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Is Voting Going Out of Fashion?

It is often said that voter turnout is highly dependent on a closely fought election at which a lot is at stake. If so, then a global economic crisis, declining living standards, and an unpopular coalition government surely provide the essential ingredients for a high participation general election in 2015?

But the latest results from the Hansard Society's 10th Audit of Political Engagement suggest that, on the contrary, rather than turning out in their droves, the public are so disillusioned, disenchanted and disengaged from politics that we may witness the lowest ever turnout in our history.

In this year's Audit, just 41% of the public say they would be 'certain to vote' in the event of an immediate general election.

There has been a precipitous decline in public interest in and commitment to voting in the last two years: the number of people certain to vote has declined 17 percentage points since 2011 and is now 10 percentage points lower than it was a decade ago at the start of the Audit series.

These results, on top of the low electoral turnouts in the mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections last autumn, and low to average turnouts in successive by-elections and local elections, should be an urgent wake-up call to all the political parties.

With the general election now two years away there is still time for these figures to recover; indeed, I would expect some improvement the nearer we get to the election. But the underlying downward trend in the public's propensity to vote coupled with other evidence in this year's Audit suggests that any improvement may in fact be difficult to achieve.

In addition to asking people whether they would vote in the event of an immediate election, our survey also asks whether they would be prepared to vote in an election in the future if 'they felt strongly enough about an issue'.

Only 42% say they would do so. It would seem that 58% of people are still not prepared to vote even if they feel strongly about something, suggesting serious disillusionment with the efficacy of voting.

Indeed, when no more than six in 10 of each of the three main parties' supporters say they are certain to vote were an election held immediately, it hints at a broader, 'plague on all their houses' rejection of what all the parties have to offer.

That only four in 10 people say they are certain to vote and 20% are 'absolutely certain not to' is worrying enough. But even worse, only 12% of 18-24 year olds say they would vote, down from 30% of this age group who said the same just two years ago.

It is widely supposed that if a person votes at an early age, the more likely they are to continue voting in future elections. So, if only one in eight first-time voters participate at the next election, the long-term prospects for the future of voting in this country could be severe.

Statistics like these inevitably raise challenging questions about proposals to extend the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds. Given the degree to which the current cohort of young people are increasingly turned off by the idea of using their vote, what exactly is going to be different about voting and politics generally that is going to engage their younger 16 and 17 year old brothers and sisters?

Each voter - of whatever age - has to want to participate and to feel that by exercising their vote they can make a difference. But, as the Audit trends show, fewer and fewer people are convinced about the value of voting than at any point in the last decade, raising serious questions about the long-term future health of electoral participation and accountability that underpins our system of representative democracy.

The Huffington Post, 15 May 2013