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The Electoral Commission

Election 2005: turnout

How many, who and why?

Translations and other formats

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The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

Election 2005: turnout
How many, who and why?

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Preface

The 2005 UK Parliamentary general election[1] was the second since The Electoral Commission was established. We are publishing a short series of reports and papers on the 2005 general election. This report focuses on turnout, an issue of particular concern following the low turnout of 59.4% in 2001.

This report does not represent the first analysis by anyone of turnout at the 2005 general election and is unlikely to be the last. But the Commission is uniquely placed to investigate the record take-up of postal voting, the profile of postal voters and the impact of postal voting on turnout. We focus on these issues in the pages that follow and, in doing so, we have drawn on the findings from a large-scale data collection exercise – involving 646 (Acting) Returning Officers and constituencies – as well as a programme of post-election research. This included research to enable us to understand what voters and non-voters thought of the election.

We have used our research to investigate patterns in turnout and postal voting and have explored, among other things, the impact of the four-week campaign, the media's coverage of the election and what people thought of voting arrangements. There is much detail in each of the research sources we have used and we intend to return to these, and others, as we take forward our programme of work over the next few years.

We did not come to the 2005 general election with a blank sheet of paper. Our *Audit of political engagement* series has told us much about people's perspectives on politics and we have conducted research after every set of elections since 2001 exploring turnout and the reasons for it. In April 2005, our *Vote 2005* paper summarised research into political and electoral engagement and turnout at UK general elections.

In this report we have built on previous analysis while utilising new research to look behind this year's turnout figure of 61%. We have analysed

1 Hereafter referred to as the general election.

patterns over time and among different sub-groups and parts of the country. However, we have not confined our investigation to turnout alone and have considered the extent to which potential voters were informed and engaged by the 2005 election campaign.

The objective of this report, along with the other reports we will publish in the months that follow, is to provide a comprehensive account of the 2005 general election as a way of contributing to the fair and efficient conduct of future elections, and as a means of seeking greater public involvement in the democratic process. This is very much a research-led report and it does not make recommendations for policy reform since we have already set these out in *Voting for change*, *Delivering democracy?* and, most recently, *Securing the vote*.

We hope that all concerned will note and consider the findings we set out here and we look forward to working with others to promote participation in our democracy.

Sam Younger
Chairman

Executive summary

As many people had hoped, turnout at the 2005 general election went up. But the improvement from 59.4% in 2001 to 61.4% in 2005 was a very modest one. This report is the second in a series of reports and papers on the 2005 general election and focuses on turnout. It uses new research and analysis to look at some of the patterns in turnout in 2005 and to explore the reasons for these.

Turnout: how many and who?

Turnout at the 2005 general election was 61.4%. While this represented an improvement on 2001, there was otherwise little consolation in the figures:

- Just over 17 million of those registered to vote decided not to do so.
- Turnout was still some 10 percentage points and 5 million voters lower than it was in 1997 – itself a post-war low at the time.
- Turnout was better than it had been in both 1918 and 2001 but was the third lowest since the turn of the twentieth century – it was, in fact, the third lowest since 1847 although that election pre-dated the mass franchise.

The overall turnout figure masks considerable variation in participation rates across British constituencies. Turnout ranged from 76.4% in Dorset West to 41.5% in Liverpool Riverside (although, at 37.2%, turnout was lower still in the postponed Staffordshire South election). Estimates show that young people were half as likely to vote as older age groups and estimated turnout among young people was lower than in 2001: according to MORI, it was 37% in 2005 compared to 39% four years ago. There were also significant variations in turnout according to ethnicity, occupational class, income and educational attainment.

Turnout: why?

Past research has found strong associations between turnout and people's perceptions of the importance, or otherwise, of the election and whether they think their vote will make a difference in some way. Our research after the

2005 general election found people reporting difficulties in deciding who to vote for, in part because of weakening political alignments but also because of the perceived similarities between the main parties. The four-week campaign was seen as, at best, lacklustre and, at worst, negative in tone and too stage-managed. There was also a perception that voting would make little difference, either because the result was a foregone conclusion or because 'nothing will change'.

Some non-voting is likely to be the product of longer-term factors such as disillusionment with politics and negative attitudes towards voting. At the same time, survey data suggests that short-term factors offer a better explanation for why turnout in 2005 did not reach the previous pre-2001 'norm', implying that the steep decline in general election turnouts since 1997 is not irreversible.

Postal voting

There was a three-fold increase in the take-up of postal voting at the 2005 general election compared with 2001. Take-up increased in all parts of the UK, with the exception of Northern Ireland, and most significantly in areas which had previously piloted all-postal voting. There was considerable variation in the take-up of postal voting among the 646 constituencies – ranging from a high of 45.4% in Newcastle-upon-Tyne North to a low of 3.1% in Glasgow East.

For the most part, postal voters were similar to in-person voters demographically and attitudinally and it would seem that turnout was edged upwards by postal voting, but only marginally so. We found voters to be satisfied with in-person and postal voting arrangements although after the election a significant minority of postal voters, a fifth, rated the method as being unsafe from fraud or abuse.

Conclusions

Our research has shown that the reasons why turnout at the 2005 general election did not reach pre-2001 levels were largely short-term ones. Political circumstances were key determinants of non-voting, especially the (still) perceived one-sided nature of the contest and the closeness of the parties. People were as receptive to the election as they had been in the past and our annual audits of political engagement have challenged the notion that the UK public is politically apathetic.

At the same time, our research highlights the possibility that after two historically low turnout elections some people are now out of the habit of voting. Also, younger age groups are much less likely to see voting as a civic duty than older age groups and new analysis for us suggests the beginning of a cohort effect, i.e. a generation apparently carrying forward their non-voting as they get older.

While our research found a strong sense of disappointment in the four-week campaign and the evidence presented in this report raises some important questions about the nature of modern electioneering, it would be wrong to attribute blame for non-voting solely to the campaign. The research we have done since 2001 has highlighted the importance of the period between elections in shaping people's attitudes towards politics and politicians. We also know that some

non-voting is the product of a broader political disengagement and that a section of the electorate are sceptical about the efficacy of voting at **any** election.

We have found considerable variation in participation rates among different demographic groups and parts of the country. However, our research suggests that any attempts to re-engage people with politics, particularly electoral politics, ought to be addressed at society generally since non-voting and political scepticism is evident among all groups. There is also a clear need to re-connect people with politics, and vice-versa, beyond moments of (relatively) high political drama such as general elections.


BALLOT
BOX

1 Introduction

This report is one of a series of reports on the 2005 general election and makes use of a programme of research projects. The findings from those projects, and this report, will have long-term value as a record of the election and also as a reference point to inform the initiatives taken by The Electoral Commission and others to address non-voting.

The Electoral Commission and election reporting

1.1 The Electoral Commission is a public body established on 30 November 2000 under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA). The Commission is independent of Government, non-partisan and directly accountable to the UK Parliament. Our corporate mission is to foster public confidence and participation in the democratic process within the UK and we aim to do this by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

1.2 We are responsible for overseeing a number of aspects of electoral law including the registration of political parties and third parties, monitoring and publishing significant donations to registered political parties, and regulating national party spending on election campaigns. In addition, we have a role in advising those involved in elections on practice and procedure but unlike many electoral commissions around the world, we do not have responsibility for administering electoral registration or conducting elections (however, our responsibilities are different with regard to referendums).

1.3 We are required to report on the administration of all major elections (PPERA excludes local elections from this duty). Since 2000, we have reported on the 2001 general election, the 2003 elections for the Scottish Parliament (combined with local elections), Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly, and the 2004 European Parliamentary elections. Last year, we also reported on local elections in Wales in response to a request from the Welsh

Assembly Government. These reports are available on our website.

1.4 Our past reports have reviewed the administration of particular elections but we have also taken the opportunity to comment on issues relating to turnout, as well as the campaigns undertaken by the political parties and the media's coverage of them. Such analysis is consistent with our remit to review the law in relation to elections and to promote public awareness of electoral systems. We have also published full records of election results and data and separate Commission reports have covered the expenditure incurred by parties, third parties and candidates.

1.5 This report does not make recommendations and has been published as one part of a comprehensive account of the 2005 general election. The Commission has previously made a series of recommendations for changes to electoral legislation in *Voting for change* (2003) and reiterated a number of recommendations relating to electoral registration and postal voting in *Delivering democracy?* (2004) and *Securing the vote* (2005).

Reporting on the 2005 general election

1.6 We have adopted a thematic approach to reporting on the 2005 general election. We have fulfilled our statutory obligations to report on the administration of the election in *Securing the vote*. Subsequently, we will be publishing a series of reports, including this one, plus a separate report covering the campaigns run by the political parties, the media's coverage and the Commission's own involvement in the election. We will also report separately on the elections which took place in Northern Ireland on 5 May and our report on campaign expenditure will be available in spring 2006.

1.7 The views and recommendations in this report are those of the Commission unless stated otherwise. Our report has been informed by a programme of research designed and managed by our Research Team and a variety of sources and pieces of work from the academic and research communities, as well as media coverage of the election.

1.8 The Commission's 2005 general election research programme included several projects:

- Analysis by Professors Michael Thrasher and Colin Rallings of the University of Plymouth Elections Centre of election data including turnout and postal voting data collected by the Commission from (Acting) Returning Officers.
- Media content analysis conducted by the Communication Research Centre at the University of Loughborough and involving David Deacon, Dominic Wring, Peter Golding, Michael Billig and John Downey.
- Analysis by a team including Dr Justin Fisher (Brunel University), Professor David Denver (Lancaster University) and Dr Andrew Russell (University of Manchester) of the election campaigns run by political parties and third parties.
- Survey research conducted on our behalf by a team at MORI among a representative sample of British adults during the election, and among a sample of people from black and minority ethnic communities after the election.

- Qualitative public opinion research involving focus groups conducted at four locations across Britain by Cragg Ross Dawson.
- Additional qualitative research involving one-to-one depth interviews by Research Works Ltd exploring voters' perspectives on the process of voting.

1.9 We have also benefited from partnering and co-funding the British Election Study (BES), a long-standing survey organised by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and managed this year by the University of Essex (with colleagues from the University of Texas) with survey fieldwork undertaken by the National Centre for Social Research. This report makes use of survey questions asked on our behalf as part of the post-election BES survey and a report prepared for us by a team led by Professor David Sanders. Data and analysis from the BES is available at www.essex.ac.uk/bes/ and Appendix A includes technical details of this and our other research inputs.

1.10 We have drawn on academic analyses recently published in *Britain votes 2005* edited by Pippa Norris, particularly the chapter on turnout written by Professor John Curtice of the University of Strathclyde. We have also made use of the opinion polling conducted by MORI, ICM, YouGov and Populus during the election for a range of media clients as well as a post-election poll undertaken by Opinion Leader Research (OLR) for the POWER Inquiry, which is currently considering how democracy in the UK might be reformed to enhance the connections between people and the political process.

1.11 As mentioned above, we have drawn on election data including turnout and postal voting data collected from (Acting) Returning Officers. In the case of Scotland where there were changes to Parliamentary boundaries, use has been made of notional data developed by Professors Rallings and Thrasher to enable comparisons between 2001 and 2005 to be made. In some instances where the findings presented in this report are based on incomplete data, this has been indicated. The absence of a legal requirement on (Acting) Returning Officers to supply the Commission with data created some difficulties and despite extending the deadline for receipt we were unable to source some data for a minority of constituencies.

1.12 Copies of the full reports relating to each of the research projects funded by the Commission and used in this report are available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk or on request from the Commission's offices.

1.13 A full breakdown of data from the 2005 general election, including election results, turnout and postal voting data sorted by Parliamentary constituency, is provided on the Commission's website, and in hard copy on request.

