

**University of Strathclyde**

**Department of Psychology**

**Honours Dissertation**

An Interpretative  
Phenomenological Analysis of  
Voting Abstention.

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I affirm that this dissertation is my own work and does not include any unacknowledged material taken from any other source.

## Abstract

In light of declining election turnouts, an interpretative phenomenological analysis of interviews with abstaining voters (n=8) identified several themes. Individuals' votes are perceived as devalued, with possible implications for the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Parties and politicians are seen as homogenous, possibly explained by the decline in social class associations with parties, in accordance with self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1985) and the relative homogeneity effect (Quattrone, 1986). A lack of impartial information about politics could be a disincentive to vote due to the bounded rationality of electors (Simon, 1955). Politicians seem more interested in competition than the business of Government, possibly due to attribution errors (Heider, 1958), and the media appear to be at cross purposes with the public, possibly due to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Further research is suggested into people's interactions with economically modelled institutions like political parties; and applying the theory of planned behaviour to voting.

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### **Voting as social behaviour.**

Voting is a behaviour with many possible interpretations: at its most basic level it is a means of expressing a preference for a particular candidate you would like to elect; or as tactical voting it can be a way of keeping the least-preferred candidate out of office (Evans, 2004, p.157). Renshon (1974) described voting in terms of personal control: “a basic need to have control over the forces and experiences that impact upon and shape our lives” (Renshon, 1974, p. 1). Renshon also notes that the individual will feel the need to exert this personal control through political participation only if they already feel that the political process is a salient feature in their life (*ibid.* p.76).

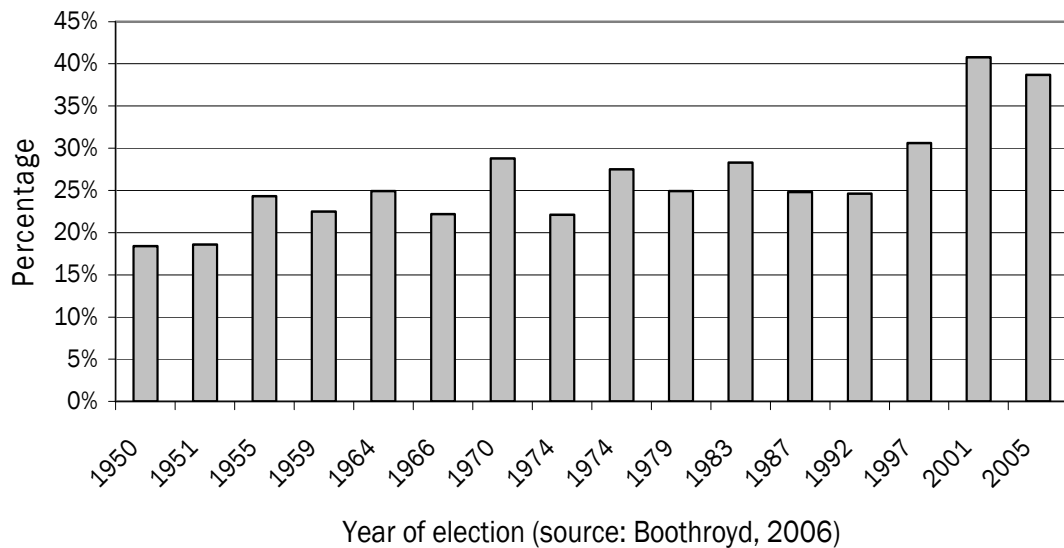
Voting can also be a way for the individual to deal with societal dilemmas such as levels of taxation and public services (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton & Radley, 1988): you cannot have both low taxation and comprehensive public services, so voting can be a way to express your opinion on the appropriate balance between these things, or indeed any other range of dilemmatic policies.

How an individual votes is related to aspects of their identity. Du Preez (1982) describes the identity of the individual as simultaneously the person and the persona: as a complex system of many identities which make up the whole person, whilst simultaneously being a selective, stylised identity which is identifiable as being one political type; a socialist, not a capitalist; a liberal, not a fascist. In this way, individuals can relate their own political identity to others of a similar political disposition, whilst still essentially remaining themselves.

From a macro-scale social psychological perspective, voting can be characterised as prosocial behaviour: “acts which are valued positively by society” (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002, p. 505). Governments cannot claim a legitimate mandate to act without popular support from their electorate. It would therefore seem illogical, from both a top-down and a bottom-up social psychological perspective, that individuals would abstain from such positively valued behaviour as voting.

## The decline of voting.

Figure 1: Voting age population who did not vote



United Kingdom General Election turnouts have shown an overall downwards trend since their high point of the early 1950s (see figure 1). Some opinion polls report that approximately 50% of non-voters give circumstantial reasons for not voting: they were ill on the day of the election; they had to work; or they had travel commitments (Boon & Curtice, 2003). This leaves approximately a further 50% of non-voters who, presumably, deliberately abstain from voting. By the figures illustrated above, this may constitute up to 20% of the voting age population.

By the admission of the pollsters themselves, none of the socio-economic factors that political science favours as variables are sufficiently robust to predict voting abstention (Evans, 2004, p.169-70), and their current theories do not adequately explain it:

“Market research more often than not attempts to rationalise attitude and behaviour rather than inaction. While respondents find it relatively easy to identify the reasons why they do something, they can find it difficult to rationalise why they DON'T.” (Boon & Curtice, 2003, p.22 - emphasis in original.)

