

BRITAIN (NOT) AT THE POLLS, 2001

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The political culture in Great Britain also approximates the civic culture. The participant role is highly developed.

Almond and Verba, The Civic Culture, p. 455.

Blurred ideas of popular sovereignty and universal suffrage are so interwoven in prevailing conceptions of British government that the obligation to vote becomes almost an aspect of the citizen's national identity.

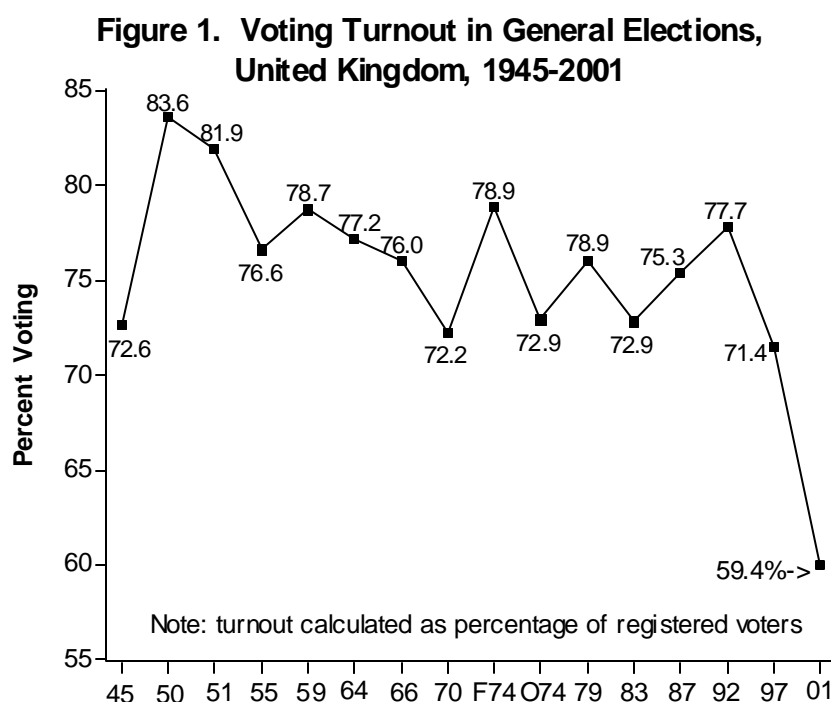
Butler and Stokes, Political Change in Britain, p. 26

American political scientists long have admired the British polity.¹ Although claims regarding the stability and effectiveness of Britain's political system are heard less frequently now than in the past, other aspects of that system – aspects that are said to invigorate the quality of democratic life – continue to be celebrated. Particularly arresting, and in sharp contrast to the American experience, is the image of voters streaming to the polls in periodic general elections to choose between alternative visions of the good society presented by the Conservative and Labour parties. British voters are seen to have (relatively) meaningful electoral choices and to *exercise* them. This portrait of a participatory electorate is strongly contradicted by the results of the 2001 general election. Turnout fell precipitously, and fears have been expressed that it might sink further in the future. Data gathered in the 2001 British Election Study (BES)² enable us to investigate factors associated with electoral (non)participation in contemporary Britain, and to consider what this may portend for British democracy.

From Gentle Decline to Freefall

In the 15 general elections between 1945 and 1997 turnout averaged slightly over 76% -- ranging from a high of nearly 84% in 1950 to a low of just over 71% in 1997. Over this period the percentage of citizens going to the polls gradually decreased, and commentators worried that turnout might fall below 70% in 2001. Figure 1 suggests this was not inevitable. Turnout in 1997 was only slightly lower than it

had been in the 1945, 1970, (October) 1974 and 1983 elections and, in each of those instances, it rebounded in the next election. But, there was no bounce-back in 2001 -- only 59.4% of the registered electorate went to the polls (Electoral Commission, 2001: 11). This figure is the lowest since the end of World War II, lower than the first election (1928) after women's suffrage became universal, and the lowest since the "khaki" election of 1918.