Structure of this report

1.14 Following this introduction, the second chapter of this report briefly examines the background to the 2005 general election before summarising the main outcomes of the election. The third chapter expands on the turnout theme and looks at patterns in the data, making reference to turnout among different

demographic sub-groups, different constituencies and different parts of the country. Chapter 4 identifies the main causes of the level of turnout in 2005 and reviews the extent to which potential voters were informed and engaged by the election campaign. The fifth chapter looks specifically at postal voting and electoral registration and Chapter 6 draws some conclusions.

2 The 2005 general election

The 2005 general election campaign lasted four weeks and involved 44 million potential electors and 3,554 candidates representing 114 parties. In total, 27 million people voted including about 23 million who voted at approximately 42,000 polling stations across 646 constituencies. A record 5.4 million postal votes were issued to electors with almost 4 million returned.

2.1 On Tuesday 5 April and after considerable media speculation about the date of the forthcoming general election, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, announced that his request to dissolve Parliament had been granted by Her Majesty the Queen. The Queen issued the proclamation dissolving Parliament and the writs for the 2005 general election were issued on the same day. This officially triggered the election process, and with the close of poll scheduled for 10pm on Thursday 5 May 2005 meant a campaign lasting four full weeks.

2.2 Owing to significant boundary changes in Scotland the number of Parliamentary constituencies contested at the general election was 646, although the Staffordshire South election took place on 23 June as a result of the death of one of the candidates.[2] This meant fewer seats were contested than the total of 659 at the 2001 general election. In 2005 there were 529 constituencies in England, 59 in Scotland (down from 72), 40 in Wales and 18 in Northern Ireland.

2.3 As well as the boundary changes, the election was notable in administrative terms for being the first general election in Northern Ireland since the introduction of individual registration and the requirement for voters to supply identification. These provisions were introduced in Northern Ireland under the Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act (2002) and our forthcoming report on the combined local and general elections in Northern Ireland will comment in detail on the administration of the Act at the 2005 elections.

2 The data presented in this report includes data for the Staffordshire South constituency, unless stated otherwise.

2.4 Electors in 37 local authority areas in England were also able to vote in local council elections on 5 May 2005. The number of seats up for election in county council elections was 2,203 and three unitary authorities had elections. In addition, several local council by-elections took place in Britain and local elections were held throughout Northern Ireland. Mayoral elections were held in four English council areas.

2.5 These elections followed a fairly busy electoral period since the 2001 general election during which time there had been local elections in various parts of England in 2002, 2003 and 2004, combined Scottish Parliamentary and local council elections in 2003, the Welsh Assembly election in 2003, local elections in Wales in 2004, European Parliamentary elections across the UK also in 2004 and Mayoral and London Assembly elections in the same year. Electors in some local authority areas of England have the opportunity to vote at local council elections in three out of every four years and by the time of the 2005 general election, electors in London had had the chance to vote at one election or other (plus a referendum in 1998) in six of the previous eight years.

Basic facts and figures

2.6 As Table 1 shows, the Commission's own analysis, derived from figures collected from all 646 (Acting) Returning Officers, found 44.2 million adults registered to vote at the general election, very similar to the 44.4 million we recorded in 2001. About 27 million of these voted on, or before, 5 May 2005 with a little under 4 million doing so by post and 23 million doing so in a polling station.

2.7 The take-up of postal voting by 12.1% of the UK electorate was three times higher than it was four years earlier, when it was 4% – the 2001 general election was the first since the law was changed to allow anyone on the register in England, Scotland or Wales to vote by post at an

Table 1: 2005 general election – basic facts and figures

Registered electors	44,245,939
Number of constituencies	646
Number of candidates	3,554
Number of polling stations	42,179
Total valid votes cast	27,148,510
'Adjusted' turnout based on valid votes only (%)	61.4
'Unadjusted' turnout including invalid votes rejected at, or before, the count (%)	61.7
Electorate issued with postal vote	5,362,501
Number of postal votes returned and included in the count	3,963,792*
Electorate issued with postal vote – UK (%)	12.1*
Electorate issued with postal vote – GB (%)	12.4*

Note: * Based on incomplete data missing for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales.

election without needing to give a reason (the law change did not apply to Northern Ireland). Approximately 5.3 million postal ballots were issued across Britain in 2005 with a further 27,680 issued in Northern Ireland. Just under 4 million were returned.

2.8 The election gave a third successive term to Labour and a solid 66-seat Parliamentary majority (discounting the Speaker and his three deputies and down from 154 going into the election), subsequently reduced by one by the Conservative Party's victory in Staffordshire South, but unaltered by the Liberal Democrats holding Cheadle in a by-election in July. On 6 May the Conservatives celebrated 32 constituency gains but reflected on little progress in terms of their vote share, which was up only slightly from 31.7% across the UK in 2001 to 32.4% in 2005. The Liberal Democrats gained a 3.7 percentage point improvement in their vote share and 11 extra seats. This took their total number of seats to 62 – their best return since the Liberals won 123 seats in 1923 and the highest number achieved by the Liberal Democrats since being formed in the late 1980s.

2.9 As shown in Table 2, Labour won 355 seats, down 47 on its 2001 performance (given the boundary changes in Scotland, the 2001 data is notional). The Conservatives won 197 seats (198 after Staffordshire South), up 32, and the Liberal Democrats won 62, up 11. The remaining 31 seats were divided among the parties in

Table 2: 2005 general election results

Party	Votes	Percentage of vote	MPs
Labour Party	9,552,436	35.2	355
Conservative Party	8,784,915	32.4	198
Liberal Democrats	5,985,454	22	62
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	605,973	2.2	0
Scottish National Party (SNP)	412,267	1.5	6
Green Party	283,414	1	0
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)	241,856	0.9	9
British National Party (BNP)	192,745	0.7	0
Plaid Cymru	174,838	0.6	3
Sinn Féin	174,530	0.6	5
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)	127,414	0.5	1
SDLP (Social Democratic Labour Party)	125,626	0.5	3
Others/Speaker	487,042	1.8	3/1
Total vote	27,148,510		

Northern Ireland, the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, the Speaker, smaller parties and one independent. Between them, Labour and the Conservatives polled 67.6% of the UK share of the vote, the lowest combined vote since 1918. Following the election there was much commentary on Labour's share of 35.2% translating to about a fifth of the electorate eligible to vote.

Candidates, independents and MPs

2.10 A total of 3,554 candidates stood for election on 5 May, an increase of 235 from 2001 (3,546 stood for election on 5 May and a further eight stood in Staffordshire South). These comprised 3,522 individuals – 10 stood in more than one seat. Just under 2,000 represented either the Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat parties, UKIP fielded 496 candidates, the BNP had 119, the Greens 203, the SNP 59, Plaid Cymru 40 and 'others' put up 754. UKIP, the BNP and the Greens fielded more candidates than in 2001. Independent candidates, or candidates without description, stood in nearly 24% of all seats contested (up from 20% in 2001), but only one won a seat. Sixty-four registered parties fielded a candidate in only one seat, often focusing on a local issue.

2.11 After the election a number of commentators noted the performance of minor parties and independent candidates[3] and while there were mixed fortunes for the SNP and Plaid Cymru, the Greens, UKIP and the BNP made progress in terms of vote share, if not seats. Also, having formerly represented Labour in the Welsh Assembly, Peter Law won as an independent candidate in Blaenau Gwent, Labour's (then) safest seat in Wales. Richard Taylor held Wyre Forest on behalf of Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern (a registered political party which has had several candidates returned in local elections) and George Galloway of Respect won Bethnal Green and Bow in London.

2.12 Of the 1,883 Parliamentary candidates fielded by the three 'main' parties, 432 were women and 109 were from black and minority ethnic communities. According to recent analysis, such candidates were disproportionately selected to fight 'unwinnable' seats[4] but, nonetheless, of the 646 MPs elected, 128 are women which is a small improvement on the 118 in 2001 (and follows the significant increase in the number of women MPs between 1992 and 1997, sustained in 2001). There was also a modest increase in the number of black and minority ethnic MPs – up from 13 before the election to 15 after the election – and while this figure still falls well short of the total required for the House of Commons to mirror the UK population (51), it is more than twice that in 1992 and nearly four times that in 1987.

3 For example, Pippa Norris notes that 'one of the most important characteristics of this election concerns the performance of the minor parties and independent candidates': P. Norris and C. Wlezien 'The 2005 UK election: who won and why?' in P. Norris (ed) *Britain votes 2005*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

4 P. Norris and C. Wlezien 'The 2005 UK election: who won and why?' in P. Norris (ed) *Britain votes 2005*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

3 Turnout: the details

As many people had hoped, turnout at the 2005 general election went up. But the improvement from 59.4% to 61.4% was a very modest one. This chapter puts these figures into historical context and uses new data and analysis to look at some of the patterns in turnout in 2005. It looks at turnout among different demographic sub-groups and across different parts of the UK.

Overall turnout

3.1 The 2001 general election was dubbed the 'apathetic landslide' on account of the large margin of Labour's victory and the low turnout.[5] The 59.4% turnout was the lowest at any UK general election since 1918 (turnout then was 57.2%) when many troops were still abroad following the end of the First World War.

3.2 As Table 3 shows, there have always been fluctuations in general election turnout but the drop between 1997 and 2001 was particularly sharp. While many commentators had predicted a fall in turnout in 2001, few had anticipated such a drop. Almost 5 million fewer people voted in 2001 than four years earlier when turnout was 71.4%, itself a post-Second World War low. According to one analysis, turnout in 2001 was the lowest recorded in any post-war general election in any European Union state[6] while another pointed out that the 2001 general election was the first modern election in which more people abstained from voting than backed the winning party.[7]

5 P. Norris (2001) 'Apathetic Landslide: The 2001 British General Election' in P. Norris (ed.) *Britain votes 2001*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; M. Harrop (2001) 'An Apathetic Landslide: the British General Election of 2001', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 36.

6 P. Norris and C. Wlezien 'The 2005 UK election: who won and why?' in P. Norris (ed) *Britain votes 2005*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

7 P. Kellner (2004), 'Britain's culture of detachment', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 57, no. 4, pp. 830–43.

Table 3: General election turnouts 1918–2005

Year	Turnout (%)	Year	Turnout (%)
1918*	57.2	1964	77.1
1922	73	1966	75.8
1923	71.1	1970	72
1924	77	1974 Feb	78.8
1929	76.3	1974 Oct	72.8
1931	76.4	1979	76
1935	71.1	1983	72.7
1945	72.8	1987	75.3
1950	83.9	1992	77.7
1951	82.6	1997	71.4
1955	76.8	2001	59.4
1959	78.7	2005	61.4

Notes: Adjusted turnout figures, i.e. excluding invalid votes.
* Figures for Ireland, not Northern Ireland.
Source: C. Rallings and M. Thrasher (2000) *British Electoral Facts: 1832–1999*.

3.3 Such developments prompted much research, inquiry and debate during the period 2001–5. Turnout has been scrutinised at elections in the UK since 2001, often becoming an election issue in its own right and a focus of media commentary. There has also been some inquiry into political disengagement and the role democratic institutions might play in addressing this. Recently, The Commission on Parliament in the Public Eye, established by the Hansard Society and chaired by Lord Puttnam, investigated how Parliament might become more responsive and improve its communication, and the Rowntree-funded POWER Inquiry is currently considering how democracy in the UK might be reformed to enhance the connections between people and the political process.

3.4 Despite this backdrop, the prognosis for turnout at the 2005 general election was relatively upbeat. The opinion polls were no longer showing large, double-digit Labour leads and a closer outcome than in 2001 was predicted by the final eve-of-election opinion polls and by much media commentary. This was important because closer contests are often accompanied by higher turnouts. Also, turnout at by-elections during 2001–5 compared favourably to those during previous Parliaments and had increased at the 2004 European Parliamentary and local elections. Several issues also suggested that the election was taking place within a more animated climate than four years previously, particularly the Iraq conflict which had prompted large public demonstrations, but also immigration, trust and the Government's record on public services.