A possible explanation for this lack of reliable data was suggested by Jervis (1993): ‘the drunkard’s search’. When a drunkard drops his keys in a dark street, he will not look for them in the shadows where he actually dropped them; rather

he will look under the street light where he can see the ground properly. Unfortunately, he will never find them by looking there.

Due to the prosocial nature of voting, it is unlikely that non-voters will volunteer to take part in opinion polls or interviews about politics and voting. Opinion pollsters may therefore find that their data set, gathered to look at voting behaviours and preferences, does not contain accurate data about non-voting: that data will need to be gathered by looking elsewhere, perhaps by looking specifically at non-voters in isolation.

These problems notwithstanding, there have been some changes in the political landscape over the period of declining voting which are worthy of note in this context. These factors include:

- Increased competition for votes between parties.
- The democratic deficit – a regional phenomenon.
- The concept of wasted votes within our electoral system.

For a brief synopsis of these concepts, see appendix A.

### **The psychology of voting abstention.**

A lot more attention has been paid to the psychology of voting than to the psychology of not voting. Nevertheless, some theories have been identified which are relevant to voting abstention.

Renshon (1974) described how personal control only really manifests itself as political participation in those to whom politics is already a salient aspect of their life. It is therefore reasonable to expect that those who do not perceive politics as being a salient aspect of their lives will not be motivated to vote. Similarly, by implication the dilemmatic aspects of voting described by Billig *et al* (1988) may lead to abstention where no suitable solution to the societal dilemma is offered by the voting choices. Both of these theories may be related to the degree of control an individual feels over their voting behaviour.

When one votes, the purpose of that action is not to mark a cross on a piece of paper: the purpose is to communicate a political will or preference in a way that will shape society. If an individual perceives that they do not have any real influence, any degree of control over the shape of their society, through this behaviour, would they still feel inclined to vote? The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) describes this sort of eventuality. Ajzen found that, for some behaviour, an individual's degree of perceived behavioural control is a stronger predictor of behavioural outcome than attitudes or subjective social norms.

Changes in the political system have seen parties and politicians change salient aspects of their identities. Self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1985) may be applied to these salient features: if, as Du Preez (1982) suggests, the political identity is to some degree separate from the personal identity, it may not be such a great leap for the individual to change their own political identity from identifying with a party to not identifying with one..

A major part of the study of psychology revolves around the fact that humans sometimes behave irrationally. The limitations of their information processing capacity mean their own decision-making is not always perfect: Simon (1955) described this as bounded rationality. The decisions people make about others are also prone to be flawed: Heider (1958) called these attribution errors. Voting involves making decisions: whether to vote; who to vote for; and evaluating other people: are they trustworthy; are their policies any good? It is anticipated that, in a field as complicated as political decision-making, some sort of errors will appear in the process. These errors may contribute to a decision to abstain.

### **Methods for studying voting abstention.**

Voting abstention is deliberate non-participation in an important and generally consensual social process, and the decision to do so may be an entirely personal one. As such, the underlying reasons and thought processes may be very specific to the individuals who decide to abstain. There is no real evidence to suggest that abstaining voters are a group as such, but common factors existing between abstaining voters are a possibility.

Any experimental social psychological examination of the subject may prove to be problematic due to the nature of its ontology and epistemology. Experimental social psychology regards the social world as being an autonomous entity within which people interact, and also regards the knowledge it produces as ideologically neutral (Stainton Rogers, 2003, p.11). Jervis' (1993) 'drunkard's search' suggests that perhaps abstinent voters are not ideologically neutral within the wider social world: they are somehow marginalised and inaccessible.

A critical social psychological method may produce better results due to its ontological position: the social world is one that is produced by the people living in it (Stainton Rogers, 2003, p.11). If one were to talk only to abstaining voters, the social world they would construct would be the social world of the abstaining voter.

Any examination of the subject may also benefit from adopting an idiographic approach rather than a nomothetic one, so as to avoid trying to draw generalisations across a population which may in fact have no significant common factors (Smith, Harré & Van Langenhove, 1995). For this reason it is felt that a phenomenological approach might be the most appropriate approach to this study.

Phenomenology, as a branch of philosophy, is concerned with intentionality rather than behaviour (Giorgi, 1995, p.33). Voting abstention being an intentional lack of behaviour presents no great problems for this method: intentional inaction is as valid a source of knowledge as intentional action in this context.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a method which "wishes to explore an individual's personal perception or account of an event or state as opposed to attempting to produce an objective record of the event or state itself" (Smith, 2006). This method should satisfy the requirements of a 'bottom-up instead of top-down' study such as this one since it concentrates on the individual's own experience, rather than the way their opinions or electoral behaviour are quantified by opinion polls.

This study will undertake an interpretative phenomenological analysis of interviews with abstaining voters, and will attempt to understand the life world of abstaining voters in the context of politics and political involvement. In this way, this study will try to give an insight into the underlying reasons that individuals choose not to participate in the democratic process, a goal which seems to be currently eluding political scientists and opinion pollsters.

## **Method**

### **Design.**

This study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) technique on transcripts of semi-structured interviews conducted with abstaining voters. An undergraduate IPA research project should aim to collect at least 5 hours of interview data (Madill, Gough, Lawton & Stratton, 2005), and to this end a target of eight interviews of approximately 40 minutes each was decided.