Absence from the polls was pronounced in all parts of Britain in 2001. In England, it ranged from slightly over 10% in the Southwest to nearly 15% in the Northwest. In Scotland and Wales, where analysts looked for evidence of growing nationalist sentiment and accompanying alienation from the British political system, the decreases were large, but not atypical – 13% and 12%, respectively. At the constituency level, turnout varied predictably with levels of party competition and socio-demographic characteristics, tending to be higher where the margin of victory had been narrow in 1997, and lower where there were large numbers of council tenants, ethnic minorities and unemployed persons.

The turnout freefall has triggered a national debate about the public's loss of interest in politics

and what to do about it. Perceptions that the situation is serious is widespread. For example, Noreena Hertz (2001), writing in the *Guardian*, a newspaper sympathetic to the governing Labour Party, suggested that trust in politicians and the political process had reached an all time low. The Electoral Commission, the official state organization which oversees the conduct of elections in Britain, announced that “[t]he Commission believes that identifying and addressing the causes of low turnout is the key challenge facing the UK’s political system and leaders” (Electoral Commission website, 2001). An immediate effect of the perceived crisis in participation has been to prompt the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) to review the whole of its political coverage (BBC, website, 2001). Similarly, there have been calls for a lowering of the minimum voting age from 18 to 16 (Vasager, 2001), and a demand for the introduction of US-style political commercials on television, something that currently is barred by statute (BBC website, 2001).

One source of low turnout, often cited in the United States, is the complexity of voter registration. This is not plausible in the British case, since the registration process is simple and compulsory³. Similarly, some have blamed the first-past-the-post electoral system which “prizes strong government above truly representative government” (*The Independent*, June 7, 2001), and called for the installation of proportional representation. The possible merits of a p.r. system notwithstanding, the current electoral system is longstanding and, therefore, it cannot be blamed for the precipitous fall-off in voting in 2001. After all, the present system was in place in the 1950s and 1960s when voting rates regularly exceeded 75%, and it did not inhibit a 78% turnout as late as 1992. We have to look to alternative explanations. Two possibilities, which have generated considerable debate, are the “heartlands” and “delivery failure” hypotheses.

Losing Its Heartlands? Not Delivering ?

The heartlands and the delivery failure hypotheses are geared specifically to the context of the 2001 election, although they echo conjectures about forces affecting turnout in earlier British elections. Reminiscent of a thesis proposed by Butler and Stokes (1971:131) over three decades ago, commentators

advancing the heartlands hypothesis predicted that turnout would decrease in 2001 because of alienation of Labour's traditional working class partisans in the Midlands, North, Scotland and Wales. The claim is that many of these people are "Old Labour" socialists who would not rally to "Tory" Blair's New Labour project of capitalist economics and tightly controlled public spending.