3.5 In addition, changes to the law, which had come into effect in time for the 2001 general election but were more widely known in spring 2005, allowed any registered elector in Britain to request a postal vote and to vote from home at a time convenient to them. The 2001 general election had seen a doubling of postal voting from 1997 and by the time of the 2004 European Parliamentary and local elections, 8.6% of the British electorate had requested a postal vote outside areas where all-postal voting was being trialled. By the early stages of the 2005 election campaign it was clear that there had been a further increase in the take-up of postal voting (Chapter 5 looks at this in detail and considers the impact of the availability of postal voting on turnout).

3.6 On the other hand, several opinion polls had indicated a relatively low propensity to vote among the UK public – for example, a poll write-up in *The Guardian* in March was headlined 'Election apathy at record level.'[8] It was also questionable whether the electorate saw the election as being close (we will further explore this in Chapter 4) especially as the party platforms of the two 'main' parties were seen in similar terms – an NOP poll in February 2005 found 21% of people identifying a 'great deal' of difference between the Conservative and Labour parties, little better than the 17% of 2001 and well below the 33% recorded in 1997 and 1983's very high 88%.[9] In addition, much research undertaken since 2001, including our own, had diagnosed a severe disconnection between people and politicians and had warned that even regular voters were beginning to question the efficacy of voting.[10]

3.7 In the event, turnout at the 2005 general election was 61.4%.[11] While this represented an improvement on 2001, there was otherwise little consolation in the figures:

- 38.3%, 17 million, of those registered to vote decided not to do so.[12]
- Overall, turnout rose by only 2 percentage points.[13]
- Only three-quarters of a million more people voted in 2005 than in 2001 (although the registered electorate was smaller this time).
- Turnout was still some 10 percentage points and 5 million voters lower than it was in 1997 – itself a post-war low at the time.
- Turnout was better than it had been in both 1918 and 2001 but was the third lowest since the turn of the twentieth century – it was, in fact, the third lowest since 1847 but that election pre-dated the mass franchise.
- Turnout was just under 15 percentage points lower than the 1945–1997 average at UK general elections (and 13 lower than the 1970–1997 average).
- As shown in Figure 1, turnout was lower than in 1997, 1987 and 1983 despite there being a much smaller average lead in the final opinion polls than at those elections.

3.8 As Tables 4 and 5 show, every part of the UK and every English region registered a modest turnout increase compared with 2001, with the exception of Northern Ireland where turnout fell from 68% to 62.9%. This is, of course, likely to reflect particular events in Northern Ireland and is explored further in our separate report on the elections in Northern Ireland. Still, despite this fall, turnout was higher in Northern Ireland than in England, Scotland and Wales. Also, in line with long-term trends and despite the relative 'safeness' of most of the seats there, turnout was higher in Wales than in England and Scotland, although four English regions recorded turnouts exceeding the 62.6% in Wales.

8 A. Travis 'Election apathy at record level', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2005.

9 J. Curtice 'Turnout: Electors Stay Home – Again' in P. Norris (ed) *Britain votes 2005*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

10 See especially, The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*.

11 Turnout was 61.7% if all invalid votes are included on the basis that this represents people who had endeavoured to cast a vote (even if it was to deliberately spoil their papers). This method of calculating turnout is called unadjusted turnout.

12 The 38.3% figure excludes those who voted but cast an invalid vote.

13 The difference between 59.4% and 61.4% is 2 percentage points but the increase is 3.4% (the change expressed as a percentage of 59.4%).

Figure 1: General election turnout 1945–2005

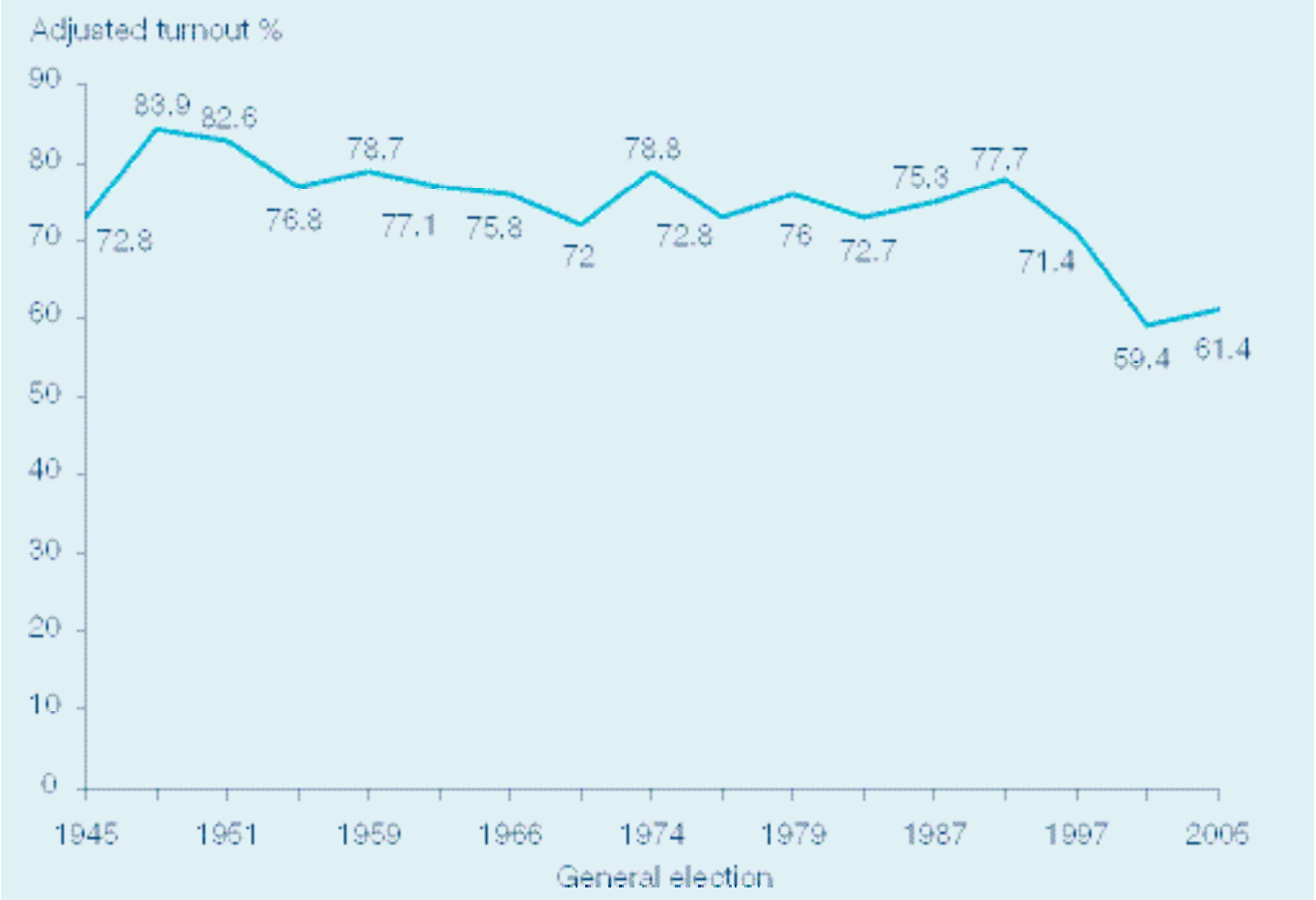

Table 4: 2005 general election turnout: by part of UK

	Turnout (%)	% point change 2001–5
UK	61.4	+2
England	61.3	+2.2
Northern Ireland	62.9	-5.1
Scotland	60.8	+2.7
Wales	62.6	+1.2

Constituency turnouts

3.9 As always, the turnout figure masks considerable variation in participation rates across British constituencies. Turnout ranged from 76.4% in Dorset West to 41.5% in Liverpool Riverside (although, at 37.2%, turnout was lower still in the postponed Staffordshire South election) and a full breakdown of turnout for each constituency is available on our website. Some of the variation in turnout among

Table 5: 2005 general election turnout: by English region

	Turnout (%)	% point change 2001–5
East Midlands	62.7	+1.9
Eastern	64	+2.3
London	57.8	+2.5
North East	57.4	+1
North West	57.3	+1.5
South East	64.7	+3.1
South West	66.5	+1.6
West Midlands	60.7	+2.1
Yorkshire & The Humber	59.1	+2.3

the 646 constituencies will have been the product of their marginality, or otherwise, and it is clearly important to see the figures presented in these tables in the context of the local contests (see paragraph 4.21 for more on this).

3.10 Tables 6 and 7 show the five largest increases and falls in turnout between the 2001 and 2005 general elections. Leaving aside Staffordshire South, the 12 biggest falls in turnout were all in Northern Ireland, with all 18 constituencies there within the bottom 24 constituencies. The largest fall in turnout in Britain was in Hartlepool (down 4.3 percentage points) where there had been a by-election seven months before the general election. By contrast, there were double-digit increases in turnout in both Maidenhead and Dunbartonshire East.

Table 6: Largest constituency turnout increases 2001–5

		% point change
1	Maidenhead	+11.3
2	Dunbartonshire East*	+11.1
3	Edinburgh South*	+9.2
4	Edinburgh North & Leith*	+8.5
5	Windsor	+8.4

Note: * Boundary change.

Table 7: Largest constituency turnout decreases 2001–5

		% point change
1	Belfast North	-9
2	Upper Bann	-8.3
3	Ulster Mid	-8.2
4	Tyrone West	-7.2
5	Newry and Armagh	-6.1

Note: Excludes Staffordshire South.

Turnout among sub-groups

3.11 While turnout figures for different socio-demographic groups are not officially recorded, pre- and post-election surveys can provide us with useful estimates. There are two sources currently available to us: estimates developed by MORI utilising aggregated data from election campaign polling and weighted to actual turnout, and findings from a survey carried out after the election by the British Election Study (BES) team asking people whether they voted or not. As Table 8 shows, MORI's estimates show that young people were only half as likely to vote as older age groups and estimated

turnout among young people was lower than in 2001 – 37% compared to 39%.

3.12 In their analysis for us, the BES team found similar patterns in turnout. As is typical with post-election surveys of this nature, there is some apparent turnout over-claim with 67% of the survey sample claiming to have voted, higher than the actual 61% turnout.[14] The BES team is currently undertaking secondary analysis comparing respondent's answers with marked registers recording who did actually vote.

3.13 While men and women were almost equally likely to vote in 2005, there were considerable differences among the various age groups. The BES survey found 45% of 18–24 year olds claiming to have voted, just under half the proportion of those aged 65 or over. Additional analysis shows turnout of 56% among those under the age of 45 and 82% among those over that age. There were also significant variations according to ethnicity, occupational class, income and educational attainment but sophisticated statistical techniques are needed in order to understand the relative strengths of these different factors in explaining turnout (alongside people's attitudes). The results of such analysis are included in the following chapter, where we seek to explain turnout and the variations among different socio-demographic sub-groups. We also look specifically at low turnout groups, including the young, and draw on the Commission's own research among black and minority ethnic communities.

14 It is noteworthy that the survey sample was not confined to those eligible to vote, in contrast to actual turnout figures which are derived from the registered electorate.

Table 8: Estimated turnout by sub-group 2001–5 (MORI)

	2001 turnout (%)	2005 turnout (%)	Change 2001–5
Total	59	61	+2
Gender			
Men	61	62	+1
Women	58	61	+3
Age			
18–24	39	37	-2
25–34	46	48	+2
35–44	59	61	+2
45–54	65	64	-1
55–64	69	71	+2
65+	70	75	+5
Social class			
AB	68	70	+2
C1	60	62	+2
C2	56	57	+1
DE	53	54	+1
Ethnicity			
White	60	62	+2
Ethnic minority	47	47	–

Notes: 2005 data based on sample of 10,986 British adults 'absolutely certain' to vote.
ABC1s = Managers, administrators, professionals and clerical workers.
C2DEs = Skilled and unskilled manual workers, those on long-term benefit and the retired drawing a state pension.
Source: MORI.