A quantitative postal survey was used to identify and recruit participants, but the results of that survey do not constitute an integral part of this study, due to its small size; untested reliability and validity; and epistemological differences from the rest of the study.

### **Participants.**

A random population of 500 people was selected from the Glasgow electoral register. Of these, 460 were contacted by post. Of the 106 responses, 12 deliberate non-voters who had given their consent were identified. Of these, 9 were subsequently interviewed. One interview was subsequently discarded due to its short duration and lack of viable content. The total interview time was 4 hours and 54 minutes.

Participants were male (n=3) and female (n=5), and aged between 21 and 43. The gender and age distribution of participants is not regarded as important, despite the randomised method: the sample is meant to be purposive rather than truly random (Willig, 2001, p.58).

### **Materials.**

An initial letter and questionnaire was posted to participants (see appendix B), including a reply-paid envelope. Interviewees were given two consent and information forms, one of which they signed and returned, one they retained (see appendix C). Interviews were recorded on Minidisk and subsequently transferred to computer in MP3 format. The interviews were transcribed onto paper, and following verification of the transcription, the Minidisk and MP3 files were erased.

### **Procedure.**

The initial quantitative questionnaire was sent out shortly after the General Election of May 2005 in order that the recipients would have recently made a voting decision of some sort, and it would be fresh in their minds. The questionnaire contained a filter question to identify deliberately abstaining voters, and a tick box to consent to being contacted for a subsequent interview.

Participants were contacted by either telephone or email to arrange a time and place for the interview, which took place at their home; place of work; or in a coffee bar. After an initial conversation in order to strike up a rapport with the participant, the study itself was introduced. The introduction was not fully scripted, so as to appear spontaneous and naturalistic, but a cue list was used to make sure that all participants were given approximately the same information before the interview (see appendix D).

Once the introduction had been completed and informed consent obtained, the recording was started, and the interview was recorded. An interview schedule was used (see appendix E), but questions were not always taken in the same order, allowing the conversation to flow naturally. The schedule was constructed to explore both the participants' own thoughts and feelings about their abstention, and their wider world-view of politics and the media's presentation of it. The schedule construction and interview procedure were guided by the procedures described in Smith (1995).

The interviews were transcribed to a pre-arranged level of detail. The aim of this study is to extract the ideas about politics and voting which participants construct in their conversation, so a phoneme-level transcription incorporating prosody would be effectively redundant. Non-words were omitted, but non-linguistic cues from one party to the other to continue ('uh huh', 'mm hmm', etc.) were recorded as a new paragraph. Inconsequential pauses were ignored, but more substantial 'thinking' pauses (more than two seconds; in the middle of a sentence; or tailing off without finishing the sentence) were recorded as three periods: "...". This approach was guided by the principles set out in O'Connell and Kowal (1995).

Names of individuals and places were replaced with the names from the television series 'The Simpsons', in order to render them anonymous. The only exceptions to this were the names of politicians and other people who are already in the public domain. An interview and transcript were selected at random by a third party and examined to verify the transcription and check for anonymity.

Each transcript was read and re-read before tentative, initial themes were identified. These were noted in the left-hand margin of the transcript. Once the initial notes were completed, emergent themes from the whole interview were noted in the right-hand margin. Again, this procedure was guided by Smith (1995). A transcript was selected at random by a third party and examined in order to verify the selection of themes.

These themes were transferred to a separate document, along with corresponding quotes from each interview, where they were examined to identify clusters of themes. When all the transcripts had been examined in this manner, a master table of themes for the group was created, showing each cluster of themes for each participant (see appendix F), and any superordinate themes which appeared across the group. This master table was used as the main reference for writing the report. This procedure was guided by the descriptions provided in the chapter on interpretative phenomenology in Willig (2001).

Themes were identified in the context of participants' attitudes to politics and the media; political and societal beliefs attributed to the electorate, politicians and the media; and participants' feelings about their own interactions or lack of interaction with this aspect of society.

## Analysis.

The results of this study suggest that the participants were quite a disparate set of individuals, with a range of different bases for their voting abstention. They were not completely disengaged from politics: some would have voted under certain circumstances; many had been involved in non-partisan political activities. There were several superordinate themes which emerged from the analysis: a lack of value of their own vote; homogeneity of parties and politicians; politicians being more interested in competition with each other than in the business of Government; a lack of impartial information about politics; and the mixed motivations of politicians, the media, and the electorate. Their different attributional styles suggest that even within these themes, the overall experience was different.

Some participants had never become engaged in the political process: "I've never voted, not ever, but especially there, that last election" (Bart, L. 8). Some were initially engaged and then became disengaged: "I don't think that voting Labour really makes sense to me any more" (Patty, Ls. 25-26). Others were engaged, but frustrated by an inability to find someone for whom they could justify voting: "I'm looking for someone to vote for, and it's just not out there." (Homer, Ls. 49-50).

Most of the participants, despite not voting, had been engaged in some political but non-partisan activities, such as the Make Poverty History campaign in 2005. The efficacy of such activities was called into question, however, in relation to the Don't Attack Iraq demonstrations of 2003: "I don't know how anyone can feel... unmoved or... how anyone can feel happy after that. I mean... that they didn't work" (Homer, Ls. 170-173).

