.354

Party mobilisation:telephone	-0.923	1.386	0.5	-0.276	0.134	2.7
SE	0.683	0.676	0.455	0.485	0.562	1.522
Voluntary activity	-0.136	-0.159	-0.35	0.217	0.084	-0.149
SE	0.137	0.095	0.114	0.131	0.139	0.166
Political efficacy	-0.044	0.2	0.07***	.043***	.089***	0.42***
SE	0.076	0.045	0.06	0.078	0.087	0.076
Interest in campaign	0.202	-0.712	-0.525***	-0.568*	-0.568*	-0.292
SE	0.246	0.163	0.196	0.226	0.225	0.208
Strength of partisanship	0.403	0.226	-0.015	0.311	-0.56	.446*
SE	0.27	0.172	0.192	0.246	0.232	0.22
N	413	785	727	751	745	1032

Perceptions of fair treatment by the government, perceptions of economic deprivation and transport policy are statistically significant. But clearly this model tells us little about the reasons the two youngest groups stayed away from the polls in 2001 and also has a weak fit for the remaining age groups. It appears that feelings of economic deprivation have some impact on young people's propensity to vote but blame does not appear to be attributed to government by the youngest group. Overall the negative incentives in this model do not fit the data well and it appears that other incentives to participation need to be examined.

Table 7 provides evidence for the last of the sociological models presented here, the social capital model. It shows that young people with higher levels of trust in others and who had volunteered to take part in politics or community activities in the twelve months preceding being asked were significantly more likely to have voted. Whilst social trust was significant, albeit at a lower level ($p=<0.05$) for other age groups (35-44, 45-54), the findings strongly suggest that social capital is now an important factor in understanding the voting behaviour of today's young voters. Research in the UK has shown that social capital has not declined in the UK to the same extent as in the US, but that there are significant disparities between and amongst social groups (Hall 99, 2002, Halpern 2005). Most notably young adults and those from lower social class backgrounds were shown to be most deficient in social capital.

Table 7 *Comparison of the performance of the social capital model*

Model fit	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
correctly classified %	66.6	58.8	70.6	76	79.6	82.3
non voters correctly classified	80	28.4	11.9	0	0	0
voters correctly classified	51.6	81.9	95.9	100	100	100
Hosmer and Lemeshow test	0.023	0.482	0.618	0.326	0.504	0.704
Cox and Snell R square	0.114	0.35	0.057	0.028	0.019	0.016
Nagelkerke R square	0.152	0.47	0.081	0.042	0.03	0.026
Predictor variables	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Trust in others	0.211**	0.061	.134*	.035*	0.028	0.036
SE	0.062	0.032	0.029	0.032	0.035	0.028
Perceived fairness	-0.011	.115**	.086**	.117**	.105**	.066*
SE	0.065	0.035	0.033	0.034	0.038	0.032
Asked to participate	0.867	0.224	0.141	0.321	0.105	0.38
SE	0.449	0.237	0.207	0.221	0.237	0.226
Volunteering	1.223*	0.17	.514*	0.229	0.431	0.555
SE	0.534	0.274	0.25	0.257	0.282	0.225
N	430	888	1230	1070	1046	1588

Table 8 provides evidence of the fit of the cognitive mobilisation model. Whilst the cognitive mobilisation model does not fit the data well, the coefficients reveal that those with higher levels of political knowledge were more likely to have voted as were those with higher levels of interest in the elections campaign. This is an important finding given that there is an increasing body of work arguing that the sources of political information available to young voters has changed in recent decades and that this is having an adverse effect on levels of political knowledge and civic engagement (e.g. Milner 2002, Wattenberg 2007)

Table 8 *Comparison of the performance of the cognitive mobilisation model*

Model fit	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Correctly classified %	68.8	72.2	75.4	79.5	80.5	85.1
Non voters correctly classified	60.8	47.1	21.5	5.6	14	0