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4 Turnout: the reasons

This chapter examines the reasons why so many of those eligible to vote at the 2005 general election did not do so. It draws on original survey and qualitative research in which people were able to articulate their own reasons but also uses findings from detailed analysis conducted on our behalf by the British Election Study team. As well as investigating turnout, we also consider the extent to which potential voters were informed and engaged by the election campaign.

Explaining turnout

4.1 Numerous academic studies have identified a range of different factors affecting turnout. In April 2005's *Vote 2005* we reported a number of important factors influencing turnout including: socio-demographics (especially age), the marginality of the contest, strength of party identification, interest in the campaign and whether voting is seen as a civic duty or not. The nature of the competition between the parties and their ability to reach, inform and motivate voters play an important role in persuading people that their vote will make a difference.

4.2 We have always known by changes in turnout that some elections capture the imagination more than others and mobilise people to vote. Looking back to the 2001 general election, it is clear that that contest was not a particularly motivating one, especially as the result was seen as a foregone conclusion and the difference between the parties was perceived to be narrow.[15] Similar conclusions were reached by Professor John Curtice in recent analysis: 'The 2005 election appears…to have been similar to 2001 in its failure to provide voters with a stimulus to vote.'[16]

4.3 These findings are echoed by analysis conducted for us by the University of Essex using the BES post-election survey dataset and including data derived from questions asked on our behalf. Sophisticated techniques were used in order to detect the strength of relationships

15 R. Worcester and R. Mortimore (2001) *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide*.

16 J. Curtice 'Turnout: Electors Stay Home – Again' in P. Norris (ed) *Britain votes 2005*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

between turnout and a number of different variables – attitudes, behaviour, knowledge and demographics. Their analysis found:

- whether people see voting as a civic duty or not is a very important driver of turnout and this is strongly related to age;
- being contacted personally by a political party during the campaign increases the probability that an individual will vote;
- the decision to vote is strongly influenced by people's calculation of the likely costs and benefits of voting (valence assessments also contribute, i.e. assessments about the parties' abilities to handle the most important problems facing the country); and
- some demographic variables have important effects on turnout decisions, with age having by far the most profound effect.

4.4 The importance of a sense of duty in motivating turnout was also very apparent in the answers voters gave when explaining their own behaviour. Our post-election qualitative research found that those who voted generally did so because they felt a duty to vote or a commitment to the principle of voting (illustrated in Box 1). Similarly, 60% of voters in the BES survey sample chose 'It is my duty to vote' as the reason they voted – a higher proportion than chose the other seven potential reasons included on the showcard list.

Box 1: Selected verbatim comments: voting as duty

'I think if I didn't take up the opportunity to vote, it would be an insult to everyone who fought for the right to vote.' (18–25 year old voter).

'It's something a lot of people in the world don't get to do. It's such a waste if you don't do it.' (26–45 year old voter).

When did you vote? 'About quarter to ten at night.' **So you rushed out at the last minute?** 'People died for me to be able to vote. I had this nagging voice in my head.' (36–49 year old voter).

Source: Research Works Ltd, Cragg Ross Dawson (2005).

4.5 Those who agreed with the statement 'It is every citizen's duty to vote in an election' were more likely to have voted than those who did not agree with it (79% against 32%). Echoing past research by the Commission, the BES found a marked difference by age in responses to this question, shown in Table 9. Younger age groups are much less likely to see voting as a civic duty: 56% compared to 73% of 35–44 year olds and 92% of those aged 65 or over. Past research by the Commission has similarly found a greater sense among the young that electoral participation is not a duty, more a right.[17]

17 The Electoral Commission (2004) *Political engagement among young people: an update*.

Table 9: Perceptions of voting as civic duty by age

	Age group					
	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
Agree voting is a duty (%)	56	66	73	77	88	92
Disagree voting is a duty (%)	44	34	27	23	12	8

Note: Question statement: 'It is every citizen's duty to vote in an election'.
Source: British Election Study.

4.6 The main reasons given by non-voters for not voting were 'I really intended to vote but circumstances on the day prevented me' (33%), 'I am not interested in politics' (25%) and 'You can't trust politicians to keep their promises' (20%). Of course, such answers are always prone to people post-rationalising their behaviour and while it is likely that, for example, unforeseen circumstances did genuinely prevent some people from voting, on the evidence of the statistical analysis described above and the qualitative research we undertook, other, stronger, factors were more prevalent.

4.7 Our post-election qualitative research identified a number of factors contributing to non-voting at the 2005 general election:

- General disillusionment with politics (and the media's coverage of it).
- Ignorance about politics, the political parties and what they stood for.
- Difficulties in deciding who to vote for, in part because of weakening political alignments but also because of the perceived similarities between the main parties.
- The nature of the four-week campaign which was seen by non-voters as, at best, lacklustre and, at worst, negative in tone and too stage-managed.
- The perception that voting would make little difference, because the result was a foregone conclusion or because 'nothing will change'.

4.8 As mentioned earlier, this last factor was thought to be an especially important reason for the low turnout in 2001. While on the evidence of the average poll lead going into the 2005 general election, 2005 was a closer contest than both 2001 and 1997, the steady message of the polls was that Labour would win, and other opinion polls had shown most people expecting this would happen. In a 2–3 May 2005 Populus poll for *The Times*, 78% of people predicted that Labour would win enough seats to become a majority government while 53% thought the party would have at least a 100-seat majority. Similarly, our focus groups after the election found people recalling that a Labour victory was the probable outcome and either a Labour or Conservative victory the only possible outcomes.

4.9 An interesting contrast can be drawn here between the recent general election in the UK and the American presidential election of 2004. According to Malcolm Shaw of Exeter University,

the American election '…had the ingredients for a high [turnout]... . [It] was close. The electorate was polarised. Feeling was high. In policy terms, the distance between the parties was substantial'.[18] The election was one of the closest contests since the Second World War and both the Democrats and the Republicans helped to mobilise electors via registration drives and 'get the vote out' campaigns. In the event, turnout was 59.5%, low by post-war UK standards but the highest in the United States since 1968.

Non-voting and apathy

4.10 While another historically low turnout in the UK might be taken as signalling the opposite, the evidence we have suggests that non-voting in 2005 was not a simple case of apathy. While it is certainly the case that a section of the electorate is uninterested in politics and elections – and it is worth remembering that even in the high turnout years of the 1950s and 1960s at least a fifth of electors did not vote – to ascribe recent turnouts to rising apathy would be an oversimplification.

4.11 This was a conclusion reached by the POWER Inquiry which used a post-election survey of non-voters to show that, rather than apathy, 'political disaffection was by far the biggest factor behind the low turnout on 5 May'.[19] Further evidence came in a MORI survey for *The Financial Times* in early April 2005 which found 61% of the British public either 'very' or 'fairly' interested in politics, an almost identical figure to that recorded as long ago as 1973 (and, subsequently, in the 1990s and immediately before the 2001 general election – shown in Table 10).

4.12 An ICM poll for *The Guardian* in March found 71% of people interested in the election and a month later a MORI poll for *The Financial Times* reported 63% interested in news and information about the general election, a figure higher than the 58% and 52% in 2001 and 1997 respectively. Back in March 2005, the second of our annual audits of political engagement found strong public interest in political issues and a strong aspiration to have a say in how the country is run.[20]

4.13 Both the BES and the British Social Attitudes Study have recorded people's interest in politics for several decades. According to the former, 71% of British adults said that they had 'some', 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of interest in what is going on in politics following the 2005 general election. This compares with an equivalent figure of 64% in 2001. As Table 10 shows, interest in politics tends to be higher in general election years than at other times (similarly, our *Audit of political engagement* series has picked up on inter-year fluctuations) and the level of interest in politics following the 2005 general election was the highest recorded since 1974.

18 M. Shaw (2005) 'The American Presidential Election in Perspective' in *Political Quarterly*, vol.76, no.2, April–June 2005.

19 The POWER Inquiry news release 'Low turnout caused by "lack of trust, not apathy", survey shows', 26 May 2005.

20 See The Electoral Commission (2005) *An audit of political engagement 2*, pp. 23–4.

Table 10: Interest in politics (MORI)

	1973 (%)	1991 (%)	1995 (%)	1997 (%)	2001 (%)	2003 (%)	2004 (%)	2005 (%)
Very interested	14	13	13	15	14	9	13	16
Fairly interested	46	47	40	44	45	42	37	45
Not very interested	27	26	30	29	29	30	33	28
Not at all interested	13	13	17	11	11	19	17	11

Notes: Figures for 2001–4 are based on UK adults; the remainder are for Great Britain only. Survey measures were taken at different times of the year, e.g. 2003 (November), 2004 (March) and 2005 (April).
Source: MORI.

4.14 It is clear that the 59% and 61% turnouts in 2001 and 2005 did not reflect a growing lack of interest in politics – interest has remained fairly static over the past 30 years. At the same time, it seems likely that some non-voting is a symptom of broader political disengagement, including the low standing of politics and politicians, and there are some long-term factors at work, particularly the decline in party identification. But short-term factors, including the nature of the 2005 contest and the four-week campaign, would seem to offer a better explanation for why turnout in 2005 did not reach the previous pre-2001 'norm' of 70% or higher.

Engaging with the campaign

4.15 What impact did the four-week campaign have on people? Back in early April 2005 there was some evidence that the 2005 campaign had the potential to have more impact than previous ones. MORI found 41% of people saying that they thought they would vote for one party or another but were doubtful enough to say that they might change their mind. This volatility was more pronounced than at the equivalent stage during the previous four general elections. Even as late as the start of May, MORI's polls recorded 27% saying they might change their minds, compared with an equivalent 21% in 2001. After the election, 66% of BES respondents said that they made up their minds who they were going to vote for before the four-week election campaign.

4.16 Following the low turnout in 2001, several politicians and many sections of the media expressed concern about turnout during the 2005 election campaign and were evidently trying to rouse the uninterested. However, on the evidence of our post-election research the campaign largely left people feeling flat and uninspired. Both voters and non-voters recalled it being lacklustre and lacking both excitement and genuine, memorable moments. These sentiments were picked up early in the campaign by pollsters such as YouGov and also some sections of the media, with some journalists trying to present an alternative view of the election and a case for people to participate.[21]

21 For example, M. Sieghart 'Wake up at the back: this may turn out to be exciting' *The Times* 14 April 2005, A. McElvoy 'Wake up, this election matters' *The Evening Standard* 27 April 2005, *The Daily Telegraph* editorial 'Do your duty on May 5 and vote' 6 April 2005 and *The Guardian*'s 'Back to the future' 16 April 2005.

4.17 On 27 April, with a week to go, *The Sun* described the election campaign as the 'most boring ever' but did go on to urge people to vote in its election-day editorial. In their polls throughout the election, YouGov consistently found people rating the campaign as 'boring' rather than 'interesting' by a margin of about two to one. In the final *The Observer*/*The Mirror* poll involving interviewing during the final weekend of the campaign, MORI found a third of people, 33%, agreeing that 'it has been an interesting election campaign' with 49% disagreeing. These figures do represent an improvement on ratings of the 2001 general election (30% and 66% respectively) but that election did produce the lowest turnout in the UK since 1918.

4.18 One criticism levelled at the political parties during the campaign (for example, during Channel 4's *Election Unspun* series of programmes) was that the parties' campaigns were too stage-managed and their messages too spun. Our post-election research with Cragg Ross Dawson revealed that voters and non-voters shared this criticism (see Box 2). The conduct of the parties and candidates was heavily criticised by people who saw the election as symptomatic of the current state of politics in the UK in 2005.