Most of the participants were able to describe issues or circumstances under which they would feel sufficiently motivated to vote. Marge talked about the Make Poverty History campaign: "You would definitely use your vote on an issue like that" (Marge, L. 285). Patty was willing to vote tactically "If I lived somewhere that a Tory might have gotten in" (Patty, Ls. 109-110), having earlier described the de-industrialisation of her home community, and blaming the Conservative Government of the 1980s.

### **Lack of value of their own vote.**

The participants all said that they felt their vote was in some way ineffectual, and did not carry as much value as it should. The causes attributed to this lack of value varied between participants. Some attributed it internally:

Maggie:

But all those things you're talking about, you know taxation and all that, they're all so big. And I just think of me, this one wee person voting, you know, and I just think... you know? I just don't... count (Ls. 201-205).

Some participants attributed it to indifference on the part of politicians: "I don't think my vote is that important... to the Government." (Marge, L. 113). Others attributed it to the current electoral system: "The way the system works is that my one wee vote doesn't really matter that much" (Selma, Ls. 124-126).

Electors not valuing their own votes is problematic for the democratic process: voting may not be perceived to offer a suitable vehicle for the elector's need for personal control (Renshon, 1974), or a means for them to resolve their dilemmas (Billig *et al*, 1988). It may also lead to the perception of having a low degree of control over electing a Government.

The theory of planned behaviour [TPB] describes how perceived behavioural control can be the most significant predictor of certain behaviours: more significant than the prevailing social norm, or the person's own attitude towards the behaviour in question (Ajzen, 1991).

If TPB were to be applied to this situation, it may show that the low degree of perceived behavioural control over electing a Government is the strongest factor predicting voting abstention. This is possibly an area for future research, since current Government initiatives to engage people in the political process seem to be aimed at altering attitudes; or reinforcing the social norm that voting is prosocial (Electoral Commission, 2005).

There are possible factual bases for participants' perception of a lack of value of their own vote: the electoral system being wasteful of votes; and the democratic deficit (see appendix A). The electoral system has remained unchanged over the course of the period of voting decline, however, so it would be unlikely that this explanation alone would account for voting decline. The democratic deficit is in the right time frame, but it is a purely regional phenomenon and would not explain nationwide voting decline.

### **Homogeneity of politicians and political parties.**

All the participants identified difficulties in determining meaningful differences between the positions adopted by different politicians and political parties. Again, attributed causes for this perception varied between participants. Some attributed it internally:

Milhouse:

I really see them as being all the same, you know? I mean, perhaps they're not, but I really just don't pay enough attention to them to be able to separate them from each other (Ls. 276-280).

Others attributed it externally, to the political system itself: "It was down to a lack of choice" (Homer, L.9).

The period of voting decline has corresponded with the emergence of two sociological trends: partisan and class dealignment of parties. The electorate is shedding its enduring party loyalties; and the parties are shedding their traditional class associations (Heywood, 2002, p. 191; 243). Politicians have always been a group with very significant barriers to group entry: one needs to rise up through a party in order to become a candidate, and then one needs to be elected to office. Through personal, family or class-based party association, however, politicians may constitute a reference group (Kelley, 1952). From the electorate's perspective, the outgroup 'politicians' was historically divided by the salience of class or party identity within the group.

Self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1985) can be applied to this political identity paradigm. In the absence of salient class associations with parties; or salient party associations with the family or community, politicians may have reverted to

being perceived as an autonomous outgroup. Under these circumstances, the relative homogeneity effect (Quattrone, 1986) may have taken effect: if the class and party traditions which divided and differentiated the outgroup 'politicians' have declined; it would follow that 'politicians' might be perceived as a single, homogenous entity.

It should be noted that political science acknowledges that party policies really have become more similar: this is not necessarily a distortion or a misperception. This change is in accordance with Downs' (1957) economic theory of democracy (see appendix A).

**Politicians are more interested in competition with each other than in the business of Government.**

All participants identified that politicians expended more of their energies in defending their own positions and deriding their opponents than they did in performing the duties for which they were elected:

Bart:

A lot of them focus, seem to focus on each other when they should be on the subject, you know, they slag each other off, campaigns of calling each other names and all that when they should be getting on with it (Ls. 113-117).

Lisa:

They're supposed to be running things and making things better, but they're too interested in power, in getting power and keeping power. They end up not helping the people they are supposed to help (Ls. 1006-1010).

Heider (1958) produced the model of the naïve psychologist making attributions about others' behaviour, and the biases and errors that can be inherent in those attributions.

The life of a politician is difficult, as some participants recognised: "they do a good job in a bad situation" (Selma, L.663). There are severe barriers to group entry in politics; competition is fierce; and as Enoch Powell observed "all political lives... end in failure" (Powell, 1977, p.151). Politicians are competing with each other, because they are fighting for survival. This process takes place in public.

The business of Government, however, is necessarily less frenetic. There are checks and balances to the legislative process (Montesquieu, 1748). Scrutiny and oversight are time consuming; the process is quite deliberately slow in order to avoid the possibility of oppressive or just plain incompetent legislation being passed (Hague & Harrop, 2001, p.227-8). This process takes place in private.

Given politicians' status as an outgroup; and that politicians are obliged by their circumstances to vigorously defend their positions, and at the same time allow legislation to grind slowly through the process; it is almost inevitable that the electorate will come up with attributional errors about politicians. Some participants' attributions could have been identified as fundamental attribution errors (Ross, 1977); other participants went as far as the ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979).

