None of the Above
Non-voters and the 2001 election
A Hansard Society Briefing
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This briefing draws heavily on a MORI research report
by Ben Marshall and Kully Kaur-Ballagan
None of the Above

Non-voters and the 2001 election

The June 2001 election saw a dramatic drop in turnout. Some decrease in voting had been widely predicted, but the size of the drop was so big it took most people by surprise and has served as a wake-up call to those who govern and represent us. There have long been governments resting on a minority of the electorate, but so long as turnout overall remained reasonably high, politicians could dismiss those who did not vote and not have to worry about their democratic legitimacy. But when six out of 10 young people do not vote, as well as, first indications suggest, nearly one-third of women over 55 - traditionally the most civic-minded - then the alarm bells ring.

The Hansard Society had anticipated a drop in turnout but the size and breadth was totally unexpected. As the Hansard Society is likely to play a role in promoting any actions to counter this situation, it is important for us to try to understand more about why voters stayed away before proposing how to address this problem. The polling data following the election had started to investigate these reasons but we felt there was need to probe further and try to get underneath these headline first responses.

The Hansard Society, funded by the Electoral Commission which has a statutory role in promoting participation in elections, commissioned MORI to carry out focus group discussions to explore why over five million fewer people voted on June 7th 2001 than in 1997 - and to examine attitudes of these non-voters to parliamentary democracy and political participation. The groups also examined some possible ways of boosting turnout and engaging people in the political process.

Verbatim quotes from participants are italicised and where used do not always represent the views of the group as a whole, though normally are representative of a significant minority. (The full MORI research report is available on our web site at www.hansardsociety.org.uk and at www.mori.com.)

Non-voters and the political process

This briefing focuses on the attitudes of non-voters to politics and politicians and the need for the political process to connect with ordinary people.

The participants in these research groups\* contradict many of the explanations discussed in the media since the election. None of our non-voters spontaneously gave 'the foregone conclusion of the result' as a reason why they themselves did not vote in 2001. Neither

\* these comprised a cross section of non-voters, mainly younger people from a range of different constituency seat types including some defined as 'activist'; see appendix for details)
was it primarily the process of voting which deterred them, although they were critical of some aspects of the electoral process and made it clear that making voting easier would be widely welcomed. Most importantly, not voting was something that most of them had consciously chosen to do: a positive abstention rather than apathy.

Not voting is like a vote in itself.
Male, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

The reasons they gave for staying away from the polls

No difference
Our non-voters did not vote because they did not see a clear choice between the politicians on offer to them. They seemed to them to be all the same. Many also failed to distinguish any real differences between the policies of the main political parties.

In the old days you had Labour on the left and Conservatives on the right and they had certain ideas of what was what. Now they are in the middle and you don’t necessarily know what’s going on or how it affects you.
Male, 18-34, ‘activist’ non-voter, Nottingham

They all do the same things, they all promise to do the same things.
Female, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

Everyone has similar policies; all the different parties say the same thing.
Female, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

This is the first time I have not voted. I voted in 1997. There didn’t seem to be such a blur between the two parties; this time I felt there was no distinction, they were all muddled into one and it’s not going to work. I don’t see the point in having a Government if you also haven’t got a reasonable Opposition, it just doesn’t work. You need that, you need two separate parties and that’s what we haven’t got now. I didn’t vote this time because the parties all seemed the same.
Female, 45-65, lapsed non-voter, Plymouth

No alternative
Others were not satisfied with the outcomes of the last four years, but did not see any better alternative for which to vote. This perception, and the decision not to vote, was influenced not so much by the election campaign itself, but by the four years that had preceded it.
Many say that they saw the parties as being ‘all as bad as each other’ - meaning that they had nothing positive to vote for, which consequently led them to abstain. Some also expressed dissatisfaction with the policy platforms of the two main parties and were critical of both Tony Blair and William Hague:
None of the parties appealed to me...a lot of people don’t want to vote for Labour but there’s no alternative, therefore, they don’t vote. Well they are not going to vote Tory, the Lib Dems just aren’t really popular. The people who can’t find an alternative, who are resigned to what’s already there, will just not vote. If you felt really strongly that you didn’t want them in then you’d go and vote just to stop them getting in.
Female, 18-34, ‘activist’ non-voter, Nottingham

Lack of knowledge
Another set of reasons given relates to the non-voters’ feeling that they did not know enough to make an informed choice. Some, especially younger non-voters, were concerned that without knowing about politics you might make the ‘wrong’ choice. This in part reflects a breakdown in the tribalism of politics where people always voted Labour or Conservative because of their class or peer group and did not have to think about who to vote for.