Box 2: Selected verbatim comments: the campaign

'I felt slightly manipulated, because the parties tell you what you want to hear rather than what they really believe. Towards the end I just lost interest.' (36–49 year old).

'In the televised broadcasts both parties were trying to use real people, but somehow none of them rang true…' (50–65 year old non-voter).

'[It was a] public relations exercise. It was obvious they'd all done their homework, and they love statistics and demographics, and they've done all their research on how to influence the voters. We don't like feeling threatened to vote one way or the other.' (36–49 year old).

Source: Cragg Ross Dawson (2005).

4.19 In particular, it was felt that presentation and media management (or 'spin') were making politicians reluctant to speak their minds. Political rallies and debates came across as being staged and people recalled few genuine moments during the campaign when they were able to cut through spin and gain real insights into personalities or policies. Two such moments came to mind – the three main party leaders appearing on the BBC *Question Time* programme and on BBC Radio One. These were welcomed by people, in part because they were unscripted, but also because members of the public were involved.

4.20 Many of those in our post-election focus groups compared the 2005 general election unfavourably with past elections. As the views expressed in Box 3 show, some felt that the election had lacked 'oomph' or 'pizzazz'. There was also a sense that the campaign's tone was negative, more so than past ones, with an accent on attack rather than promotion of policies and vision. This seemed to reinforce existing negative perceptions of the state of modern politics and left people feeling uninformed about what the main parties' intentions would be, if elected.

4.21 Allied to this, some people bemoaned that the election seemed to lack immediate relevance to them because they lived in 'safe' seats where the likely result was known in advance of 5 May – and as Table 11 shows, turnout was higher in seats with slim majorities. Our focus groups found some people critical of the lack of contact they received from parties and candidates (although others appreciated this) and a connection was made by several people between seat-targeting and the first-past-the-post electoral system. This point was also made early on in the campaign by *The Times* which estimated that the Conservative and Labour parties were effectively concentrating their resources targeting 800,000 key voters in marginal seats and after the election by, among others, the Electoral Reform Society and *The Independent* newspaper which called for a move away from the first-past-the-post system towards proportional representation.[22]

22 T. Baldwin 'The hidden election' *The Times*, 6 May 2005, The Electoral Reform Society (2005) *The UK general election of 5 May 2005: report and analysis*.

Table 11: Turnout by seat type

% majority 2001	Average turnout 2005 (%)
0 to 5	66.3
5 to 10	65.3
10 to 20	64.1
20+	57.6

Box 3: Selected verbatim comments: the campaign

'[They should] go back to the '80s. For me, the '80s was like a rainbow, and the election this time was in duller colours, in sepias. There's no excitement. In the '80s it seemed to have more pizzazz.' (36–49 year old non-voter).

'…Normally they've got a bit of oomph, but it was like they were reading from a script. I didn't find any of it interesting at all.' (36–49 year old non-voter).

'It was like a non-election.' (50–65 year old non-voter).

'I think it was the most bland election in my life.' (50–65 year old non-voter).

Source: Cragg Ross Dawson (2005).

4.22 Of course, targeting was not unique to this election and MORI found that, despite it, the campaign's reach was greater than it was four years earlier. More people reported receiving a leaflet, seeing or hearing a party election broadcast, seeing a billboard or newspaper advert and receiving a letter from a party leader than was the case in 2001. Moreover, 7% recalled being telephoned by a representative

of a political party and 21% remembered being called on at home – both increases since 2001 but in the case of the latter, below levels recorded in elections in the 1980s and 1990s.[23]

4.23 MORI's survey found 89% recalling receiving at least one political leaflet during the election campaign but how many leaflets did people receive? According to data derived from an exercise undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, the New Politics Network and Dr Justin Fisher (Brunel University), people received, on average, just under 12 contacts with most of these being leaflets and letters. Three hundred and thirteen volunteers in 223 constituencies logged every contact they received from the political parties and the number of telephone or doorstep contacts was very low (on average, two contacts per five people). However, the average number of telephone/doorstep contacts in the safest seats was under a fifth (18%) of the average in the most marginal seats.[24] The level of effort directed at persuading any particular individual to vote depended largely on where they lived and how marginal their seat was.

4.24 Such developments are important because analysis of the 2005 BES found that higher propensity to vote is associated with exposure to personal, person-to-person campaigning such as being canvassed at home in person or by telephone or being contacted on 5 May. As Table 12 shows, those exposed to personal canvassing at the 2005 general election were more likely to have voted than those who were not. Such evidence raises important questions about the nature of modern campaigning – especially where this is remote and impersonal – and demonstrates the important role political parties play as mobilising agencies.[25]

Table 12: Turnout by exposure to personal campaigning

	Those exposed	Those not exposed
Voted (%)	77	63
Did not vote (%)	23	37

Note: Exposure to personal campaigning defined as having received a telephone call from a party, been canvassed or contacted on election day.
Source: British Election Study.

Turnout among some sub-groups

4.25 As we have already seen, non-voting is evident among all groups in society but analysis by both MORI and the BES suggests that 18–24 year olds and the black and minority ethnic population were relatively less likely to vote in 2005 than registered electors as whole. Such patterns are similar to those found in 2001. The estimated 39% and 47% turnouts among these groups at the 2001 general election prompted us to commission a team at the University of Manchester to prepare *Voter engagement among young people* and *Voter engagement and black and ethnic minority communities*, published by us in 2002 and subsequently used to inform our public awareness and outreach strategies. Since then we have published update papers on political engagement among these groups and

23 MORI (2005) *Election digest*, May 2005.

24 The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, New Politics Network and Dr Justin Fisher (Brunel University) (2005) *General election 2005: A Voter's Eye View*.

25 For an international analysis of the role of mobilising agencies, see P. Norris (2002) *Democratic Phoenix*, Cambridge University Press.

will continue to do so as more research evidence comes to light.

Young people

4.26 According to MORI, turnout among those aged 18–24 fell from 39% to 37% between 2001 and 2005 – one of only two age groups bucking the trend of a modest improvement in turnout (see Table 8). The BES similarly found turnout to have fallen among this age group but also recorded a drop in turnout among 25–34 year olds. Both sources suggest that non-voting is more prevalent than voting among young men and women and the statistical analysis conducted by the BES team for us (see paragraph 4.3) found age to be by far the strongest demographic variable in explaining turnout.

4.27 The differential turnout among old and young age groups in May 2005 meant that while those aged 55 or over comprised about 34% of the eligible electorate, they made up about 42% of those actually voting, according to MORI.[26] As Table 13 shows, this is not a new phenomenon, with older voters consistently showing a higher propensity to vote at elections than younger age groups, especially at recent elections. Is there evidence that this is simply a lifecycle effect, with younger people acquiring the habit of voting as they age, or are we witnessing a cohort effect with people carrying forward their behaviour as they get older?

4.28 Alison Park's analysis of the British Social Attitudes survey series in 2004 found that there had been a significant fall since 1994 in the interest that young people express in politics and the extent to which they favour any of Britain's political parties. She also found that the well-established generation gap between the levels of political interest shown by the oldest and youngest age groups has widened since 1986. While interest does develop with age, current levels are so low that they '…would need to increase substantially over the next decade or so if these groups are to "catch up" with previous generations'.[27]

4.29 On our behalf, the BES team also looked at patterns in turnout data among different age groups over time. As Table 13 shows, non-voting among the 18–24 age group has increased markedly since 1992 and at successive elections the incidence of non-voting seems to have been carried forward to older age groups. The BES team point to this data as '…suggest[ing] that, over the last 30 years or so, habits of non-voting acquired in youth have tended to be carried forward into middle age…'.

4.30 Some insights into the reasons for low turnout among younger age groups were provided by an ICM survey of first-time voters for Radio One's *Newsbeat* show and reported in *The Guardian* on 3 May 2005. The survey found 31% sure they would vote (compared with 38% in a similar survey in 2001) and of those who were not sure they would vote, 32% said that they could not be bothered, 30% said they did not believe their vote would make a difference and around 20% said they did not know enough about politics.[28]

26 R. Worcester 'Women's support gave Blair the edge' *The Observer*, 8 May 2005.

27 A. Park (2004) 'Has modern politics disenchanted the young?' *British Social Attitudes – the 21st report*.

28 L. Smith and T. Branigan 'Two-thirds of first-time voters care about key issues, but still will not vote' *The Guardian*, 3 May 2005.

Table 13: Claimed non-voting by age group 1964–2005

	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65–74	75+	All
1964	11	**19**	8	9	10	9	**16**	11
1966	**33**	**21**	12	11	14	14	**19**	16
1970	**28**	**24**	18	15	15	11	13	18
1974 Feb	**21**	14	12	9	8	10	**15**	12
1974 Oct	**27**	**19**	13	10	11	11	10	15
1979	**27**	**18**	**15**	9	8	9	**16**	14
1983	**26**	**23**	13	11	11	16	16	17
1987	**23**	**15**	14	8	10	10	10	14
1992	**24**	13	12	8	13	10	13	13
1997	**38**	**32**	**22**	15	11	11	16	21
2001	**46**	**44**	**33**	21	21	14	14	29
2005	**55**	**47**	29	24	16	15	11	29
Change 1964–2005	+44	+28	+21	+15	+6	+6	-5	+18

Note: Figures in bold denote non-voting above claimed non-voting among all respondents.
Source: British Election Study.

4.31 At the same time, the poll found strong interest among the young in the key issues of the day and, in April 2005, MORI found more 18–34 year olds interested than uninterested in the election. Some clues to higher abstention levels among young people can be found in the data we presented earlier on attitudes towards voting as a civic duty but, as with other age groups, turnout is also a reflection of the current political context and the stimulation provided by the political parties. In addition, Alison Park has highlighted the important role that parental political interest appears to play in shaping young people's engagement with politics.

Black and minority ethnic communities

4.32 People from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities also had a lower propensity to vote than the population as a whole, according to the estimates developed by MORI and the BES. However, these sources do not offer us the opportunity to investigate any differences between communities, something our past research has highlighted as important. With this in mind, we worked with MORI to conduct a large-scale survey of British BME attitudes towards the 2005 general election and attitudes to voting and politics more generally. The survey was designed to complement the BES by providing new insights and involved 1,220 face-to-face interviews with a minimum of 150 people from six main groups – Black African,

Black Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and mixed race/'other'. It included sampling points where there are relatively high numbers of people from BME communities but also points with relatively low numbers.

4.33 The MORI report is available on our website and contains a comprehensive analysis of the survey findings, including commentary on patterns in claimed turnout among different communities. Turnout was lower among the main black groups (61% among those from African communities, 54% among Caribbean groups) than it was among those from the main Asian national-origin groups (Indian 67%, Pakistani 70% and Bangladeshi 76%) and lower still among the mixed-race group and 'others'. As among the British population as a whole, abstention was highest among younger BME people but it appears that this 'young' group includes not only 18–24 year olds but 25–34 year olds whose turnout was just as low.

4.34 While, as expected, those from 'white collar' professional socio-economic groups were the most likely to vote, turnout among 'blue collar' workers or non-workers was almost as high. According to MORI, '…something, therefore, seems to have unusually energised the least affluent and least well educated ethnic minority voters in 2005. Quite likely it was an effect operating within these communities during the election.' It might also reflect the incidence, and nature, of local campaigning – turnout was significantly higher among those who said they had been visited by a party representative than those who had not.

4.35 While turnout is comparatively low among BMEs, this does not seem to be driven by scepticism about the value of voting. MORI's survey found that members of ethnic minorities are more positive about the efficacy of voting than the British population as a whole (although there are some interesting differences between those born outside the UK and those born here – the former are relatively more likely to agree that voting makes a difference). Religion was not a factor explaining BME turnout and neither were attitudes to Government policy regarding Iraq. MORI conclude that, among BME Britons, 'the personal satisfaction from voting is a stronger motivator [to turn out] than sense of duty or obligation to the community'.