### **A lack of impartial information about politics.**

Most participants identified at least one form of this theme:

Marge:

There doesn't seem to be an independent person to say, you know, this is who they are, and this is who they are, and this is the issues, and this is what you need to know. (Ls. 174-176)

Lisa:

I think they could teach you a bit more about it at school, you know? I mean, I did modern studies at school and we did stuff like a bit of sociology and a wee tiny bit of politics, but they never told you about political parties or anything like that. (Ls. 935-939)

Milhouse:

I mean, the stuff [election publicity] is like advertising, like advertising soap powder or something, it's all nice and colourful, big smiley picture, wearing a nice tie, you know? I don't buy my soap powder on the basis of the adverts, why am I going to vote on... that same basis? (Ls. 311-314)

Politicians, parties and the media gather a tremendous amount of information about the preferences of the electorate: opinion polls; focus groups; and approval ratings. The electorate, however, are not afforded the same level of information for their political options. Simon (1955) described the way people make decisions with limited information as bounded rationality: "The bounds on human rationality

arise from limitations of our information-processing abilities and the costs involved in exhaustive comparison of all available options” (Colman, 2003, p.100).

The electors’ primary source of political information would appear to be media: the ‘political socialisation’ of individuals is becoming less reliant on family and community; and more reliant on the media (Heywood, 2002, p.203). As participants themselves noted, politicians devote a lot of energy and time to debunking their competitors’ claims, so the aggregate information from politicians is conflicting: the Government claims it is investing in the health service; the opposition claims that the health service is being starved of money. Who should the elector believe? Within their bounded rationality, it is very difficult to make any sort of rational choice based on this quality of information alone: “you end up not knowing what not to believe” (Bart, L. 332).

Another decision that may be easier to make is whether to engage in the whole area of politics at all. Within the electors’ bounded rationality, engagement involves dealing with a stream of conflicting and confusing information, and then arriving at a decision about how to vote; disengagement involves not bothering with any of that, and maybe feeling a little awkward or guilty as a result. As a bounded rational choice, abstinence may be quite an attractive option.

### **The media and the electorate have different motivations.**

Most participants recognised that the media’s representation of politics was not the way that politicians would like to be represented to the electorate, leading to possible biases or communication problems. Some also thought that the way the media represented politics was not the way they wanted it to be represented. Opinions of this varied from the benign, through mischief, to malice:

Patty:

I’m not a conspiracy theorist, you know? I don’t think the media is going to bring down the Government or anything. I’m happy for them to be there, and for them to do what they do, and if I watch it, I’ll take it with a pinch of salt (Ls. 496-500).

Maggie:

And, it's like, the politicians want to get in the papers and on the telly, but the media want... it's like all those sleaze stories, you know? (Ls. 526-528).

Milhouse:

It's not just politicians, it's not just them, I... I don't really believe, I don't take anything at face value when it comes from the papers or the television, I tend to not believe a word of it. (Ls. 201-203).

Electors need to be properly informed so that they can exert their personal control (Renshon, 1974), or resolve their dilemmas (Billig *et al*, 1988), or even just choose a candidate they like the sound of. Their principal sources of information are the media (Heywood, 2002, p.203).

The role of the media in the political process is an immensely complicated and contentious issue, and it falls largely outside the remit of this study. Nevertheless, the media are comprised of businesses: they are trying to make a profit by selling news, by selling political information which people want to know. The media are subject to the same sort of competitive economic principles (Hotelling, 1929) as the politicians, and the same competitive, economic process which brought about homogenous but competitive politics may also tend to produce homogenous but competitive news coverage.

The same attributional processes which were applied to politicians earlier may also be applied to the media (Heider, 1958): the media are an outgroup; they are in competition with each other; and they have limited resources and time with which to work. This could well lead to attributional errors.

McLuhan (1964) wrote that 'the medium is the message': the way the media work is more significant than what they actually say. The impact that the media have on society is that they present politics and other news stories at a breakneck speed, or as sensational exposés, in order to keep up with their competitors. This may make the people and processes they are reporting on appear to move very slowly, or behave suspiciously. Again, this could lead to misrepresentations of what actually occurred.

## Discussion

Participants do not feel that their vote has any real value; they find the different politicians and political parties to be homogenous; they think that politicians are more interested in political competition than in the business of Government; they identified a lack of impartial information about politics; and they have doubts about the motivations of the media.

Several of the themes addressed here seem to relate to a conflict between irrational human behaviour and rational political theory. Political theory tells parties how to become more popular: irrational humans see homogeneity. Every adult citizen has a vote of equal value: the irrational person thinks their own is devalued. The legislative process protects the citizen from abuses of power: the irrational person sees politicians prevaricating and ignoring their work.

This paper is premised on the fact that voting abstention is an applied social psychological issue: voting is not a laboratory experiment; it has consequences for society. It would therefore be pointless to 'blame' the abstainer and dismiss them; instead it would be better to try and find ways to address the problems they perceive, and re-engage their interest.

Psychology cannot make people more rational than they already are: what it can do is suggest ways in which the system can better accommodate human nature. There are two ways in which the problem of voting abstention could be approached: one is to reform the political system from the ground up; the other is to offer palliative solutions for the problems which have been identified.