Voters correctly classified	75	86.7	96.1	98.5	97.7	100
Omnibus test	0	0	0	0	0	0.03
Hosmer and Lemeshow test	0	0.259	0.001	0.058	0.925	0.94
Cox and Snell R square	0.159	0.174	0.105	0.078	0.116	0.055
Nagelkerke R square	0.212	0.238	0.151	0.122	0.182	0.096
Model fit	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Education qualifications	0.209	-0.082*	-0.740*	0.232	-0.633	0.237
SE	0.57	0.399	0.372	0.319	0.383	0.334
Political knowledge Q1	1.263**	0.736*	0.433	-0.286	0.245	0.262
SE	0.465	0.373	0.459	0.669	0.59	0.52
Political Knowledge Q2	.946*	-1.124*	-0.971*	0.642	-0.116	0.264
SE	0.456	0.327	0.412	0.753	0.685	0.557
Political knowledge Q3	.823***	-0.893	1.413	1.81	-0.344	0.007
SE	0.683	0.535	1.666	1.904	1.1	0.805
Television coverage	-0.227	.542***	0.284	0.083	-0.012	0.205
SE	0.225	0.15	0.167	0.201	0.21	0.193
Interest in election	-1.144***	-0.766***	-0.641***	-0.720**	-0.894	-0.428
SE	0.303	0.19	0.2	0.225	0.27	0.22
gvt handle crime	-0.26	-0.038	0.064	0.044	-0.329	0.428
SE	0.177	0.142	0.151	0.157	0.204	0.167
gvt handle education	0.133	0.008	-0.065	-0.318	0.23	-0.352
SE	0.159	0.139	0.159	0.176	0.202	0.189
gvt handle the NHS	-0.04	0.247	.362***	.388*	.444*	0.84
SE	0.202	0.132	0.149	0.176	0.216	0.173
gvt handle transport	0.027	-0.144	-0.266	0.098	-0.127	0.41
SE	0.182	0.132	0.154	0.172	0.212	0.165
N	435	561	830	985	1003	1240

The final of the age group models tested here is the general incentives model. In their important work on *political choice in Britain*, Clarke et al (2004) found the general incentives model to be the most accurate of the models for prediction the decision to

vote in 2001. Table 9 reveals that the model does not fare well for the youngest group in my analysis. Those who felt a sense of satisfaction from voting were more likely to vote which is likely to reflect the widespread dissatisfaction many young people have with politics. Table 9 also shows that those who have positive feelings towards the Liberal Democrats are also more likely to vote. This might indicate that those identifying with the Liberal Democrats, somewhat counter-intuitively, feel more efficacious as the party has not been tainted by recent experience in government in the same way the Conservative and Labour parties have been.

Table 9 *Comparison of the performance of the general incentives model*

Model fit	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Correctly classified %	68.8	72.2	75.4	79.5	80.5	85.1
Non voters correctly classified	60.8	47.1	21.5	5.6	14	0
Voters correctly classified	75	86.7	96.1	98.5	97.7	100
Omnibus test	0	0	0	0	0	0.03
Hosmer and Lemeshow test	0	0.259	0.001	0.058	0.925	0.94
Cox and Snell R square	0.159	0.174	0.105	0.078	0.116	0.055
Nagelkerke R square	0.212	0.238	0.151	0.122	0.182	0.096
Model fit	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Education qualifications	0.209	-0.082*	-0.740*	0.232	-0.633	0.237
SE	0.57	0.399	0.372	0.319	0.383	0.334
Political knowledge Q1	1.263**	0.736*	0.433	-0.286	0.245	0.262
SE	0.465	0.373	0.459	0.669	0.59	0.52
Political Knowledge Q2	.946*	-1.124*	-0.971*	0.642	-0.116	0.264
SE	0.456	0.327	0.412	0.753	0.685	0.557
Political knowledge Q3	.823***	-0.893	1.413	1.81	-0.344	0.007
SE	0.683	0.535	1.666	1.904	1.1	0.805
Television coverage	-0.227	.542***	0.284	0.083	-0.012	0.205
SE	0.225	0.15	0.167	0.201	0.21	0.193
Interest in election	-1.144***	-0.766***	-0.641***	-0.720**	-0.894	-0.428
SE	0.303	0.19	0.2	0.225	0.27	0.22
gvt handle crime	-0.26	-0.038	0.064	0.044	-0.329	0.428
SE	0.177	0.142	0.151	0.157	0.204	0.167
gvt handle education	0.133	0.008	-0.065	-0.318	0.23	-