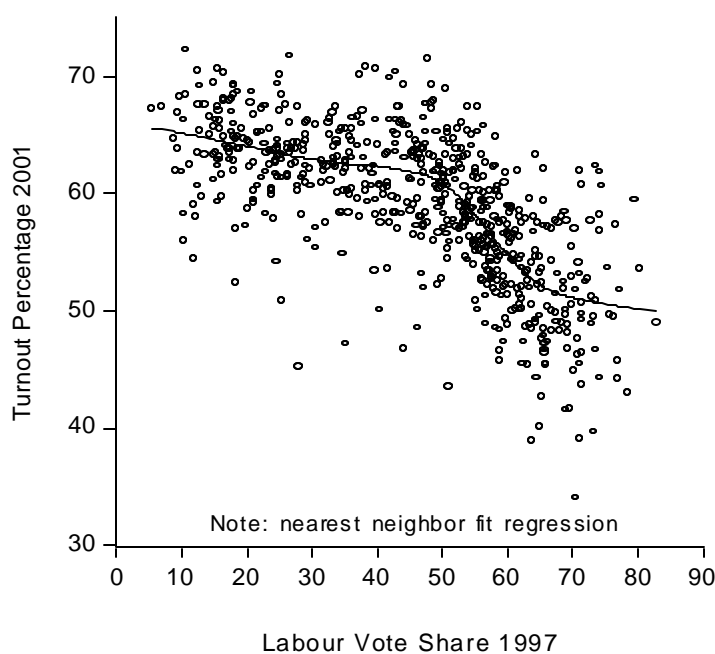
One puzzle associated with the heartlands hypothesis is its failure to have a major impact on turnout in 1997. As Blair emphasized immediately after that election, not only would he govern as New Labour, he had campaigned as New Labour (see, e.g., Bara and Budge, 1997). Indeed, his long campaign to bring New Labour to power had begun when he became party leader in the summer of 1994. Blair's departures from traditional Labour approaches to economic and social policy received wide media coverage, which intensified when he overrode leftwing objections and jettisoned the hallowed "Clause Four" (committing the party to the "common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange") from the party's constitution. What New Labour stood for should have been no mystery when voters went to the polls in 1997 and, in the event, turnout was down -- but only slightly.

Pace Downs (1957), it may be that voters are more concerned with policy *outcomes* than they are with policy *commitments*. In this regard, a second popular, and somewhat related, explanation of the 2001 turnout decline cites disaffection among Labour supporters because of their party's failure to "deliver the goods" by improving health care, education, transportation and other vital public services during its first term in office. The desirability of an expansive public service agenda long has been an article of faith among Labour voters. After their party's 1997 victory, many of them had high hopes that cherished programs such as the National Health Service would be refurbished after what they saw as nearly two decades of painful neglect by the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major.

Once in office, Labour did contradict previous Conservative policies by adopting a national minimum wage, strengthening union recognition rights, and joining the European Union's Social Protocol

(Ludlam and Smith, 2001). Substantial improvements in public services were not forthcoming, however. This was especially annoying because since Tony Blair and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, did deliver on their promise to manage the economy effectively. In a mirror image of the stagflation that had crippled the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan in the 1970s, the new reality was robust growth accompanied by spectacularly low rates of inflation and unemployment. Messrs. Blair and Brown thus *could afford* major increases in spending on public services, but chose not to make them. Disappointed by New Labour's failure to deliver, but judging that there was no viable alternative -- since investment in public services was not seen as a credible priority for a Conservative Party pledging large tax cuts, and the Liberal Democrats did not have a realistic chance to win the election -- a large number of potential Labour supporters chose to stay home in 2001.

Figure 2. Constituency Turnout 2001 by Labour Vote Share in 1997



The heartlands and delivery failure hypotheses both require the fall-off in turnout to be significantly greater among Labour supporters than other electors. Although not speaking directly to *which* voters abstained, constituency-level returns⁴ show that, in fact, the decline was somewhat larger in

Labour-held constituencies (13%) than in Liberal Democrat- and Conservative-held ones (11% in each case). Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, there is a clear negative relationship between turnout in 2001 and Labour's 1997 vote share, with the relationship strengthening in constituencies where the party had obtained 45% or more of the vote in 1997. This pattern is what both the heartlands and performance dissatisfaction hypotheses would predict, since it indicates that voters tended to be less likely to go to the polls in constituencies where Labour support is concentrated.

