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Behaviour change:
Voter apathy

Freedom to vote has been hard won so why over the last half century has voting turnout been in decline? Why are over a third of voters, not exercising this right? Psychology can give us insights into understanding this behaviour and ways to identify, understand and communicate with all potential voters.

Voter apathy

Possessing the freedom to vote is considered a cornerstone of political democracy. However, for the last half a century, voting turnout has been in decline. In the 1950 UK General Election the voter turnout was 84 per cent, whereas in the 2015 General Election the turnout was 66.1 per cent. This worries our politicians because it undermines the legitimacy of the incumbent government, as well as acting as an indirect indicator of distrust and disbelief in democracy as a political idea. In the 2015 UK General Election, the Conservative Party won with a slim majority vote of 36.9 per cent (11.3 million votes)[1]. This means that 11.3 million people voted for the interests of a total UK population of 64.7 million people[2], i.e. 17 per cent voted for the interests of the remaining 83 per cent of the country. There was also a level of closeness between those who were eligible to vote but didn't (15 million) and those that couldn't vote (18 million).

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Reasons behind this apathy have been found to include a feeling that Parliament did a bad job; a lack of trust in Ministers to tell the truth; and that running the country was in the hands of a few (YouGov, 2016). Reasons such as these help us to understand the widening gap between those who are eligible to vote (the voting age population) and those who actually register to vote.

The challenge

The challenge for politicians is how to engage meaningfully and communicate effectively with an increasingly disaffected and disengaged electorate. Ironically, this challenge exists in an age of rapid technological innovation that now enables people to collect and share more information and data than ever before in what some call 'a new public information space'[5]. This issue is especially pertinent to the younger generation, who are not only a key demographic of voter apathy, but also the 'information doers' who utilise 'go anywhere' technology in a persistent and real-time manner.

Therefore, if politicians want their electorate to engage with the political process and increase voter turnout then they need to update their models of how they understand, connect and communicate with their voters. Politicians who continue to use time-worn and one dimensional words of encouragement to simply 'get out and vote' are already out-of-date and behind the curve with their electorate. This challenge has been perfectly articulated by the Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee, who stated that 'urgent action is needed to make elections more accessible to the public and to convince people that it is worth voting – no matter who they vote for!'[6]

The psychology

Understanding why people don't vote

A body of research in the psychology of politics has tried to better understand the numerous factors that affect voter turnout and apathy. A traditional social psychology theory of behavioural apathy comes from the studies on bystander intervention[7], which suggests that peoples' sense of social responsibility is diluted when they are in a group setting. This has been generally attributed to three psychological processes[8]:

1 **The diffusion of responsibility:** The tendency to reduce your personal responsibility when around others ('it's not my job, there are others here better qualified').

2 **Pluralistic ignorance:** The tendency to assume and rely on the overt actions of others ('someone will do something soon').

3 **Evaluation apprehension:** The fear of being judged by others when acting publicly ('if I do something I'll look like an idiot').

Research into decision making has identified the strong influence of emotions. Kahneman (2011)[8], suggests that people often prefer to use an impulsive and emotionally-based approach (emotion) as opposed to a rational and deliberate approach (rational). This is both interesting and important as politics is often portrayed as a dull and boring topic that requires a dry, intellectual mindset in order to understand it. This suggests that the importance of whom to

vote for, and what to vote about, requires a rational approach, but Kahneman's findings suggest that emotion could play a greater role in voting behaviour than has been traditionally recognised and accepted. This was almost certainly the case in the recent EU Referendum whereby the perception of voters to fully understand true facts and statistics as different from political spin resulted in polarising people into the Leave or Remain camps based on their emotions and 'gut feeling' because they could not trust the information being presented to them. In fact, two weeks prior to the vote a YouGov poll[9] found that almost 50 per cent of those surveyed still did not know which way they would vote; suggesting a last minute emotionally-influenced heuristic-based decision (emotion) rather than a rational, methodical, evidence-based decision (rational). Furthermore, on the eve of the election the percentage of those who were unclear (clear) about the case for leaving or remaining was 42 per cent (34 per cent) and 46 per cent (29 per cent) respectively[10]; thereby further supporting reasons for either not voting (apathy) or voting based on emotion.

