

IF VOTING CHANGED ANYTHING ...

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Have the tricks of consumer politics in the 1990s to get the vote out in the USA and UK backfired? Is voter disaffection the same as political disaffection? Is our political landscape changing and does it matter? Nick Spencer explores these and other issues in this article. In contrast to those in the Middle East who have no vote, he reveals the fragility in our own democratic system and urges us to use the forthcoming election not only to hold politicians to account but to "re-read the Gospels in the light of the major social issues of the day", to search the Torah for "the political logic that underpinned early Israel" and to "keep a vigilant eye on all manifestations of consumer politics", thus improving the health of our democracy.

In the midst of last year's USA election campaign, the most frenzied in living memory, Democratic candidate John Kerry took time out to go goose hunting in Ohio, and then to watch a game of American football at home, with his family and a beer.

To the uninitiated it looked like he was having a break. Here was a regular, all-American guy, taking time to relax and spend time with his family during a tough month. To those with eyes to see, it was the one of most important tactical moves in his campaign, almost as important as the three televised debates with President Bush.

Eight years earlier, President Bill Clinton had hired political strategist Dick Morris to help him win the 1996 election after a disastrous showing in the 1994 mid-term elections. Morris, to the irritation of many in Clinton's cabinet, persuaded the president to sideline major policy initiatives and to concentrate instead on the small-scale concerns of middle-class America. More importantly, he helped the president reflect back to the all-important middle-class swing voters their own lifestyle preferences, by showcasing him doing the things they did, wearing the clothes they did, and living the life they did. The tactic worked and Clinton turned the electorate around to win a second term.

The following year, New Labour, under the guidance of Peter Mandelson and Philip Gould, imitated Clinton's campaign tactics with equal success. Labour was returned to power after seventeen years in opposition. Perhaps more importantly, after years of gestation, the mentality of the marketplace – "find out what the people want and then give it to them" – transformed the UK political arena. "Consumer politics" was born.

Recent years have witnessed the flourishing of single interest politics.

Consumer politics is not, of course, limited to parties of the left. Politicians across the political spectrum engage in such tactics today, determined to ensure that the “right” message, i.e. the one that voters want to hear, is communicated at all times and in all places. The motivating idea, which has its roots in Sigmund Freud’s thinking as adopted and adapted by his nephew, the founding father of public relations, Edward Bernaise, is that democracy needs to recognise and respond to people’s dominant emotional, irrational and self-oriented desires. A population inculcated by the values of the marketplace expects its politicians to be appropriately receptive and responsive to its needs. Only by reacting to such consumer demands will democratic politics survive and flourish.

It was an inspiring and, for some parties, successful idea, but it has done little to help democracy flourish. Not only has it failed to address political disaffection in the UK, it also has arguably deepened it, presiding over record levels of mainstream political disengagement.

Fifty-nine per cent of the electorate voted in the 2001 general election, the lowest turnout since 1918 and 12 per cent less than the already low figure of 1997. Local election turnouts hover around one in three. Thirty-eight per cent of the eligible population voted in the Welsh assembly elections and 49 per cent in the Scottish parliament ones. The UK has consistently low turnout rates for elections to the European Parliament, with returns of 24 per cent in 1999 and, with the aid of postal voting, 39 per cent in 2004.

It is important to acknowledge that some of these low turnouts can be explained, at least in part, by specific reasons. Labour’s 179-seat majority acted as a powerful disincentive because many of those who voted Labour in the previous election did not see the need to vote in 2001. One-fifth of non-voters said they “could not get to the polling station because it was too inconvenient” and 16 per cent said they did not vote because they “were away on election day”. Both of these explanations have a ring of “the dog ate my homework” about them.¹

The reasons for public disengagement are much deeper than the circumstances of June 2001, however, and can fruitfully be divided into three categories: politics, politicians and the public.