Who Didn't Vote and Why? Evidence From the 2001 BES

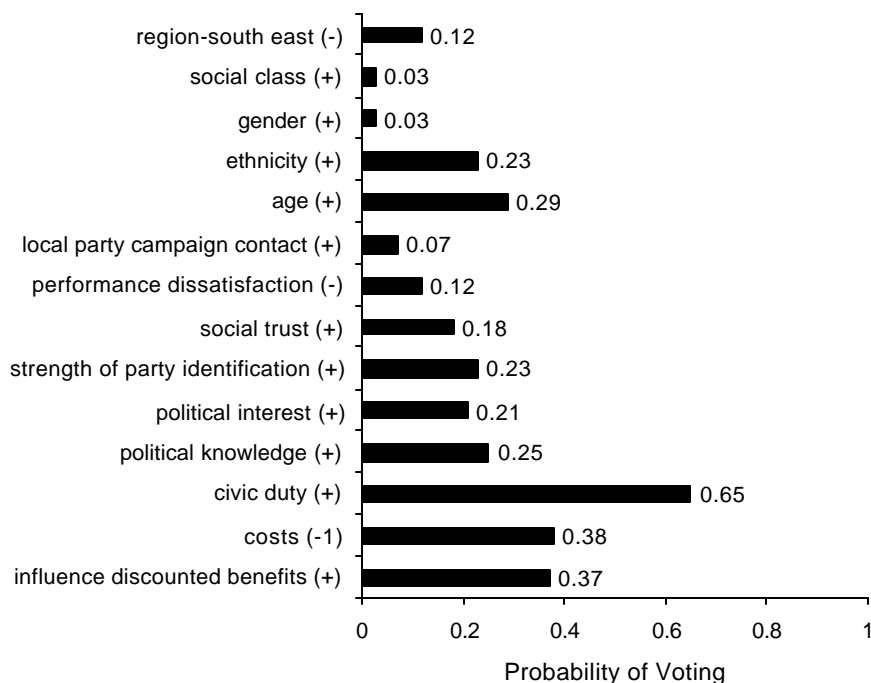
Although constituency-level patterns are consistent with the possibilities that heartlands disaffection and/or performance dissatisfaction may have reduced turnout in 2001, individual-level data provide much greater leverage for investigating these and other hypotheses. Anticipating that nonvoting might be an important feature of the election, we included several sets of questions in the 2001 BES to measure key concepts in alternative theories (e.g., civic voluntarism, cognitive mobilization, modified rational action, relative deprivation and social capital) of voting and other forms of political participation.⁵ We included several major predictor variables from these theories in a turnout model.⁶ Two other variables measured membership in Labour's heartlands (i.e., working class Labour party identifiers living in the Midlands, the North, Scotland or Wales), and the extent to which people "leaning" towards Labour in 2001 were dissatisfied with the party's performance in office.

As Figure 3 illustrates, turnout was influenced by several of the "usual suspects" in electoral participation research. Persons with higher levels of political interest, political knowledge and social trust were more likely to vote, as were strong party identifiers, and those who were contacted by one or more of the local parties during the election campaign. Some socio-demographic characteristics were significant as well – middle- and upper-class individuals, men, those describing themselves as "white British,"⁷ and older people all were more likely to go to the polls.

There also is considerable explanatory power in a version of the much disputed modified rational

action model, $P*B - C + D$, where P = perceived political influence (efficacy), B = differential benefits provided by various political parties; C = costs of voting; D = civic duty. As originally formulated by rational choice theorists, the model did not include the D term. As Blais (2000:5) observes, D was added to increase the power of the model, but "[i]f all the story is in D , we should conclude that the rational choice theory is not very helpful" (see also Green and Shapiro, 1994:52). In 2001, civic duty (D) did indeed have very strong effects on turnout. With other predictors held at their means, the probability of voting rises by nearly 65 points as civic duty increases from its minimum to its maximum value (see Figure 3). However, the effects of influence-discounted benefits ($P*B$) and costs (C) also are decidedly nontrivial; varying perceptions of the benefits and costs of voting each alter the probability of going to the polls by nearly 40 points.