Many other studies in political psychology have looked at other reasons and factors that might affect voters' behaviour, such as self-efficacy (a person's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task)[11], personality (conscientiousness and emotional stability)[12], stress[13], voting history and habit[14] and even the location of voting can exert subtle influences[15]. The general consensus to draw from these numerous findings is that:

- voting behaviour is multidimensional (there are many reasons to vote);
- it is complex (the reasons are inter-related in complex ways);
- it is dynamic (real-time events can influence behaviour); and
- it is not typically a rational and deliberate thought process (it is open to bias and influence).

This suggests both opportunities as well as challenges to addressing voter apathy and voting behaviour in general.

What has been shown to improve voter behaviour?
Studies have shown that potential voters with high self-efficacy overestimate the impact of their individual vote, but they vote nonetheless[16] (which should be music to the ears of the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee); therefore, improving voters' individual sense of importance and ability could help to influence turnout numbers.

The use of explicit and implicit pressure has been studied in terms of voting behaviour[17]. Explicit pressures are overt interventions that target the individual in order to change behaviour. Examples include 'naming and shaming' and targeted mail and telephone approaches. Although explicit pressure may result in behaviour change, it is often criticised as being too cumbersome and can result in a psychological backlash and behavioural non-compliance. On the other hand, implicit pressures are much more subtle, with the intention that the target cannot make an obvious link between the intervention and how it is trying to influence them. An approach that has been used in numerous contexts is the 'watchful eyes' intervention (Figure 3), whereby a pair of eyes placed in the vicinity of the behaviour (e.g. near bicycle racks, near a collection box or on a mailed letter) lead to behavioural influence via implicit social pressures (i.e. that the person feels they are being watched)[18].

Glosford (2008) found that pre-election intentions to vote and actual voting behaviour are positively linked. The key elements of this link were perception (of the ability to vote), information (to base the vote upon) and social motivation[19].

Figure 1. The 'watching eyes' intervention

Can we force people to vote?

If people actively choose to change their behaviour, on their terms, then it will be psychologically stronger and have a greater chance of leading to long-term or permanent change than enforced behaviour. However, there are plenty of enforced behaviour change strategies that have been considered successful, for example, seat belt use in cars, bans on indoor smoking in public places, and most recently, paying for plastic bags in shops. Unsuccessful strategies that try to enforce behaviour are normally unsuccessful due to problems in robustly enforcing the law. The best historical example of this was prohibition in the United States of America (1920–33). In Australia, where voting is compulsory (otherwise the registered voter is fined), the turnout for their General Elections is approximately 95 per cent (30 per cent higher than in the UK). However, some people argue that the freedom not to vote is also a democratic right and a choice for free citizens. Yet, if the ratio between the eligible UK voting population and registered voters continues to widen, and if the final turnout number in elections continues to decline then considering a compulsory voting strategy must surely be worthy of debate.

Recommendations

Psychologists have created a 3-stage framework in order to assist politicians with improving their relationship with their electorate. Building upon models developed by the Government Social Research Unit and Fogg (2009)[20], this framework accounts for the various issues, factors and findings mentioned in this report in terms of an individual's motivation and intention to engage with the political voting process. The three stages are: IDENTIFY – UNDERSTAND – COMMUNICATE, which should help politicians develop better campaigning strategies aimed at connecting and engaging with the electorate.

Identify '*who* are the voters, and *where* are they?'	• Tackle the numbers not registered to vote by enabling them to vote by a number of different means (i.e. postal, digital, in-person, by proxy) and help reduce the numbers who can't vote. • Identify the range of target audiences for voting. Build this knowledge around valid and reliable data analysis of demographic variables (age, gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, etc.).
Understand '*what* is important to voters and *why*?'	• Develop a deep understanding of the range of issues that are important to the various target audiences. It is no longer sufficient for politicians to apply over-simplistic one-issue determinants of voting incentives. This was evident during the EU Referendum by assuming the primary motivation for Leave voters was immigration, and for Remain voters it was the economy. • Understand the complex interactions between similar and competing issues, recognising that both similar and different issues will resonate with the different target audiences.
Communicate '*how* do we communicate with voters and *when*'	*Connect to voters* • Maximise reach and exposure • Focus on issues that are important to the target audiences *Tap into personal relevance* • Value their emotion and experience • Validate their authenticity and uniqueness • Seek advocacy and endorsement

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