In their study of the 2001 election for the 19th British Social Attitudes Report, Catherine Bromley and John Curtice came out heavily for the first category.²

“Turnout fell in 2001,” they concluded, “because the choice that the electorate was being asked to make was not sufficiently interesting, rather than because a wave of apathy and alienation has descended upon the electorate.” There is much truth in this. The lie of the political landscape shifted significantly in the mid-1990s, and the general tenor of Labour’s first term in power further blurred traditional political boundaries. For many voters it became hard to distinguish one party’s policies from another’s. As one respondent told a post-election study, “I did not vote this time because the parties all seemed the same.”³

If politics has bred confusion, politicians have provoked hostility. The 1990s saw governments mired by accusations of deceit and corruption, first by sleaze then by spin. The situation has not been helped by the soap opera mentality that has developed around Westminster. Human-interest stories attract larger audiences than policy documents and in their desire to appeal to a population that lives on a diet of television entertainment and believes itself to be too busy to absorb anything longer than a soundbite, politicians and the media have sometimes conspired to transform Westminster into a gilt version of Walford. Regrettably, the tactic has not worked and the electorate has grown increasingly cynical and mistrusting of politicians (not to mention journalists).

Yet the electorate itself is hardly blameless. As even Bromley and Curtice acknowledge, British political disengagement implicates Britons as well as their political system. BBC research into voter apathy conducted in February 2002 reported that thirty-seven per cent of respondents said they felt “powerless”, “unsupported” and “unrepresented”.⁴ At the same time, other studies have shown that the number of people who actively *do something about this* remains consistently low.⁵ The percentage of people who claim they have engaged in some form of non-electoral political activity over the last 12 months has increased in every category since the 1980s but with the exception of signing a petition, no category engages more than one in six people.⁶ Our consumer culture may incite us to complain when our political “service” is unsatisfactory but it does not encourage us to do much more.

Yet, in spite, or perhaps because of our confusion with politics, disaffection with politicians and aversion to engagement, recent years have witnessed the flourishing of single-interest politics. The two largest demonstrations in British political history (the anti-war

General election campaigns afford everyone ... the opportunity for self-reflection.

NOTES

1. See www.mori.com/polls/2001/elec_comm_rep.shtml
2. C Bromley and J Curtice, "Where have all the voters gone?", in A Park, J Curtice, K Thomson, L Jarvis and C Bromley (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: The 19th Report* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).
3. *None of the Above: Non-voters and the 2001 election* (Hansard Society, 2001; www.mori.com/polls/2001/pdf/hansard2.pdf)
4. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1845276.stm
5. J Curtice and B Seyd, "Is there a crisis of political participation?", in Park et al. (eds.), *British Social Attitudes*.
6. It should be noted that the number of people who claim to have participated in non-electoral political activity is always higher than the number of people who actually have participated.
7. Curtice and Seyd (eds.), "Is there a crisis of political participation?".

► and Countryside Alliance marches of February 2003 and September 2002, respectively), the fuel protests of September 2000, ongoing anti-capitalist campaigns, protests against student top-up fees, the destruction of GM crops, anti- and pro-hunting rallies, animal welfare campaigns: these and other single issues have frequently dominated headlines, Prime Minister's Question Time and even government policy in recent years. Their prominence begs the question whether our disengagement with mainstream politics actually matters. Is the political landscape simply being reshaped to fit our social and cultural priorities?

To a certain extent, the answer is yes. Single-issue campaigns are commonly organic, relevant and committed. They are politics in its purest sense of people working for the interests of one another within a gathered community, rather than a distant and professionalised activity conducted by a minority on behalf of the majority. As such, they should be welcomed.

Yet there are good reasons to have a vision for and to engage in "mainstream" politics too, many of which I have outlined in greater detail in my book *Votewise: Helping Christians engage with the issues*, on which the following paragraphs draw. First, we can only start from where we are. Single-issue politics may, in time, reshape the mainstream but the next election, and with it the way we address current social problems, will be decided according to the existing political system. To ignore present political debates entirely in favour of single-issue, personally relevant concerns is to renounce the responsibility incumbent upon participants within a democracy.