Figure 3. Factors Increasing/Decreasing the Probability of Voting



In contrast, the heartlands hypothesis does not fare well. With other factors controlled, working

class Labour identifiers in heartlands areas were no less likely to cast a ballot than were other persons. Nor is the effect “hiding” in the finding that the perceived benefits provided by various parties affected turnout. In this regard, the modified rational actor model speaks directly to the heartlands hypothesis, since the benefits term is a measure of voter perceptions of differences (or the lack thereof) between the parties. In fact, compared to other people, working class Labour identifiers in the heartland areas tended to see larger, not smaller, differences between Labour and the other parties. This also was true in 1997, and the size of the gap in Labour v. other party perceptions among Labour heartlands and other voters decreased by only two-tenths of a point between the two elections.⁸

Finally, the delivery failure hypothesis performs better. As Figure 3 shows, dissatisfaction with Labour's performance among persons leaning towards Labour (but unsure if they would vote) did matter, with the most dissatisfied being 12 points less likely to cast a ballot than the most satisfied.

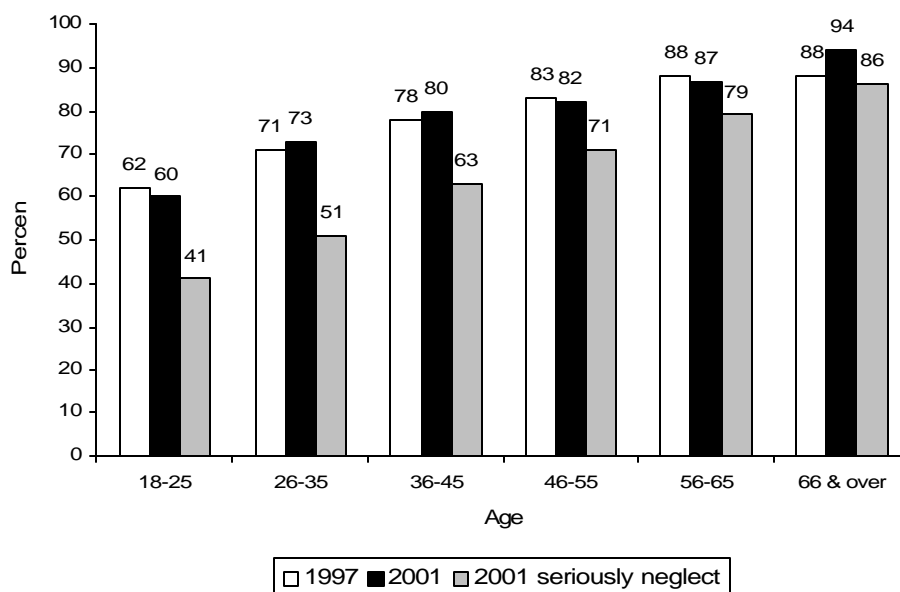
The latter finding should not be interpreted to mean that dissatisfaction with Labour's performance in office is the whole story of the 2001 turnout *decline*. Changes between 1997 and 2001 in the values of other predictors also are potentially important. Consider interest in the election -- which is capable of altering the probability of voting by 21 points (see Figure 3). Long before the 2001 election was called, media pundits had joined turf accountants (the British term for bookie) in making Labour the overwhelming favorite.⁹ Stigmatized as a boring “non-contest,” the election was unlikely to capture public attention or energize partisan sentiments. Comparing data from the 1997 and 2001 BES post-election surveys shows that the percentage of voters paying “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of attention to politics fell from 32% to 29%, whereas the percentage paying “not much” attention or “none at all” categories rose from 31% to 36%.¹⁰ Similarly, the percentage of “very strong” party identifiers fell from 16% to 12%, the percentage of nonidentifiers doubled from 7% to 14%, and the mean strength of party identification on a 0-3 scale dropped from 1.67 to 1.49.