Social deprivation

4.36 As at previous elections, there was a strong association between turnout and constituency characteristics in terms of seat type (i.e. marginality) but also socio-economic profile and degree of affluence. Put simply, turnout is generally higher the more affluent the area and/or the more marginal the seat. Statistical analysis for us by Professors Rallings and Thrasher shows strong correlations between a constituency's turnout and the housing profile and extent of car ownership within that constituency. Similarly, even after allowing for the marginality (or otherwise) of the constituency, there is an association between turnout and indicators of the social characteristics of the constituency such as the percentage who say they are in good health or the percentage who are manual workers.[29] The BES study

29 J. Curtice 'Turnout: Electors Stay Home – Again' in P. Norris (ed) *Britain votes 2005*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

found claimed turnout of 49% among those living in households with an annual income of £15,000 or less compared with 68% among those in all other households.

4.37 Such patterns are not new and neither are they confined to turnout alone. Our second *Audit of political engagement* (2005) found a significant neighbourhood effect with interest in politics markedly lower in areas with relatively high deprivation and numerous other studies have shown strong correlations between lower levels of political participation and a range of variables which identify social deprivation including poverty, poor housing, poor education, low income, poor health, etc. There appear to be strong, reinforcing relationships between social and political exclusion and some commentators have expressed concerns about the development of a 'participation divide'.[30]

Summary

4.38 Past research has found strong associations between turnout and people's perceptions of the importance, or otherwise, of the election and whether their vote will make a difference in some way. Our research after the 2005 general election found people reporting difficulties in deciding who to vote for, in part because of weakening political alignments but also because of the perceived similarities between the main parties. The four-week campaign was seen as, at best, lacklustre and, at worst, negative in tone and too stage-managed. There was also a perception that voting would make little difference, either because the result was a foregone conclusion or because 'nothing will change'.

4.39 Some non-voting is likely to be the product of longer-term factors such as disillusionment with politics and attitudes towards voting. At the same time, survey data suggest that short-term factors offer a better explanation for why turnout in 2005 did not reach the previous pre-2001 'norm'. While this implies that the steep decline in general election turnouts since 1997 is not irreversible, the apparent beginnings of a cohort effect with younger age groups carrying forward the habit of non-voting into older age, suggests a very real risk that it will be even harder to mobilise turnout next time.

30 See, for example, W. Paxton and M. Dixon, ippr (2004) *The state of the nation – an audit of injustice in the UK*. A summary of current research on this subject can be found in Electoral Commission (2005) *Social exclusion and political engagement* which is available on our website.

5 Postal voting and electoral registration

Postal voting became an important issue at the 2005 general election and the subject of much commentary and media coverage. The focus of this chapter is not how postal voting ought to be reformed – we have already published our recommendations for the future of postal voting in *Securing the vote* – but how many people voted by post and why. We also review the evidence we have on the impact of postal voting on turnout and briefly consider electoral registration.

5.1 The administration of the election became a prominent issue during the four-week campaign. Loughborough University conducted a content analysis of all national media between 4 April and 6 May 2005 and found that, behind the electoral process (the actions, strategies and prospects of the participants), the joint second most common theme related to concerns about potential political improprieties. Such coverage was largely related to potential abuses of postal voting arrangements (although it also encompassed attacks on the integrity of party leaders and leading politicians). According to Loughborough's analysis, asylum and immigration gained most prominence during the second and third week of the four-week election campaign period, but in the later stages were '…swamped by the rise of [the issue of] Iraq and [the] resurgent return of media concern about abuses of the postal voting system.'

5.2 One of the reasons for this attention was the record take-up in postal voting as identified by surveys of selected constituencies by *The Times* newspaper and the BBC in the lead-up to, and after, the deadline for the receipt of postal vote applications (such data is not held centrally owing to the local administration of elections in the UK).[31] This was particularly salient following as it did the criticism of postal voting made by Richard Mawrey Q.C. when delivering his judgement in April 2005 on a case investigating electoral fraud at local elections in Birmingham in 2004.

5.3 The issue became the focus of some front-page lead stories in the broadsheet press as

31 For example, 'Postal vote applications triple', www.bbc.co.uk, 26 April 2005.

well as editorial comment.[32] *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* made postal voting a subject of inquiry in their regular opinion polling with Professor Anthony King's analysis of a YouGov poll in late April reporting that 'the abuse of postal ballots is drastically reducing public confidence in the integrity of the electoral system…'.[33] There were also several incidences of journalists seeking to expose the risks and flaws in the system by fraudulently applying for postal votes.

The take-up of postal voting

5.4 In the event, there was a three-fold increase in the take-up of postal voting at the 2005 general election compared with 2001 – up from 4% to 12.1% across the UK, shown in Table 14. This increase was perhaps not surprising given that there had been relatively little time in 2001 for local authorities, political parties and candidates to make people aware of the then new arrangements before that year's general election. Research by the Commission in January 2005 found 73% of British adults saying they were aware of the law change, a significant increase on the 52% we recorded in 2003. The all-postal pilot schemes held in four regions of England in the European Parliamentary elections in 2004, involving a third of the English electorate, probably helped to build awareness of postal voting. Indeed, there is evidence that those pilot schemes had a longer-term legacy in terms of the number of postal voters (see paragraph 5.7).

5.5 Our previous research had also found strong interest in voting by post. In January 2005, just over two-thirds of British adults (68%) expressed an interest in requesting a postal vote from their local council, a similar figure to that recorded in 2003 (66%). We also witnessed increases in the

Table 14: Take-up of postal voting over time

Election	Electorate issued with postal vote (%)
UK general election 2001	4
English local elections 2002*	4.9
Scottish Parliamentary elections 2003	3.6
National Assembly for Wales 2003	6.9
UK European Parliamentary and local elections 2004*	8.3
UK general election 2005**	12.1

Notes: * Postal voting in non-pilot regions/local authorities.
** Some or all data missing for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales.

32 See, for example, 'Fraud fear as postal voting soars 500% in marginals' *The Times*, 15 April 2005 and 'Never again: postal voting abuse' *The Guardian*, 27 May 2005.

33 A. King 'Most voters want the rules on postal ballots tightened because of fraud fears' *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 April 2005.

take-up of postal voting at elections in 2003 and 2004. Record numbers of postal votes were issued at the Scottish Parliamentary and Welsh Assembly elections in 2003 (despite falls in turnout). At the 2004 European Parliamentary and local elections more than 8% of registered electors requested a postal vote in those regions without all-postal pilots with over 10% doing so in Wales and the South West of England.

5.6 As Table 15 shows, the exception to the average increase in postal voting at the 2005 general election was in Northern Ireland where different legislation applies and postal voting is only permitted for certain reasons. As at UK-wide elections in 2001 and 2004, postal voting was less prevalent in Scotland than in England and Wales. In England, the take-up of postal voting was highest in the four regions which had previously piloted all-postal voting in 2004, along with the South West.

5.7 The take-up of postal voting varied considerably among individual constituencies and ranged from a high of 45.4% in Newcastle-upon-Tyne North to a low of 3.1% in Glasgow East. Across Britain, 45 constituencies had a take-up of 20% or more while take-up was 6% or below in 30 constituencies. Table 16 lists the highest and lowest take-up constituencies and Table 17 shows those constituencies where the largest percentage change in postal voting occurred. All but two of the 20 highest take-up constituencies had piloted an all-postal voting election in 2002, 2003 or 2004 and, without exception, the top 20 increases between 2001 and 2005 happened in previous all-postal pilot areas.

Table 15: Take-up of postal voting by region

	Electorate issued with postal ballot (%)	% point change 2001–5
UK*	12.1	+8.1
Britain*	12.4	+8.4
Northern Ireland	2.4	-0.2
Scotland	8.1	+5.4
Wales*	12.7	+7.8
England	12.8	+8.7
North East**	19.3	+13.6
Yorkshire & The Humber**	14.2	+10.5
South West	13.8	+9.1
East Midlands**	13.5	+9.7
North West**	12.7	+9
South East	12.3	+8.2
Eastern	12.1	+7.3
London	10.9	+7.2
West Midlands	10.7	+7.4

Notes: * Some or all data missing for 35 constituencies in England and one in Wales.
** All-postal voting pilot scheme area in 2004.

Table 16: Highest and lowest postal voting constituencies

		Electorate issued with postal ballot (%)
	Ten highest	
1	Newcastle-upon-Tyne North*	45.4
2	Stevenage*	45
3	Rushcliffe*	39.9
4	Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central*	36.7
5	Newcastle-upon-Tyne East and Wallsend*	35.4
6	South Shields*	35.2
7	Jarrow*	33.1
8	Hackney South & Shoreditch*	30.6
9	Tyne Bridge*	30.4
10	The Wrekin*	30.4
	Ten lowest	
1	Glasgow East	3.1
2	Glasgow North East	3.9
3	Glasgow Central	4
4	Glasgow South West	4.1
5	Hull East*	4.1
6	Glasgow North	4.2
7	Hull West & Hessle*	4.3
8	Hull North*	4.3
9	Glasgow South	4.5
10	Motherwell & Wishaw	4.5

Note: * All-postal voting pilot scheme at one or more elections 2002–4.

Table 17: Constituencies with largest percentage point increase in the take-up of postal voting

		% point increase
1	Rushcliffe*	36.1
2	South Shields*	32.4
3	Jarrow*	30.5
4	Hackney South & Shoreditch*	29.6
5	Hackney South & Stoke Newington*	28.7
6	Newcastle-upon-Tyne North*	28.1
7	Telford*	26.6
8	The Wrekin*	25.5
9	Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central*	23.9
10	Durham North*	21.6

Note: * All-postal voting pilot scheme at one or more elections 2002–4.

The who and why of postal voting

5.8 There is little available evidence about the profile of postal voters at the 2001 general election but Worcester and Mortimore suggest that use was highest among older voters.[34] Our own research after the 2004 European Parliamentary elections found the take-up of postal voting at that election to be higher among older people and lower social class groups, especially those not working (these were probably one and the same demographic, i.e. retired/pensioner older voters). In 2005 we used the BES to investigate the take-up of postal voting among different sub-groups, shown in Table 18, and to develop a profile of postal voters, shown in Table 19.

34 R. Worcester and R. Mortimore (2001) *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide*.

Table 18: The take-up of postal voting

	Sample (%)	Claimed turnout (%)	Percentage of group who voted by post
Total	100	67	9
Gender			
Men	48	66	10
Women	52	67	9
Age			
18–24	19	45	6
25–34	20	52	5
35–44	19	71	7
45–54	15	76	8
55–64	12	84	12
65+	15	87	22
Occupational class			
Manual	31	57	8
Non-manual	69	71	9
Annual respondent income			
Under £15,000	5	49	7
Over £15,000	95	68	9
Ethnicity			
Minority ethnic	7	56	7
White	93	68	9
Disability			
Yes	19	69	17
No	81	66	7

Source: British Election Study.

Table 19: The profile of postal voters, in-person voters and non-voters

	All postal voters (%)	All in-person voters (%)	All non-voters (%)
Total	100	100	100
Gender			
Men	46	48	50
Women	54	52	50
Age			
18–24	6	8	21
25–34	9	14	27
35–44	14	21	20
45–54	12	18	14
55–64	16	18	8
65+	44	21	10
Occupational class			
Manual	35	28	40
Non-manual	65	72	60
Annual respondent income			
Under £15,000	3	3	6
Over £15,000	97	97	94
Ethnicity			
Minority ethnic	6	6	9
White	94	94	91
Disability			
Yes	63	19	20
No	37	81	80
Interest in politics			
Great deal/quite a bit/some	78	79	53
Not very much/none	22	21	47
Past turnout (general elections)			
Voted at all/most/some	97	97	47
Voted at not very many/none	3	3	53

Source: British Election Study.