Second, the kind of consumer politics outlined above reveals an alarming fragility in our democratic system, as policy and debate are subsumed by image and sound bite. It may be unrealistic to expect the 44 million UK voters to read and inwardly digest every available election manifesto, but the idea that an election might be decided by a candidate's hobby or (publicly) preferred clothing brand is disturbing. Not only are these feeble grounds on which to choose a leader but they place a worrying power in the hands of advertising, PR and media executives. Consumer politics allows, indeed encourages, images to trump ideas and pithy, memorable catchphrases to outpace serious political thinking.

In spite of various attempts by politicians and the media to address political apathy and make the political

process more accessible, relevant and interesting, the only real antidote to sound bites, slogans, photo shoots and all of the other paraphernalia of consumer politics is the electorate's thoughtful engagement with the issues that underpin the political process. Ultimately, it will not matter one iota what brand of beer a candidate drinks or what advertising slogan he borrows if an electorate has made the effort to understand his vision and has compared it with its own ideas and hopes.

Third, single-issue causes, effective as they can be, can disunite just as much as they unite. When the then Czech president, Vaclav Havel, invited anti-globalization protestors to debate with IMF officials during the Prague summit in 2000, he recognised that thousands of single-issue campaigns could (and did) produce thousands of (often mutually contradictory) solutions, none of which was remotely as powerful as the forces it confronted. By their very nature such causes are limited and specific, unable to stretch across issue boundaries and achieve the joined-up thinking that is so important to many issues. Campaigning on asylum, for example, is right and just but ineffective if unable to engage with the related issues of international order, transport, community, education and cultural awareness. For such complex, interconnected issues, a uniting vision offers perspective, motivation and the prospect of effectiveness.

Fourth, the generally low levels of non-electoral political participation disguise significant imbalances within the population.⁷ Education correlates strongly with participation: the higher one's qualifications, the more likely one is to have undertaken some form of non-electoral activity, such as contacting an MP or the media or joining a campaign group. Self-confidence, political understanding and scepticism all encourage activism. The result is that the politically ignorant, ill-educated and insecure, among whom are the most vulnerable members of society, become progressively voiceless.

Finally, and importantly for a Christian point of view, democracy implies individual accountability before God in a way that other political systems do not. With the rights of electoral participation come the responsibilities for national action, and although individual voters cannot be as answerable for national policies as their executive, the democratic process does confer a duty as much as it does a right. The fact we describe politicians as *our* leaders is surely significant.

None of these reasons should deter single-issue campaigns or other forms of non-electoral activity but they do remind us that we abandon mainstream politics at a cost. A genuine concern for others will prompt us to channel the commitment we might otherwise expend on immediate, localised concerns towards the good of society as a whole.

The forthcoming UK general election, is likely to be dominated by a handful of issues – the Iraq war, security, crime and the ongoing reform of the public services, in particular health and education. Engaging with these issues will be important for those who wish to take their democratic responsibilities seriously. That said, there are a number of other issues – such as our culture of debt, the treatment of asylum seekers, immigration, transport, environmental degradation and Third World poverty – that also demand serious attention

All of this can seem overwhelming. Who, other than politicians and professional political pundits, has time to research and assess these various problems *and* the numerous manifesto pledges that promise to solve them?

The answer is no one but this is not, in itself, a reason for disengagement. General election campaigns afford *everyone*, irrespective of the level of their political knowledge, the opportunity for self-reflection. Whilst sitting in judgement on elected politicians is entirely right and just, doing so without a corresponding act of self-examination is hypocritical and ultimately fruitless. Using an election campaign as an opportunity for introspection – for a thoughtful re-reading of the Gospels in the light of the major social issues of the day, for a close reading of the Torah in search the “political” logic that underpinned early Israel, for a careful assessment of one’s own vision for contemporary society, and for keeping a vigilant eye on all manifestations of consumer politics – will help equip and protect voters, and, in some small way, improve the health of our democracy. ■