Most are self-conscious about knowing ‘not much’ or ‘not enough’ about ‘politics’ and what voting for different parties and candidates would mean in practice. For them, ‘politics’ is a largely serious, complicated and intimidating subject and, especially among the young, a subject and activity that is ‘not for me’.

If you don’t know anything about it why vote? All the people who are really interested in it do vote. But if the people who don’t have a clue vote for someone else and they win, then it is bad for the others.
Female, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

I would rather come up and say, ‘I don’t know enough’, or, ‘no one sticks out for me so I am not going to vote this year.’
Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

I haven’t got a clue who to vote for, I don’t know what is going on in politics. So I have never voted because I don’t know what is going on. I can’t see the point in voting.
Female, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

I have never voted because I don’t think it is fair that I should use my vote and I don’t know anything about it. And if I did vote, I would probably find out a couple of months later, ‘oh I didn’t know they did that, I voted for them and I wish I hadn’t.’
Female, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

The role of the election campaign
It was not the ‘boring’ election campaign, as the media termed it, that put people off voting. It was the period between the 1997 and 2001 elections that had most influenced the views
of non-voters in our groups. They had in effect already switched off from the political process before the campaign began.

Confirming MORI’s election polling which found that three-quarters say they decided what they were going to do on June 7th before the campaign began, non-voters say they made up their mind not to vote well in advance of the election campaign. For many of the younger non-voters, the campaign largely passed them by. For others, the campaign confirmed or crystallised a decision not to vote, although few say they remember the time they consciously decided whether or not they would vote.

It’s over the last four years when they have been in power you get an idea of what Labour are like, they are always on the news, you get an idea of what everyone’s like so you don’t make your mind up in the weeks running up, you decide over those previous four years.
Male, 18-34, ‘activist’ non-voter, Nottingham

I think I probably decided [during the campaign] that I definitely wouldn’t vote as opposed to probably wouldn’t.
Female, 18-34, ‘activist’ non-voter, Nottingham

Not only may it be too late by the time of the election to engage people in politics, it may even be the worst time - especially if people perceive that elections are the only time that politicians are visible in their constituencies.

The proximity of an election can heighten cynicism such that people are likely to be less receptive to the information and, indeed, discourse, during the four weeks leading up to an election. This further underlines the importance to the political system of being visible and being seen to be working for the public during the ‘peacetime’ period in between elections.

You see them before the elections, and that is it, that is the last you hear of them until the following elections. I mean they should make it a point to come out here, say for example, go to schools, not to see the children, see the parents…
Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

They say one thing and do another, I agree with that. Every political person says the same thing every year, to make you vote for them.
Female, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

They say anything in the campaign just to get your vote.
Male, 18-34, ‘activist’ non-voter, Nottingham

You get the information but you only get it at one time during the year. Like I said, you don’t have any idea what they have been doing for the last three years, the last four years.
Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford
Non-voters and the political process

The research was designed to look beyond the election itself and to explore non-voters' attitudes to politics and Parliament. If the perceptions which lead to non-voting are formed between elections, then understanding these attitudes may help to indicate what is going wrong.

Non-voters are largely negative about the political system. Increased media coverage has made the political system familiar to people but at the same time more distant. Non-voters, especially the young, say they don't know how the system works. They find it hard to relate to what goes on at Prime Minister's Question Time and during elections are unable to see how outcomes will impact on them immediately and on their local area. They want to see evidence that the political system is in touch and working for them all the time, not just every four years. While they are more positive about their own MP than about MPs generally, there is a call for their representatives to be more visible and to engage in greater dialogue with constituents.

Politics as seen on TV

The media, especially television, plays a key role in creating or transmitting the images which gave our group their negative perceptions.

There is a sense that 'politics' is familiar (not least because of national media coverage) but at the same time it is seen as being distant and having little direct relevance to, and impact on, people's day-to-day lives. Younger non-voters tend to associate 'politics' with Westminster and Prime Minister's Question Time, which is viewed negatively:

'Order, order', you know, it is just a game to them. And it would be nice for once if someone...say, like the Conservatives have a good idea and then Blair will get up and say, well I think that is a good idea. They can't agree on anything you know, it is just stupid.
Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

I think they are argumentative, when I flicked on the telly and see them in parliament, they stand up and sit down and address each other. You see people arguing and laughing, you think 'I don't want to listen to this.'
Female, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