Data from the 2001 BES rolling cross-section survey testify that the election campaign did not

consequential. Designated as *the* crucial determinant of turnout by Butler and Stokes and many other analysts, civic duty is the most powerful predictor in our model. Although the 1997 and 2001 studies use different measures of the concept,¹¹ the closest comparison we can make does not indicate an erosion in civic duty either across the electorate as a whole, or among particular age groups. For example, the percentage stating that it is every citizen's duty to vote is 62% among persons aged 18 to 25 in 1997 and 60% in 2001 (see Figure 5). Among those 66 or older, the comparable percentages are 88% and 93%, respectively.

Still, the possibility that generational change may be eroding the voting-civic duty nexus cannot be ruled out definitively. A question in the 2001 BES asking respondents if they *seriously* neglect their duty if they do not vote produces much larger differences across the age groups than do other measures (see Figure 5). Most striking, only two in five persons 25 or younger think that failing to vote is a serious neglect of their civic duty, and only slightly over half of those in the 26-35 age group do so.

Figure 5. Sense of Civic Duty by Age Group, 1997 and 2001 BES



A Less Participatory Future?

The spectacular decline in turnout in the 2001 general election strongly contradicts the traditional image of a participatory British electorate. 2001 BES data testify that many factors worked to keep voters away from the polls. Although the much discussed heartlands hypothesis does not pass muster, the performance dissatisfaction hypothesis does receive support. But the latter was hardly the whole story – several variables that traditionally have been featured in models of electoral participation were in play in 2001. In some instances, comparisons with 1997 BES data suggest that their values had decreased appreciably over the four years separating the two elections. For example, political interest was down on 1997, and the 2001 campaign did nothing to reinvigorate it. Strength of party identification, another "familiar face" in turnout studies, also declined and, again, the campaign failed to revive it.

It is difficult to tell if the values of these and other important explanatory variables will rebound next time around. In some cases, the behavior of political elites will be important. In this regard, voters' perceptions of the benefits of voting depend heavily on the policy positions and more general ideological stances adopted by contending parties. Although Tony Blair's comprehensive rebranding of Labour narrowed inter-party ideological differences after he became party leader in 1994, Margaret Thatcher's strident right-wing rhetoric and neo-conservative policy agenda provide powerful evidence that a race to the middle is not inevitable -- "Downs can fail" in British politics (Crewe and Searing, 1988). The Conservatives' recent selection of Iain Duncan-Smith as their new leader suggests the continuing strength of Thatcherite ideas in the party. This, together with Labour's announced intention to bolster public services significantly during its new term in office, raises the possibility that there may be considerable ideological "blue water" between the parties in the foreseeable future.

Similarly, it is not inevitable that future election campaigns will fail to provoke voter interest. If party competition intensifies – perhaps because of a recession-driven erosion of Labour's reputation for managing the economy effectively -- then the next campaign may be more heated, and interest in the election, appreciably greater. Local party organizational activity, another significant predictor of turnout,

can be expected to increase in such a circumstance. Summarizing a number of these conjectures for *Daily Telegraph* readers, Anthony King (2001) wrote: “Just provide the voters with a closely fought election at which a great deal is at stake and, make no mistake, they will again turn out in their droves.”

But, there are other influential variables, and they may behave differently. In some cases (e.g., strength of partisanship, social trust), it is likely that the values registered in the 2001 BES reflect, at least in part, long-term downward trends at work in Britain and many other mature democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Perhaps most important, the dynamics of civic duty are problematic. Although a comparison of 1997 and 2001 BES data does not suggest that the belief that voting is an obligation of British citizenship has diminished appreciably in recent years, already strong age-related differences are accentuated in responses to a new civic duty question in the 2001 BES. If these enhanced differences signify growing life-cycle or -- more ominously -- generational gaps in civic duty, the 2001 decrease in turnout may be a harbinger of a future where levels of electoral participation in Britain more closely resemble those in the United States. Whether high turnout will give American political scientists cause to lionize the British political system in the 21st century remains to be seen.

