

Voter dealignment, disillusion and the implications for the May 2015 election

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In this post, [Pete Dorey](#) discusses historical trends in voter turnout and ‘top two’ party voting in UK elections. Despite common concerns about falling turnout levels, he argues that thanks to the fact that the election looks close, 2015 will probably see an increase in the number of voters turning out. The Labour and Conservative share of the vote, however, is likely to continue its gradual decline.



A common cause of recent concern among many political commentators is the decline in the number of people voting, particularly in general elections. This is often attributed to two related factors, namely an increase in voter apathy, and declining interest in politics among the British public. However, as ever, we need to be careful about drawing firm conclusions on the basis of headline figures for electoral turnout since the early 1990s, as illustrated in Table 1, because closer examination suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding.

Table 1: Turnout in general elections since 1987 (per cent of electorate actually voting)

1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
77.9	71.5	59.1	61.4	65.3

Although turnout in 2010 was clearly rather lower than in 1992, the decline has not been continuous, but has fluctuated somewhat. The low-point, of course, was the 2001 election, when turnout dipped below 60%, thus prompting concerns about the health of British democracy. However, this slump in turnout probably owed much to the virtual certainty of the outcome, with New Labour widely expected to win another landslide, to the extent that many voters saw little point in voting themselves, because it would not affect the result.

In 2010, however, the opinion polls universally predicted that the outcome was likely to be very close indeed, and this would have persuaded many people that their vote might actually have some impact on the final outcome – certainly more than it would have done in 2001. In other words, in a closely-fought election, more people believe that it is actually worthwhile voting; their vote will be more meaningful, and so less likely to be wasted.

Two other examples illustrate the manner in which electoral turnout tends to be higher in closely fought contests where the result could go either way. The first is at constituency level, where a ‘marginal’ (in which two candidates each have a realistic chance of winning) tends to attract a higher proportion of voters than a safe seat, although the higher turnout might also be partly attributable to the more vigorous campaigning that parties are likely to undertake in such a seat. Clearly, in a marginal constituency, more voters are likely to believe that their vote could make a difference; certainly more so than in a safe seat always won by the same party.

The second example of a closely contested campaign yielding a high turnout was the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, in which 84.5% of the Scottish electorate voted. Not only was this clearly a poll of the utmost political importance, but it was also on a knife-edge for most of the campaign, and thus persuaded ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ supporters alike that their vote could make a difference, and actually determine Scotland’s constitutional future.

Back to British general elections, what is rather more important when observing overall trends in voting patterns in recent decades is the steady loss of support experienced by the two main political parties, Labour and the

Conservatives, as indicated by Table 2.

Table 2: Changes in Conservative and Labour support in Britain since 1970 (per cent of votes cast)

Year	1970	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Conservative	46	44	43	42	42	31	32	33	36
Labour	43	37	27	31	35	43	41	37	29
Total	89	81	70	73	77	74	73	70	65

Again, the decline has not been constant, but has fluctuated, yet the overall secular trend has been downwards: from an averaged share of 85% in the 1970s, to 74.6% between 1987 and 1997, and down to 65% in 2010.

There are numerous (and often inter-linked) reasons for this long-term decline in electoral support for Labour and the Conservatives, namely: class and partisan dealignment; the increased importance of 'issue saliency' and the emergence of new issues, coupled with judgements about the parties' competence or stance on these issues; a perception that the two main parties are similar, in terms of overall policies, so that they do not offer a genuine choice; an assumption that these parties are out-of-touch with ordinary voters, by virtue of their similar educational backgrounds and professions prior to entering Parliament – they often lack experience of 'the real world' as lived in by most voters; a sense that they are dishonest, either in the soon-to-be-broken promises they make at election time, or in terms of their personal conduct, as evinced by the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal.

The prime beneficiaries of this growing cynicism towards Labour and the Conservatives have been so-called third parties, some of whom might also be characterised as anti-system or populist parties, portraying themselves as being 'out there' with ordinary people against an allegedly corrupt or out-of-touch political elite.

The most obvious example of such a party is UKIP, which has successfully exploited widespread British Euroscepticism, and yoked this to growing public anxiety about the perceived scale of immigration from Eastern Europe following the previous phase of EU enlargement. UKIP's growing electoral popularity has been bolstered by its charismatic leader, Nigel Farage, who has successfully portrayed himself as 'real' and plain-speaking compared to the seemingly identikit political leaders at Westminster.

However, the Green Party, having had its first MP elected in 2010, has also enjoyed a recent surge in support, doubtless attracting some voters who previously viewed the Liberal Democrats as a Left-of-centre alternative to New Labour's milk-and-water Thatcherism, but who have since been appalled at the Liberal Democrats' complicity in the enactment of a Right-wing Conservative policy agenda in coalition.

What all of this means is that turnout in the 2015 general election is quite likely to be slightly higher than it was in 2010. With [widespread predictions of another Hung Parliament](#), due the relative parity of Labour and Conservative support in opinion polls, more voters are likely to be persuaded that this time, it will be worth voting. Certainly, in many marginal seats, the incumbent MP is likely to be more vulnerable to defeat than ever before, by virtue of losing a few hundred votes to a UKIP or Green candidate, which might, in turn, allow the challenging candidate to win the seat instead. Of course, it is conceivable that UKIP might actually win a few more seats themselves. Meanwhile, in Scotland, the SNP looks as if it might perform well at the Labour Party's expense in several seats.

However, although overall voter turnout is likely to increase in May 2015, due to the predicted closeness of the outcome, [Labour and the Conservatives will probably suffer a further decline in their share of the vote](#) – as will the widely discredited and derided Liberal Democrats – while 'third' parties like UKIP, the Greens and the SNP, all enjoy significant increases in their support. However, because of the vagaries of Britain's first-past-the-post electoral

system, Labour and the Conservatives will yet again emerge as the two largest parties at Westminster, in terms of the number of parliamentary seats won overall, albeit on an even lower share of the vote than in 2010. This would cast further doubts both on the legitimacy of either party in seeking to govern, and on the continued efficacy or representativeness of Britain's electoral system.

About the Author

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