I only know what I see on the news, but it is like a load of people on this side, load of people on the other, all talking over each other. Why not change the way it is done, do it in a more civilised manner?
Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

The system is seen as being confrontational with 'fighting', 'squabbling' and 'arguing' frequently used to describe the conduct of political debate and decision-making:

They are always fighting against each other, because they haven't got their facts right. If they
don’t know who has got the facts right how should we know?
Female, 45-65, lapsed/serial non-voter, Plymouth

You get the Conservative person saying something and then you have the Labour Party opinion and they just slag them off. They don’t say one thing about what they plan to do.
Female, 45-65, lapsed/serial non-voter, Plymouth

There is also a sense that politics and the way it is communicated to the electorate are too stage-managed. The word ‘spin’ is often mentioned in a negative way and the media come in for some criticism for simplifying politics to the level of ‘soundbites’. Politicians are thought to be equally culpable in going along with this and being more interested in getting across what they want to say, rather than engaging in genuine dialogue with the public. This reinforces the perception that politics is distant and ‘out of touch’.

The way in which Parliament and politics are presented through the prism of the media is clearly very influential in forming public attitudes. This confirms previous research carried out by the Hansard Society. (See Coleman, 1999) The impact of the media coverage of politics on voting behaviour will be the subject of further research by the Hansard Society in 2002, to explore this connection in more depth.

**Perceptions of politicians**

Many of those taking part in these groups had a low opinion of politics and of politicians. Few showed awareness of the constituency role of MPs; only one mentioned a case where a politician had helped someone they knew. The majority did not think that politicians were ‘serving’ their communities. Instead they saw them as remote from the lives and experiences of ordinary people.

The politicians are interested in money and power. I think they start with a cause and they believe in that cause, but I think they get lost on the way into just securing their own existence in politics really.
Female, 45-65, lapsed/serial non-voter, Plymouth

The majority [of MPs] are toffs. They haven’t got a clue what is going on in an inner city.
Male, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

I don’t think they have any idea how an old age pensioner copes day-to-day. They have never had to think on that level.
Female, 45-65, lapsed/serial non-voter, Plymouth

They just got a pay rise didn’t they? They don’t suffer you know, they hear of people, but they don’t suffer, they never suffer themselves. Until you suffer yourself you don’t know, you don’t really understand it really. I don’t think they do. It is like they are always sympathising, but I don’t think they really understand what the NHS is like, all the waiting…
Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford
Switching on the non-voters

The group participants in our research did not consider themselves apathetic about politics although, as we have already discussed, they do have very negative attitudes to politicians and the political process (as viewed by them on their television screens). They were asked what they thought would encourage higher turnout in elections and also about ways in which people might become more engaged in the political process.

The first responses they gave, which they wrote down on post-it notes without any discussion or prompting, reflect their own reasons for not voting and are largely focused on the outcome of elections rather than the process.

- More relevant policies from politicians and parties;
- Clearer policies from politicians and parties;
- Policies that have a constituency/local focus;
- Better communication of these to the electorate;
- Greater differentiation between the parties so there is a ‘real choice’;
- Better leaders of the parties;
- Delivery of promises;
- Greater honesty on the part of politicians;
- Improving access by making it easier to vote.

This was expanded in the discussion:

I think a lot of people feel voting is very important but I think unless in 2004/5 there are policies going on that we believe in, we won’t [vote].
Male. 18-34, ‘activist’ non-voter, Nottingham

If it made a difference, then yes I would vote. If I knew that by me doing that I would make a difference, then yes. But right now I don’t think if I did vote, or didn’t vote, it would make a difference. Because irrespective of what I say, or what I think, whoever goes into power is just going to do the same old thing.
Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

I think a polarisation of the parties so that they are a bit more different is what would need to happen…
Female, 18-34, ‘activist’ non-voter, Nottingham

If someone would actually stand up and say ‘I can’t promise you the world but realistically we’ll try and do this’.
Female, 45-65, lapsed/serial non-voter, Plymouth

This feeling that people had to believe in the policies and the politicians is carried through
into discussion of ways of involving people more directly in political discussion. Their lack of confidence in all aspects of the political process would need to be overcome before any strategies for engagement could succeed.

Building engagement and involvement in decision-making is widely supported; people agree that this is something which should be done and indeed, needs to be done. However, many acknowledge that they would only be interested in getting involved in decision-making if it was relevant, directly affected them and provided they had confidence in the system – these are seen as being the major failings of the current political system:

Once you get belief, you get people talking, that is when you get word of mouth, that is when you get involvement, after that, whenever you come up with a new scheme, or a new idea, people will be more interested, and more attentive you know, to get involved and to help out. Because they know at the end of the day it is helping themselves, and their borough, and where they live, and they are going to make it a better place.

Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

Engaging with the active citizens

Of particular interest to the Hansard Society were the perceptions of non-voters who were already active citizens. Non-voting activists were included in the discussion to try to find out why, despite their involvement in other political activities, they rejected the ballot box.

The MORI/Electoral Commission surveys found that 24% of 18-24 year-olds who were active citizens (attending a political or interest group/charity meeting, taking part in a demonstration or march, presenting their views to a local or national politician, urging someone else to) did not vote.

Other MORI surveys have shown decreasing involvement in party politics but other activities, which are political in a broader sense, have held up or actually increased. In these groups, the more activist among the non-voters say that they did not vote because there was nothing in it for them or their communities whereas other activities offer opportunities to affect real change.

When asked how politics could be made more interesting and relevant, participants say they want MPs to be more proactive in the community and more visible in between elections. They also feel that MPs need to have greater, as well as on-going, dialogue with their constituents. People want greater contact and interaction between the public and the political system with the proviso that it is on their terms i.e. the public should be generating the agenda and priorities, not being informed about what has already been decided. They want the political system to be working for people all the time (and they say
they see little evidence that it is), not once every four years or so:

Basically if people felt once they had been elected they had more input on their behaviour in politics during their term in office they might feel a lot better about it. You feel that once you have voted them in you are stuck with them for four years and if you don’t like them you are no better off if you don’t vote again. Yes. You vote them in and that’s it for four years. I can’t do anything about it.

Female, 18-34, ‘activist’ non-voter, Nottingham

The participants were given a list of suggested ways of building greater voter engagement. Given the views expressed above, it is not surprising that the participants supported all the suggestions and felt that everything should be tried. Interestingly, strongest support was for opportunities to learn more about Parliament and the political system and how they work.

Most participants felt this should be done in secondary schools with a ‘curriculum’ focusing on the ‘basics’ – how the system works, who does what and how, how this relates to ‘us’ and how we can change things.

When people say, what do you know about politics, I think a lot of people would say they can’t tell you the first thing....

Female, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

I think if it were taught in schools and stuff you would probably understand more about it. But if you understand it fully then you would probably know who to vote for, and then you get used to that way and just carry on voting.

Female, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

Citizenship Education will be a part of the National Curriculum from September 2002 and these non-voters appear to reinforce the need for teaching about Parliament and the political process to be a central feature of this.

**Information and citizenship education for adults**

There is also support for the provision of better information to the electorate during elections.

More important than the amount is the content; non-voters say they want more relevant, local and issue-based information about what is being done between elections, and what the parties are offering them. They want to know what their MP is doing and what he/she intends to do for them. However, information provision is thought to be the responsibility of parties and politicians and the media, none of whom are seen as particularly trustworthy messengers.
Participants regret their lack of basic knowledge of how the political system works. However, delivering citizenship education to people who have already left school is not easy and remains a key issue for the Hansard Society, working with others, to address.

If I had some foundation on how it works, then I might get involved and try and take an interest in politics.
Male, 25-45, rare/non-voter, Watford

A representative parliament

There is also strong support for more candidates who reflect the composition of society, in the sense of being demographically similar (more women, more younger people, more ethnic minority people). More importantly, however, they want candidates to be 'in tune' with society and more accessible. As mentioned earlier, there is an impression that elected representatives have little in common and little empathy with the 'person in the street':

I think more candidates that reflect the composition of society because if there were more people like us then they'd know what we want and then they would then change it. That would be quite good I think. Because at the end of the day if they don't reflect our needs we shouldn't be out there voting for them.
Female, 18-34, 'activist' non-voter, Nottingham

There was, however, support for changes to the electoral process to try to make voting easier and further information about this aspect can be found in the full MORI report. One idea in particular struck a chord and sums up the positive abstention interpretation of the participants' non-voting:

None of the above

If the main reason for non-voting is the rejection of the choices on offer, then the inclusion of a space for 'none of the above' on the ballot paper will at least make these positive abstentions visible to the politicians. This idea was presented to the groups and, not surprisingly, gained support.