5.9 For the most part, postal voters are demographically similar to those choosing to vote in polling stations with two important exceptions – older people and those with disabilities were more likely to make use of postal ballots. While 6% of those aged 18–24 voted by post, 12% of 55–64 year olds and 22% of those aged 65 or older did so. Using these findings we can further estimate that 72% of all those voting by post were over the age of 45 and 44% were over 65 – and, thus, heavily concentrated among those who were more likely to vote anyway. That said, the analysis presented in Table 19 shows that, overall, postal voters were similar to in-person voters in terms of their interest in politics and past turnout at general elections.

5.10 The reasons given by people for their decision to vote by post focused on the convenience of the method (mentioned by 43%) and the difficulties in getting to a polling station because of health reasons (20%), having difficulty finding the time (18%), often being away on holiday or on business (both 10%) or not having transport (5%). These findings closely match those from research conducted by us during winter 2004–5[35] as well as those from qualitative research undertaken after the 2005 general election.

5.11 On our behalf, Research Works Ltd conducted one-to-one depth interviews lasting 45–60 minutes among polling station voters and postal voters so that we could better understand people's motivation for using the main methods of voting and their experience of doing so. There were several reasons for voting by post, but common to most postal voters was a need to ensure that they could vote by overcoming difficult individual circumstances. For the most part, the main motivation was a practical one rather than out of any particular preference.

5.12 There are, of course, likely to have been other factors boosting the take-up of postal voting in 2005. These include promotional activity undertaken by electoral administrators working for those local authorities responsible for maintaining electoral registers. While the extent and nature of such activity varies between authorities – for example, Stevenage Borough Council has proactively been working to build awareness of postal voting over several years – one innovation that was uniformly used in 2004 was the addition on the annual electoral registration canvass form of a tick box allowing people to request an application for a postal vote prescribed in electoral legislation (some local authorities had already included such an initiative in previous years).

5.13 The political parties, media coverage of postal voting, promotion by other organisations such as the National Union of Students and the Commission's own public awareness campaigns are also likely to have mobilised postal voting, although it is striking that the take-up of postal voting did not increase to a greater degree in marginal seats than in 'safe' seats, shown in Table 20.

35 MORI (2005) *Public Opinion Research: Winter 04/05*.

Table 20: Increase in take-up of postal voting by seat type

Majority 2001 (%)	Average % point increase in postal votes issued 2001–5
0 to 5	8.6
5 to 10	8.4
10 to 20	8
20+	8.7

5.14 We have already seen that the take-up of postal voting was higher in areas which had previously piloted all-postal voting. Such pilots had involved the mailing out of postal ballot papers to all registered electors. People received ballot papers automatically without having to request them and there were no polling stations. In some areas of England, all-postal voting became the 'norm'. For example, Gateshead and Newcastle councils held all-postal pilots in 2002 and 2003, and were part of the North East region holding all-postal voting at elections in June 2004 and at the North East Assembly referendum in November 2004.

5.15 Our survey research in June 2004 found public concern about some aspects of all-postal voting (as well as a desire for choice in the voting methods available) but, at the same time, there was evidence that familiarity with postal voting did build favourability towards the arrangements.[36] Concerns about some aspects of postal voting continued at this year's general election (see paragraph 5.27 below). At the same time, however, people were more likely to opt for a postal vote if they had had past experience of postal voting.

36 ICM/Professor John Curtice (2004) *Public opinion and the 2004 electoral pilot schemes*, p. 60.

The impact of postal voting

5.16 So far we have concentrated on the proportion of the electorate issued with a postal vote, but how many votes were actually cast? According to figures collated by the Commission from constituencies across the UK, approximately 78.6% of the 5.4 million postal ballot papers issued were returned (4.1 million) and 3.9 million were included in the count. Some will have been rejected before the count owing to, for example, incomplete declarations of identity (the form requiring a signature by the voter and a witness). Perhaps surprisingly, given that postal voting would have been a new method of voting for many people, the rapid increase in the take-up of postal voting did not result in an increase in the percentage of postal ballots rejected before the count (2.5% this year compared with 2.4% in 2001).

5.17 The turnout of postal voters across Britain was 76.6% which compares with 59.4% among those who chose not to vote by post but at a poling station. Again there was considerable variation between constituencies – for example, 91.8% of those issued with a postal vote in Doncaster Central returned their ballot papers, while only 46.8% did so in Hull West & Hessle. The turnout figure of 76.4% among postal voters compares with 79.6% in 2001 (turnout was 58.1% among in-person voters in 2001). In their report to us, Professors Rallings and Thrasher conclude that such evidence shows that '…those with postal votes are still more likely to vote, but the more of them there are, the narrower the gap with the turnout among in-person electors'.

5.18 Fifteen per cent of all valid votes cast at the election were cast by post, shown in Table 21.

More votes were cast by post in 2005 than ever before, reflecting the higher turnout among those requesting a postal vote. This has significant implications for the political parties, among others, since it potentially brings the final 'getting out the vote' stage of the campaign forward.

Table 21: Postal votes as percentage of all valid votes cast

Election	%
General election 2005	15
European Parliamentary and local elections 2004*	16
General election 2001	5

Note: * In non-pilot regions.

5.19 Less easy to determine is the impact postal voting is having on turnout. On the one hand, it seems clear from the research findings outlined above that postal voting allows some people to vote who would otherwise find it very difficult to do so but on the other, applying for a postal vote in the first place indicates a level of interest in and engagement with political events and a predisposition to vote.

5.20 Analysis of data from the 2005 general election, shown in Table 22, finds little difference (barely a percentage point) between turnout increases in seats where postal voting increased markedly and in those where it was little changed. Thus, it would seem that turnout was edged upwards by increased postal voting but, for the most part, postal voters would have voted anyway.[37]

37 A similar conclusion was reached by Professor John Curtice: 'the wider availability of postal voting had, at most, a small impact on turnout…' J. Curtice 'Turnout: Electors Stay Home – Again' in P. Norris (ed) *Britain votes 2005*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Table 22: Postal voting and turnout

% point increase in postal voting since 2001	% point change in turnout since 2001
Less than 4%	+1.3
4 to 6%	+1.8
6 to 8%	+2.2
8 to 10%	+2.5
10% or more	+2.4

People's experience of postal voting

5.21 Keen to understand people's experience of the process of voting – be it by post or in a polling station – we funded additional questions in the BES post-election survey as well as separate qualitative research undertaken by Research Works Ltd. The survey found high satisfaction among postal voters with the application process: 93% were satisfied, 2% were not. Similarly, nine in 10 (90%) were satisfied with the instructions and advice about how to complete a postal vote, with only 6% dissatisfied.

5.22 Our qualitative research programme included one-to-one depth interviews with 12 postal voters and involved showing them the ballot packs to remind them of what they received. Such an approach allowed us to get a detailed insight into what individual people felt about the voting arrangements, something not really possible via survey research. Overall, it was felt that, when opened, the different elements within the ballot pack – the ballot paper, instructions, witness statement and envelopes – were clear and easy to understand. In fact, as Box 4 shows, some people had been pleasantly surprised at how easy their ballot papers had been to complete.

Box 4: Selection of verbatim comments: postal voting

'It was much easier than I expected. Because it is a government thing you expect the forms to be really long and complicated but it wasn't.' (46–60 year old voter).

'I told my friends, it's so straightforward.' (46–60 year old voter).

'This is very good for disabled people – it's very clear. Anybody who can read can use it. It was very easy to use, every instruction was simple.' (26–45 year old voter).

Source: Research Works Ltd (2005).

5.23 Most postal voters were comfortable with completing the declaration of identity and the witness statement did not pose any difficulties for most of our 12 respondents. However, Research Works Ltd did find that while there were no objections to completing these, people did wonder whether doing so was worthwhile as, to them, it seemed very easy to claim to be someone else. We have found a similar sentiment before and in *Delivering democracy?* we reported the findings from qualitative research by ICM in June 2004.[38]

5.24 Overall, those who voted by post at the 2005 general election were positive about the experience. It had enabled those who were motivated to vote to overcome some logistical difficulties and to find a way of voting. People did feel that they would be prepared to vote by post again although there were some relative and reflective, rather than top-of-mind, concerns about the security of postal voting. Respondents recalled publicity regarding fraud in Birmingham and although unable to cite details, they were aware that the security of postal voting had been called into question.

5.25 Similarly, the BES post-election survey found a significant minority of postal voters reporting concerns about the safety of postal voting from fraud as well as the secrecy of the ballot. After the election, a fifth of postal voters (21%) rated the method as being unsafe from fraud or abuse and one in eight (13%) considered it ineffective at 'keeping your vote secret'.

5.26 While we do not have true benchmarks for such figures – no such questions were asked in 2001 among either postal voters or people more generally – polling for us by MORI towards the end of the election campaign (29 April–1 May) found more people seeing electoral fraud as either a 'very big problem' or a 'fairly big problem' in Britain than was the case in December 2003 (up 22 points).[39] People were also more likely to consider postal voting to be unsafe from fraud and abuse than was the case in the four all-postal pilot areas in 2004 (when there was also considerable media coverage and comment on the subject).

5.27 In 2004 we saw a growth in, and a hardening of, negative public opinions about all-postal voting (although, at the same time, the majority of people in pilot areas were satisfied with all-postal voting overall), and this year we have seen a growing association in people's

38 The Electoral Commission (2004) *Delivering democracy?* p. 48.

39 For full details, see MORI (2005) *Public attitudes towards postal voting* and MORI (2003) *Perceptions of electoral fraud in Great Britain*, both available on our website.

minds between postal voting and fraud. As we have already seen, the BES found a significant minority of postal voters expressing concerns about fraud after the election. Similarly, our polling towards the end of the election campaign found three in 10 (28%) of those who had already voted by post rating the method as unsafe. Among the population as a whole, more rated postal voting as unsafe than safe (46% against 36%).

5.28 However, according to Research Works, in talking about fraud relating to postal voting '…[people] wanted to demonstrate that they were aware of the issue…but it was simply a story that had been noted, rather than a situation that was causing any particular personal concern'. Similarly, our focus group research suggested that while the issue was raised from time to time and prompted calls for greater security, there was no sense that the postal voting system had been fatally undermined.

5.29 Another concern – and our depth interviews found this to be a more salient concern than fraud among postal voters – relates to the perceived risks in using the postal service as a method of delivering a vote. Personal experience of postal delays had meant that several postal voters were conscious that, in contrast to voting at a polling station, they could not be totally sure that their vote would reach its destination on time to be counted.

Polling station voting

5.30 While there was a considerable increase in the uptake of postal voting at the 2005 general election, 85% of all votes cast – about 23 million – were cast in polling stations. Previous research by the Commission has found people very satisfied with, and attached to, polling stations, which have a strong symbolic importance (although at the same time the idea that the voting process ought to be modernised is an uncontroversial one).[40] This year, 97% of in-person voters rated polling stations as convenient and 89% were satisfied with the guidance and assistance they received in the polling station.

5.31 Our qualitative research also found people typically very familiar with the process. In most cases people said they had always voted at polling stations in the past and this was very much the default way of voting, something which was almost second nature. By and large, people had voted at a polling station simply because it was 'just the thing you always do.' Similarly, the BES found 71% of polling station voters saying they voted that way because they always do, although 32% did choose 'it prevents fraud or abuse' from the list of six potential reasons.

5.32 Polling stations were considered a very convenient way to vote. Our qualitative research respondents noted the long opening hours which provided the opportunity to vote either before or after work and reported that polling stations were typically in convenient locations, within easy walking distance. It only took a matter of minutes to vote and for experienced voters the process of voting at a polling station had become so familiar that they hardly gave the experience a second thought, so much so that they struggled to find fault with the process even after prompting.

40 See especially, The Electoral Commission (2003) *The shape of elections to come* and MORI (2003) *Public opinion and the 2003 Electoral Pilot Schemes*.