Reforming the electoral system to make it more proportionally representative might deal with many of the issues identified in this study, but at a cost. Proportional systems waste fewer votes, and would probably result in a different style of Government with coalitions, co-operation and a larger number of parties being represented (as in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly). A larger number of parties might provide a wider range of policies; more dilemma-solving opportunities; and less homogeneity. Such a radical change to the system of

Government might be a disproportionate response to the problem, however: it might cause more problems than it solved.

Palliative solutions to the issues identified may prove to be a more realistic approach. Politicians spend a lot of time and money on their presentation and image. If they know that their homogeneity is a problem, it may prompt them to diversify and try to appear and act more as individuals. There may be a possible trade-off between occupying the centre ground, and therefore being the most popular amongst politicians; and appearing to be a differentiated individual, and therefore engaging the largest proportion of the disengaged electorate.

Participants complained of a lack of impartial information about politics: here perhaps is a role for the education system; or for public service broadcasters like the BBC or Channel Four, whose remit includes a public information role as well as entertainment. If people receive impartial information through the media, this may also help to deal with their perceptions about the media's motivations.

Two points emerged from this study which may be suitable subjects for further investigation: Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour might be applied to voting to see if perceived behavioural control is a strong predictor of that behaviour. There may also be other societal conflicts between the rational behaviour of organisations, and the irrational thought processes and behaviour of individuals: this might be an interesting area of study since many more organisations are now becoming competitive and results-driven.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the lifeworld of abstaining voters, using an interpretative phenomenological analysis technique. Several superordinate themes emerged: a lack of value of the vote; homogeneity of parties and politicians; politicians seem more interested in competition with each other than with the business of Government; a lack of impartial information about politics; and doubts about the motivations of the media. Several of these themes could be explained by the incompatibility of rational behaviour by organisations: the Government; the media; the political parties; with the irrational aspects of human thought and behaviour.

There are possible interventions which could be made in order to alleviate some of the issues which were identified in the study. These would hopefully help to arrest the decline in voting, and maybe even help to reverse it. Further research is suggested in the areas of perceived value of voting, specifically using the theory of planned behaviour; and the nature of the conflict between rational organisational behaviour and human irrationality through bounded rationality and attribution processes.

### **Reflection**

This is the author's first paper using this method, and as such there are two aspects which, with hindsight, would have been done differently. Firstly, the sampling method was unnecessarily complicated and quite expensive: a purposive sample could have been easily obtained by talking to people about the subject and finding willing abstainers that way. Secondly, the post-interview debriefing could have been recorded, as some participants' reactions to learning the theoretical background to this area were as interesting as their interviews.

More positively, a reasonably coherent set of ideas has emerged, relating to theories that fit into the timeframe for the decline of voting, and although this sort of study does not produce a degree of significance for its findings, it has provided some pointers for future research. Although the study concludes that people act irrationally, it must be said that the participants were an intelligent and pleasant set of people who really engaged with the issue.

(5,890 words)

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## **Appendices.**

**Appendix A:** Political theory synopsis.

**Appendix B:** Initial letter and questionnaire.

**Appendix C:** Information and consent form.

**Appendix D:** Introduction cue list.

**Appendix E:** Interview schedule.

**Appendix F:** Master themes and individual themes list.

## **Interviews.**

Interview with Marge.

Interview with Homer.

Interview with Lisa.

Interview with Maggie.

Interview with Bart.

Interview with Patty.

Interview with Selma.

Interview with Milhouse.

## Appendix A: Electoral Competition

Over the last forty years or so, the nature of British political parties has changed fundamentally. After the Second World War, political analysts noticed that class associations with political parties were declining; that voters were abandoning their enduring loyalty to one party (Heywood, 2002, p.191); and that the parties were becoming more ‘ideologically mobile’ (Ball & Peters, 2000). What was happening in effect was that the parties were becoming more competitive with each other.

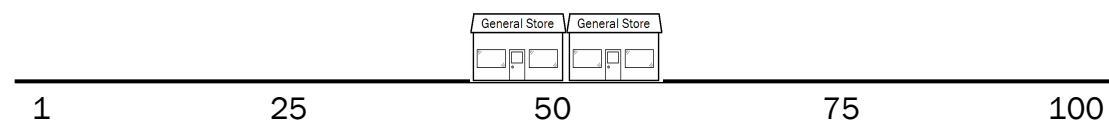
This competitive principle was first described by economist Harold Hotelling in 1929. An imaginary a street has 100 houses built along one side (see figure 1). There is planning permission to build two shops along the other side of the street. Both the shops sell the same goods, so there is nothing to choose between them, and everybody from the street will go to one shop or the other. Where would be the best position for the shops?

Figure 1: after Hotelling (1929)



A consumer would probably choose to put the shops at about numbers 25 and 75. This means that no-one has to walk too far to get to the shop. According to Hotelling, they would be wrong. By distributing the shops along the length of the street, the shopkeepers are giving away a possible competitive advantage to the opposition: no-one from houses 51 to 100 would ever choose to visit the shop at number 25; no-one from houses 1 to 50 would ever choose to visit the shop at number 75.

Figure 2: after Hotelling (1929)



Hotelling argued that it made better sense to put both their shops in the middle of the street (see figure 2). Although this means that the people living at the extremes of the street have further to walk to get to the shops, neither shop is giving away a competitive advantage to the other. The payoff to the consumer is supposed to be that the distances to the two shops is now the same, so they will compete with each other on price.