What people like about the idea is that it is seen as giving greater choice to non-voters who do not like what is on offer and who can either not vote at all or register a rejection of all candidates. Some are more sceptical, questioning why you would want to tick 'none of the above' when you could just as easily not turn out at all:

I think it shows a different side of voting. I do think it would be a good idea to have a 'none of the above' in case someone did want the choice of going and not voting for somebody, not make it compulsory to vote but that to be there if you wanted to put your point across in that way.
Female, 18-34, 'activist' non-voter, Nottingham
At least if you don’t want to vote for anybody you have gone there. You have not voted but at least you have put what you thought, at least you have done something. Then if you don’t know who to vote for, which I didn’t, if there was a box saying ‘none of the above’ I could have just ticked that. At least I have gone there and done something.
Female, 18-24, non-voter, Stockport

Non-voters are not less interested in politics - just less well-informed and less connected to the established political process; others are simply disillusioned. This is a cycle which is self-perpetuating. They do not like what they see when they do connect with information about politics - which is usually only during elections when they cannot avoid it. This was a common thread across the groups, despite differences of geography, age and gender.

It is instructive, and encouraging, that younger non-voters do not rule out voting in 2004/5. Confirming the MORI/Electoral Commission survey results, they think highly of the principle of voting, and its importance, and say that they want to vote in an informed way and for positive reasons, rather than simply voting for voting’s sake.

It is up to those who seek these votes, and the public service broadcasters who have a responsibility to provide the information voters need to make an informed choice, to explore how they can present a more attractive option for the four out of 10 adults who rejected them at the last general election. Right now, they really do not think it matters.

It is funny, because you are talking about it like I might actually lose sleep over it, I don’t.
Appendix: Background to the MORI research

The research programme was designed to build on previous quantitative polling conducted by MORI for the Electoral Commission and others before, during and after the 2001 general election campaign and to explore why people did not vote in the general election on June 7th 2001. At the same time, the Hansard Society and the Electoral Commission were interested in gauging non-voters' attitudes to parliamentary democracy, investigating attitudes towards political participation and identifying possible ways of re-engaging people with 'politics' and the political system. The topline results from the two surveys conducted by MORI for the Electoral Commission and full methodological details are provided in a separate report available from MORI and at www.mori.com. These datasets and the Electoral Commission's report on the election entitled Election 2001: The Official Results can also be found on the Electoral Commission's web site at www.electoralcommission.org.uk

The focus group programme

The programme of focus groups was designed to ensure that a cross-section of non-voters were included from a range of different seat types ('safe', 'marginal', urban, rural etc):

**Group 1**

Date and time: Tuesday September 11th, 6:30 pm, Nottingham
Quota: 18-34 'activists', non-voters in 2001, BC1C2
Constituencies: Rushcliffe and Nottingham North

'Activists' were defined as people who had done any one of a range of activities including: 'presented my views to an MP', 'urged someone outside my family to vote' and 'taken part in a demonstration, picket, march or sit-in'.

**Group 2**

Date and time: Thursday September 13th, 7:45 pm, Watford
Quota: 25-45 non-voters in 2001 and rarely/never vote, BC1C2
Constituencies: Watford and Harrow East

**Group 3**

Date and time: Tuesday September 18th, 6:30 pm, Plymouth
Quota: 45-65 women, non-voters in 2001, ABC1 Mix of lapsed and 'serial' non-voters
Constituencies: Plymouth Sutton and villages/rural areas in Devon SW
Group 4
Date and time: Thursday September 20th, 6:30 pm, Stockport
Quota: 18-24, non-voters in 2001, C2DE
Constituencies: Cheadle and Manchester Withington

Interpretation of the data

Two of the key strengths of qualitative research are that it allows issues to be explored in detail and enables researchers to test the strength of people’s opinion. However, it needs to be remembered that qualitative research does not allow conclusions to be drawn about either the extent to which something is happening or percentages of the population who have certain attitudes and opinions. Qualitative research is designed to be illustrative rather than providing statistically representative data. It should also be remembered that throughout this report we record perceptions, not facts.

MORI surveys for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and in 2001 for the Electoral Commission, similarly have shown that interest in politics has remained very stable in the period since the 1970s and the youngest 18-24 age cohort are no less interested in politics than they were a decade ago.

Interest in politics over time

Q How interested would you say you are in politics?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Not particularly/at all interested</th>
<th>% Very/fairly interested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 1991</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 1995</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>Apr 1997</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2001</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: c. 1,000 British/UK adults 18+, interviewed by 'phone, 9-15 May 2001
Source: MORI/JRRT
The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and the Hansard Society, as an independent non-party organisation, is neither for nor against. The Society is, however, happy to publish these views and to invite analysis and discussion of them.

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