ENDNOTES

1. Woodrow Wilson and A. Lawrence Lowell are good early examples. See, e.g., Ranney (1954).
2. The 2001 BES is being conducted by Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart and Paul F. Whiteley with funds provided by the UK Economics and Social Research Council (ESRC). The study has several components: (a) a pre-campaign baseline in-person survey (CAPI) with a representative sample of the British electorate; (b) a post-election in-person survey (CAPI) with a panel of (a), plus a nationwide "top-up" sample; (c) a national rolling cross-sectional telephone survey (CATI) with a post-election panel component; (d) a post-election telephone survey (CATI) with a representative sample of the Northern Ireland electorate; (e) a mail-back questionnaire distributed to all respondents in (b). Details concerning the study are available on the 2001 BES website: www.essex.ac.uk/bes.
3. All persons 18 years of age or older are required by law to fill in and return a voter registration form each year, which is delivered to their homes. The electoral register is then updated using this information.
4. The constituency-level data are from the British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992-2001, Release 2, June 21, 2001, prepared by Pippa Norris.
5. See, e.g., Barnes and Kaase (1979); Blais (2000); Dalton (1996); Gurr (1970); Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Berry (1996); Parry, Moyser and Day (1992); Putnam (2000); Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995); Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980).
6. Turnout is measured using two variables. One is recalled turnout. Since, as in other national election studies (e.g., earlier BES, ANES, CNES), this variable exaggerates actual turnout, we adjust it using respondents' pre-election likelihood of voting estimates as measured on a 0-10 scale. Everyone who has a score at or above the average on the scale and reports voting is considered to have done so. Results reported here use the adjusted turnout measure as the dependent variable. However, they are very similar to those produced using the unadjusted measure. The set of explanatory variables includes :(a) civic duty index; (b) costs of voting index; (c) equity-fairness evaluations index; (d) influence (efficacy)-discounted benefits of voting index; (e) interest in 2001 election; (f) Labour heartlands supporter; (g) Labour leaner x

performance dissatisfaction index; (h) local party campaign contact index; (i) performance dissatisfaction index; (j) perceived closeness of constituency-level party competition; (k) political knowledge index; (l) social trust index; (m) strength of party identification; (n) socio-political contact index; (o) socio-demographics - age, education, ethnicity, gender, region, social class. Details concerning the construction of these variables may be found on the 2001 BES website (see note 1 above).

7. In Britain ethnicity is defined in racial terms, so that Scots, Welsh and Irish would not be described as members of an ethnic minority. Social class is defined in terms of the respondent's occupational status which can be measured in a number of different ways. In this paper we use the market research society's definition of occupational status, which has six categories: A, B, C1, C2, D, E. Working class respondents are defined as those who score C2, D or E on this scale.

8. In 2001, for working class Labour identifiers in the heartlands regions, the mean perceived difference between Labour and other parties is 4.2 points; for other people, it is 3.0 points ($F = 120.64$, $p < .001$). The comparable figures for 1997 are 4.6 and 3.2 points, respectively ($F = 157.18$, $p < .001$).

9. Throughout the 1997 and 2001 period, Labour continued to enjoy large leads in monthly opinion polls. Although the lead finally evaporated during the September 2000 petrol crisis, it quickly reappeared and was maintained throughout the months leading up to the election call.

10. Since the 1997 BES did not ask about interest in the election, we use a question about attention to politics generally that was worded identically in the 1997 and 2001 surveys to gauge changes in interest over time. The strong correlation between the general "attention to politics" and the election interest in the 2001 survey ($r = +.62$) suggests the former is a useful (albeit imperfect) proxy for the latter.

11. The 1997 BES civic duty question is: "Thinking now about voting in general elections. Generally speaking, do you think: people need not vote unless they really care who wins, or, is it everyone's duty to vote." In 2001, civic duty was measured with two five-category "agree-disagree" statements: (i) "It is every citizen's duty to vote in an election," (ii) "I would be seriously neglecting my duty as a citizen if I didn't vote."

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