						0.352
SE	0.159	0.139	0.159	0.176	0.202	0.189
gvt handle the NHS	-0.04	0.247	.362***	.388*	.444*	0.84
SE	0.202	0.132	0.149	0.176	0.216	0.173
gvt handle transport	0.027	-0.144	-0.266	0.098	-0.127	0.41
SE	0.182	0.132	0.154	0.172	0.212	0.165
N	435	561	830	985	1003	1240

The analysis so far reveals that three of the models of voter turnout; the civic voluntarism, the social capital and the cognitive mobilisation models, provide important information into the predictors of electoral turnout for today's young adults. But before discussing the implications of these results it is necessary to perform a test to verify the statistical significance of the difference between the age groups in the models. Tables 10-12 use the whole pooled sample (all age groups) to interact age with each of the significant variables in the above models. Age is coded 18-24 – 1, 25+ - 0. Table 10 interacts the significant variables in the civic voluntarism model and confirms that social class and political recruitment have a greater effect on the 18-24 group than on the other age group. Table 11 does the same for the social capital model, confirming that for 18-24 year olds social trust was a more important factor in their decision to vote than for other age groups. The interactions for the remaining variables in the social capital model do not fully support the separate age group analysis. Volunteering is not significant when interacted with age, whilst perceived fairness of others is a more important factor here than in the age group models. Table 12 interacts the political knowledge variables included in the cognitive mobilisation model, showing that one of the three knowledge variables is significant. In summary, whilst the results of the interactions do not confirm the statistical significance of all the difference in the age group models, they still support the conclusion that social class, social capital and political knowledge were key predictors important to the youngest groups of adults decision to vote in 2001 and 2005.

Table 10 *Interaction terms in the civic voluntarism model*

Base Model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Educational qualifications	-0.494***	-0.455***	-0.487***	-0.478***
Social class	0.309**	0.318**	-0.244	-0.355
Leisure time	0.140*	0.175**	0.171**	0.173**
Asked to participate	0.464**	0.437**	0.444**	1.567**
Anyone convince to vote	-0.201	-0.164	-0.17	-0.16
Party mobilisation: home	0.157	0.148	0.143	0.129
Party mobilisation:telephone	0.486*	0.450*	0.463*	0.487*
Voluntary activity	-0.045	-0.056	-0.055	-0.053
Political efficacy	0.034	0.043	0.041	0.042
Interest in campaign	-0.483***	-0.455***	-0.448***	-0.434***
Strength of partisanship	0.216**	0.247**	0.249**	0.253**
Control variables				
Age		0.456***	0.456***	0.456***
Gender		-0.14		
Ethnicity		0.004		
Interacted variables				
Social class*Age			0.282***	0.282***
Asked to participate*Age				1.549*

Table 11 *Interaction terms in the social capital model*

Base model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Trust in others	0.289	0.289**	0.275**	0.275**	0.275**
Perceived fairness of others	0.42	0.420***	0.425***	0.425***	0.425***
Recruited to politics/com affairs	0.071	0.071***	-0.040***	-0.040***	-0.040***
Volunteered	0.088	0.088***	0.089***	0.089***	0.089***
Control variables					
Age	0.286***	0.286***	0.248***	0.248***	0.248***
Gender (0 female, 1 male)	-0.113				
Ethnicity (0 other, 1 white British)	-0.03				
Interacted variables					
Trust*Age		0.058**	0.058**	0.058**	0.058**
Perceived fairness*Age			0.058**	0.058**	0.058**
Recruited*Age				-0.443	-0.443
Volunteered*Age					-0.403