Political scientist Anthony Downs described this phenomenon in a political context in his 1957 *Economic Theory of Democracy*. Downs argued that parties in America were moving into the position where they had abandoned their traditional ideological viewpoints, and were adjusting their policy positions in order to maximise their vote-gaining potential. This led to the parties having homogenous policies, but they were popular homogenous policies

Referring to the diagrams above, if the shops are substituted for parties, and the street is substituted for the left-wing to right-wing political spectrum, figure 1 represents the state of politics before the advent of electoral competition; figure 2 represents the state of politics afterwards. Spectra other than left-wing to right-wing are equally viable: high taxation and comprehensive public services, to low taxation and minimal public services; authoritarian Government to *laissez-faire* Government; or pro-European Union to anti-European Union.

The single-dimensional model is a gross over-simplification: every issue has a spectrum of opinion, but the competitive parties will always tend towards the centre of those spectra, working on the assumption that public opinion is normally distributed. For example before the 2005 General Election, Evan Davies, the BBC's Economics Editor, ran various models of the two main parties' economic plans through his computer, and found that at best they differed by 1% in public spending after three years (Davies, 2005).

In the context of voting abstinence, a pertinent difference between Hotelling's and Downs' analyses of competitive practices is that Hotelling's shoppers are compelled to shop at one of the two stores; Downs' voters are encouraged to vote, but are under no compulsion to do so.

## **The Democratic Deficit**

Political scientists identified a peculiarly Scottish phenomenon which may be relevant in this context: the democratic deficit (McCrone, 2005). Between 1979 and 1997 Scotland as a whole consistently elected a majority of Labour Members of Parliament, yet received a Conservative Government. The democratic deficit has been identified as one of the drivers behind regional devolution in this country, and the Scottish Parliament's more proportionally representative electoral system reflects the concern the Scottish political system seemed to feel over their lack of representation (Lynch, 2001).

The eighteen years of Conservative Government constitute almost an entire generation of ineffectual voting by the Scottish electorate. A behaviourist might recognise this as grounds for the extinction of a conditioned response (Pavlov, 1927); or as the basis of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). More pertinently, it saw a generation of Scottish children being politically socialised by seeing that their parents' votes did not produce a satisfactory outcome.

## Wasted Votes.

Every electoral system has a tendency to waste votes. A vote is wasted when it does not directly contribute to electing someone. Proportional electoral systems tend to waste fewer votes than simple majority (or first-past-the-post) systems, but are more complicated to operate. In the United Kingdom, Members of Parliament are elected by the simple but wasteful simple majority system.

Figure 3: Election Result

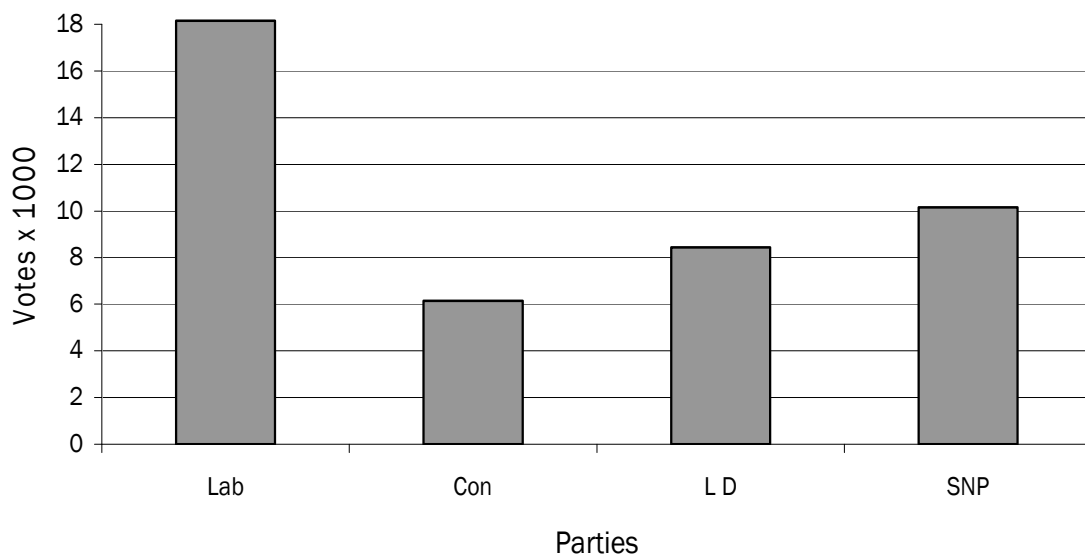
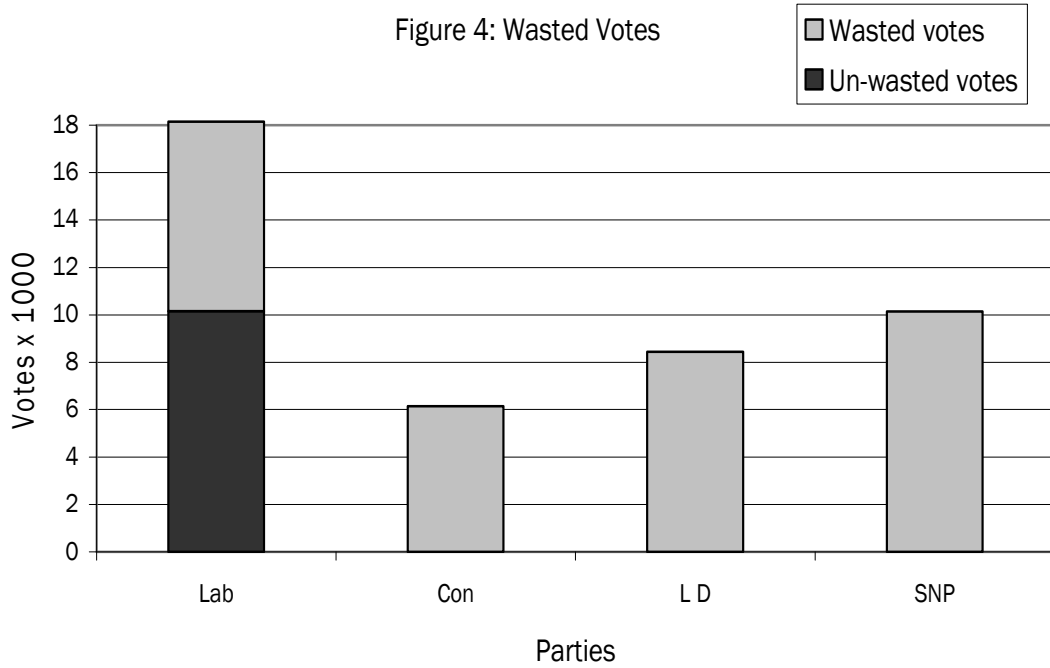