5.33 Despite general confidence in the ease and simplicity of voting at a polling station, some difficulties did emerge. Among the 24 depth interviews we conducted after the election, two of our 12 polling station voters, including one experienced voter aged 61, had ticked, rather than crossed, a box on their ballot paper. Both were confused as to whether they had inadvertently spoiled their ballot papers. This, and a concern expressed by others about the lack of prominent step-by-step information in polling stations and on ballot papers, further highlights the value of good design and the importance of appreciating the voting process from the perspective of the user.

Electoral registration

5.34 The register of electors underpins any election and while, in terms of media coverage, electoral registration was not as important an issue during the 2005 general election as postal voting, we received more calls from the public to our call centre and to our four offices in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast about registration than about any other issue. From the start of February 2005 to 6 May 2005 we fielded a total of 35,803 phone calls and there were also 318,762 visitors to the Commission's public information website www.aboutmyvote.co.uk. Approximately 66% of the phone calls we received related to electoral registration.

5.35 There was a dramatic increase in the number of calls we received after the election was called on 5 April with thousands of callers disappointed to learn that they had missed the 11 March deadline for registering to vote in time to vote at the 2005 general election. It was with this in mind that *Securing the vote* repeated the Commission's recommendation that the deadline for registering to vote for a particular election should be moved until after the election has been announced.

5.36 A person was eligible to vote at the 2005 general election if they had applied to be on the electoral roll by 11 March 2005. This was the final date for inclusion on the register published on 1 April 2005, the last published register before the closing date for candidate nominations on 19 April 2005. For the general election, 44,245,939 people were registered and eligible to vote as at 1 April 2005, 0.35% less than the 44,403,238 at the 2001 general election but more than in 1997, as shown in Table 23.

Table 23: Persons registered to vote at UK general elections 1992–2005

Election	Number of persons
2005	44,245,939
2001	44,403,238
1997	43,846,152
1992	43,275,316

5.37 As we explained in *Understanding electoral registration*, it is impossible to ascertain the extent of non-registration in a robust way without comparing population and registration data and taking eligibility into account. Research for us by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and MORI has found several reasons for non-registration. Some people are unintentionally unregistered while some are quite deliberately so and, just as political disengagement is a key barrier to turnout, so it is also a barrier to registration.

There also remain significant gaps in people's awareness and knowledge of the registration process and new initiatives such as rolling registration (introduced in 2001) to allow people to register at times outside the annual canvass period during the autumn.[41]

Summary

5.38 There was a three-fold increase in the take-up of postal voting at the 2005 general election compared with 2001. Take-up increased in all parts of Great Britain and especially in areas which had previously piloted all-postal voting. There was considerable variation in the take-up of postal voting among the 628 constituencies in Britain – ranging from a high of 45.4% in Newcastle-upon-Tyne North to a low of 3.1% in Glasgow East. For the most part, postal voters were similar to in-person voters demographically and attitudinally and it would seem that turnout was edged upwards by postal voting, but only marginally.

5.39 The higher take-up of postal voting in previous pilot areas confirms our past research suggesting that familiarity builds favourability. We found voters to be satisfied with in-person and postal voting arrangements although a significant minority of postal voters, a fifth, rated the method as being unsafe from fraud or abuse. Our polling also found an increase in the proportion of people considering electoral fraud to be a problem in Britain and it is clear that the 2005 general election, and media coverage of it, has strengthened the association between postal voting and potential fraud in many peoples' minds.

41 The Electoral Commission (2005) *Understanding electoral registration*.

6 Conclusions

Elections underpin our democracy, ensuring that our representative institutions are both accountable to public opinion and legitimised by it. They provide an opportunity for politicians and political parties to outline their ideas and to defend their performance. Elections can interest, inform and empower people and, by doing so, can help to build political engagement.

6.1 The 2005 general election was something of a mismatch between people's expectations and what actually transpired. While parties, candidates and the media evidently attempted to engage people and mobilise turnout, our research found a strong sense of anticlimax with both voters and non-voters recalling being uninspired by the state of politics in 2005, by the four-week campaign and by the choices on offer. On the whole, people recounted little excitement, few genuine incidences of interaction between people and politicians, and were critical of the negative tone of the campaign. And, of course, the 61% turnout was only a very modest improvement on the 59% recorded in 2001 and was still low in historical terms.

6.2 The nature of the general election campaign and the evidence presented in this report raises some important questions about the nature of modern electioneering. It would be wrong, however, to attribute blame for non-voting solely to the four-week campaign. The research we have done since 2001 has highlighted the importance of the period between elections in shaping people's attitudes towards politics and politicians and one of the findings from our post-election qualitative research was the absence of sufficient background reasons to mobilise people to turn out this time. We also know that some non-voting is the product of a broader political disengagement and that a section of the electorate are sceptical about the efficacy of voting at **any** election. Against this backdrop, there is clearly a limit to what a four-week election campaign can do. A much more concerted long-term effort is required to turn around such negative, and often entrenched, views.

6.3 This report has shown that the reasons why turnout at the 2005 general election did not reach pre-2001 levels were largely short-term ones. Political circumstances were key determinants of non-voting, especially the (still) perceived one-sided nature of the contest and the perceived closeness of the parties in policy terms. The available evidence also suggests that people were as receptive to the election as they had been in the past – opinion polling showed people as interested in politics in April 2005 as in 1973 – and our annual audits of political engagement have challenged the notion that the UK public is politically apathetic.

6.4 The prognosis for future general election turnouts is not then entirely gloomy. However, there are some clear warning signs. Past research has shown weakening attachments to political parties, meaning that people are less predisposed to turning out for no other reason than to back 'their side'. In addition, younger age groups are much less likely than people in middle age and older groups to see voting as a civic duty and new analysis for us by the BES team suggests the beginnings of a cohort effect with a generation apparently carrying forward their non-voting as they get older.

6.5 Also of concern is the possibility that after two historically low turnout elections some people are now out of the habit of voting, or may not yet have acquired the habit, and must be won over. If, as some academics have suggested, the first few elections they experience are crucial in shaping people's political outlook, including the value of voting, then a degree of catching up could well be necessary at the next general election and throughout the crucial period between now and then.

6.6 Finally, while we have found considerable variation in participation rates among different demographic groups and parts of the country, our research suggests that any attempts to re-engage people with politics, particularly voting, ought to be addressed to society generally, since non-voting and political scepticism is evident among all groups. There is also a clear need to reconnect people with politics, and vice-versa, beyond moments of (relatively) high political drama such as general elections.

Appendix A
Technical details

This report has been informed by the findings from a programme of research projects designed and managed by our Research Team. Brief technical details of these projects are provided below. Further details can be found in each of the project reports available on our website.

Electoral data

The findings relating to turnout and postal voting presented in this report and the detailed breakdowns available on our website are derived from data collected by the Commission from (Acting) Returning Officers in all 646 Parliamentary constituencies across the UK, including Staffordshire South where the election was postponed until June 2005. (Acting) Returning Officers were asked to supply us with copies of two standard forms – the declaration of results and the statement of postal ballots – plus some additional data. In some cases, the data we received was incomplete and while we have endeavoured to check its accuracy and fill in any gaps, this has not always been possible.

Analysis of the data was provided by a team at the *Local Government Chronicle* Elections Centre at the University of Plymouth led by Professors Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher.

The British Election Study

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded the BES and the Commission funded a suite of questions included in the post-election survey. The study was managed by the University of Essex with the survey component conducted by the National Centre for Social Research.

The bulk of the evidence drawn from the BES and presented in this report is taken from the second (post-election) wave in a two-wave panel survey involving interviews with 4,706 randomly selected British adults. The survey, which has a weighted base of 3,979, used a random probability-based design and the post-election interviews were carried out face-to-face in people's homes in May, June and July 2005. The results reported include respondents interviewed before 10 July 2005. The survey was confined to interviewing in Great Britain – the Commission conducted separate survey research in Northern Ireland.

Survey of black and minority ethnic communities

On our behalf, MORI conducted quantitative survey research among people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities – by BME we refer to people who do not define themselves as being white using the 2001 Census definitions (a full definition is available in MORI's report on our website). The sampling for this study was done in two stages to ensure that we collected the views of BME adults living in areas where they accounted for a high proportion of the population as well as those living in areas where BME groups were a low proportion of the population.

In total 1,220 interviews were achieved with BME adults aged 18 and over. This comprised 968 interviews in the high incidence BME areas and 252 interviews in the low incidence areas. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes between 6 May and 4 July 2005. The data were weighted according to age, gender, ethnicity, work status and high/low

penetration according to the population profile of BMEs in Britain using updated 2001 Census data.

Qualitative focus groups across Britain

Qualitative public opinion research was conducted on our behalf by Cragg Ross Dawson during May and June 2005. Eight focus group discussions were held at four different locations across Britain, shown in Table 24. Six of the groups were recruited after the election had taken place – two were voter groups and four were non-voter groups. A mix of constituency types were chosen with both marginal and safe seats included in the programme. The sample was segmented by age and social class and each group represented a spread in terms of knowledge of, and interest in, current affairs.

Two of the groups were recruited two to three weeks before the election. At the time, respondents in these groups were undecided about whether or not to vote (in the event, about two-thirds of these respondents reported having voted). Respondents were asked to keep a diary during the period 25 April to 6 May to record their experiences of the election campaign and their thoughts about voting. These were used as stimulus material – respondents were asked to talk about the sorts of comments they had written – and were designed to ensure that we collected real time impressions and opinions. Extracts have been used to illustrate the findings in this report.

Qualitative one-to-one depth interviews across Britain

Additional qualitative research was conducted to explore voters' perspectives of the process of voting. This involved a programme of 24 one-to-one depth interviews of 45–60 minutes duration and was conducted by Research Works Ltd between 18 May and 1 June 2005.

Table 24: Focus group programme

Location	Group type	Age profile	Social group
Poole	Voters	18–34	ABC1
Edinburgh	Non-voters	18–25	C2DE
Tyneside	Non-voters	26–35	ABC1
Poole	Undecided before election (diary group)	26–35	C2DE
Edinburgh	Undecided before election (diary group)	36–49	ABC1
Hertsmere	Non-voters	36–49	C2DE
Hertsmere	Non-voters	50–65	ABC1
Tyneside	Voters	50–65	C2DE

Notes: ABC1s = Managers, administrators, professionals and clerical workers.
C2DEs = Skilled and unskilled manual workers, those on long-term benefit and the retired drawing a state pension.

Interviews were conducted in four locations: Moston (in the Manchester Withington constituency), Dundee (Dundee East and Dundee West constituencies), Carmarthen (Carmarthen West) and Chippenham (Wiltshire North where electors also had county council elections). All respondents had voted in the 2005 general election and the 24 interviews were divided equally between in-person and postal voters.

Media content analysis

Media content analysis was conducted by the Communication Research Centre at the University of Loughborough and involved David Deacon, Dominic Wring, Peter Golding, Michael Billig and John Downey. It involved quantitative content analysis of coverage of the election campaign across a diverse range of news arenas and locations including national, regional, local and online media.

Loughborough University coded all election-related news items identified in a selection of television programmes and in the following sections of the sample of newspapers: the front page; the first two pages of the domestic news section; the first two pages of any specialist section assigned to the coverage of the campaign, and the pages containing, and facing, papers' leader editorials. Loughborough University's analysis also incorporated qualitative textual analysis.

Analysis of party campaigns

The election campaigns run by political parties and third parties and their impact were analysed by a team including Dr Justin Fisher (Brunel University), Professor David Denver (Lancaster University) and Dr Andrew Russell (University of Manchester). Interviews were conducted with representatives from the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party and VoteOK.

In addition, Dr Fisher conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the communication received from political parties and candidates during the election by a team of 313 volunteers in 223 constituencies. The research was undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and the New Politics Network. In addition, the Commission part-funded the administration of a survey questionnaire sent to agents of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party.

The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

Democracy matters

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