Table 12 *Interaction terms in the cognitive mobilisation model*

Base model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Education qualifications	-0.552***	-0.176	-0.172	-0.182	-0.182
Political knowledge Q1	0.601***	0.581***	0.654	0.578	0.623*
Political Knowledge Q2	0.549***	0.439	0.439*	0.306	0.405
Political knowledge Q3	-0.316	-0.177	-0.18	-0.167	1.304
Television coverage	0.175*	0.206	0.208	0.206*	0.215*
Interest in election	-0.807***	-0.733***	-0.734***	-0.731***	-0.739***
gvt handle crime	-0.114	-0.082	-0.081	-0.082	-0.084
gvt handle education	-0.093	-0.101	-0.1	-0.103	-0.091
gvt handle the NHS	0.226***	0.278*	0.277**	0.277*	0.266**
gvt handle transport	-0.047	-0.059	-0.062	-0.053	-0.076
Control variables					
Age		0.184***	0.184***	0.184***	0.184***
Gender		-0.580***	-0.580***	-0.580***	-0.580***
Ethnicity		-0.101			
Interacted variables					
knowledge 1 * Age			-0.036		
knowledge 2 * Age				0.067	
knowledge 3 * Age					-0.674*

Conclusions

The cohort analysis strongly suggests that today's young (non-) voters are experiencing the political world differently not only to their elders but to their counterparts in previous generations. Whilst overall electoral turnout began to recover in 2005 from the nadir of 2001, amongst the youngest cohorts, Britain's newest and future citizens, the decline in turnout continued. This poses important questions for future policy debates on social exclusion and the nature and functioning of representative democracy in Britain.

The second part of the paper tested five competing models of voter turnout. The findings indicate that social class, social trust, political knowledge and political efficacy were key factors in the decision to vote by Britain's youngest voters in 2001 and 2005. Recent studies have suggested that social capital has not declined in Britain to the degree that Putnam found in the United States (Hall 2002) and that levels of

community involvement, charitable endeavour and informal sociability have remained resilient in Britain (Hall 1999; Johnston and Jowell 1999; Johnston and Jowell 2001; Hall 2002; Halpern 2005). Whilst most agree that there is not a crisis in terms of declining social capital in Britain, many studies show that significant disparities in the distribution of social capital exist among social groups. These studies show that the most significant disparities in social capital exist amongst young people and those from lower social class backgrounds (Hall 1999; Hall 2002; Bynner et al 2003; Halpern 2005).

If, as Franklin (2004) argues, electoral competition or the lack of it leaves a lasting impression on voters, it is reasonable to suspect that this might be the case for other kinds of explanatory variable. Political socialisation plays a crucial role in conditioning whether one votes or not. It is not only the character of elections that leaves a footprint in the electorate, but also the wider context in which voters are socialised. Whilst party membership and partisan identification have been in decline over a longer period, this generation of young voters are likely to be some of the first not to have received a strong sense of partisanship through their parents. It is also the case that the information environment citizens are now exposed to is vastly different to that of fifteen years ago. Newspaper readership has been in decline and the internet has revolutionised the amount and accessibility of political information. However, it is the changing television environment that should perhaps be of most concern. Putnam (2000) placed much of the blame for civic disengagement in the USA on television watching. There are good reasons to suspect that changes in television could account for low levels of political knowledge and also affect levels of social capital. We know that young people receive most of their political information from television (Russell 2002). We also know that the period in which this research is focused is one where important structural changes in television broadcasting took place. These changes fundamentally altered the kinds programmes available to viewers. Young people growing up in the 1990s were the first generation of young citizens to be exposed to this new media environment. Wattenberg (2002, 2007) refers to the shift from a broadcasting to a 'narrowcasting' television environment that has dramatically altered the exposure young people get to political information while growing up. This working paper adds to the evidence suggesting a pressing need for a research agenda that focuses on the sources of political information available to today's young people.

Understanding and assessing changes in the way young adults receive their political socialisation in recent years is likely to become a key task for political scientists seeking to explain voting behaviour in years to come.

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