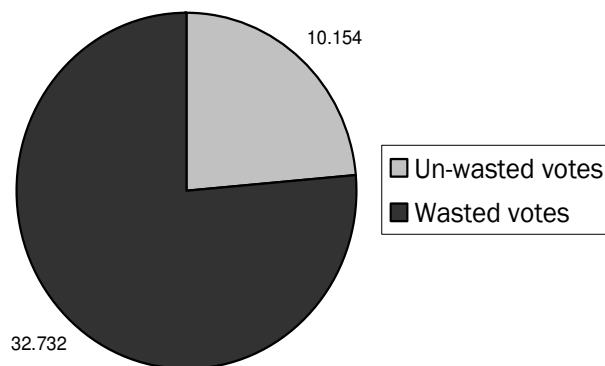
Figure 3 shows the results of an imaginary simple majority election. The Labour party won this seat, so votes cast for any other party are effectively wasted: they did not contribute to electing anyone. The second placed party was the SNP. The Labour party only needed to beat the SNP by one vote – a simple majority – so any additional votes cast for the Labour party are also wasted: the member has already been elected, so these votes do not contribute to the election of anyone else.

If the wasted votes are separated from the un-wasted votes in this election (see figure 4), it is apparent that a large proportion of the vote was wasted.



This is even more apparent if the total of wasted votes is compared to the total of un-wasted votes (see figure 5). It can be seen that in an unremarkable election result such as this, fewer than one in four votes actually produced the result of the election: the rest were in some way wasted. Although no electoral system completely takes account of every vote cast, many of the more proportional systems waste a far lower proportion of votes than the simple majority system.

Figure 5: Wasted and un-wasted votes



## **Appendix B: Initial Letter and Questionnaire.**

Department of Psychology  
University of Strathclyde  
Graham Hills Building  
40 George Street  
Glasgow  
G1 1QE

<Title> <Name> <Surname>  
<Address 1>  
<Address 2>  
<Town>  
<Postcode>  
<Date>

Dear <Title> <Surname>,

My name is Roy Hunter and I am a student at the University of Strathclyde. As part of my course, I am conducting a study into how people decide to vote, or not vote. Your name and address were randomly selected from the Electoral Register, which is a public document, and this letter is to ask you to take part in this study. At the moment, I have no information about you other than your name and address, and you are under no obligation to take part, but if you do, it would assist my research enormously.

The recent General Election provided an excellent opportunity to ask you about voting, since we have all been thinking about it and have had to make a decision about whether to vote, and if so how to vote. I must stress that I am not interested in which party or candidate you voted for. I am interested in is how you arrived at your voting decision, whatever it was, how it made you feel, and your general impressions about modern political life.

If you are willing to participate, please fill in the questionnaire attached and return it to me in the envelope supplied. Your responses will be strictly confidential, and no information identifying you will appear in the final report. There is a tick box at the bottom of the questionnaire which you can tick if you would be willing to take part in further research. This would consist of an interview lasting between thirty minutes and an hour. Again, you are under no obligation, but it would assist my research enormously.

This study is being supervised by Dr. Sally Wiggins of the University's Department of Psychology, and is being conducted under the ethical codes of the Department of Psychology, the University, and the British Psychological Society. You can contact me on 0771 9669 404, or email: [roy.hunter@strath.ac.uk](mailto:roy.hunter@strath.ac.uk). Dr. Wiggins can be contacted on 0141 548 4461, or email: [sally.wiggins@strath.ac.uk](mailto:sally.wiggins@strath.ac.uk). Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Yours faithfully,



## Voting Questionnaire

1: Please circle the statement you agree with most:

I voted in the General Election  
because I wanted to.

I did not vote in the General Election  
because I did not want to.

I voted in the General Election  
because I felt I had to.

I did not vote in the General Election  
because I could not manage to.

2: Please circle the statement you agree with most:

In general, I do not trust  
any political parties.

I trust political parties  
with one exception.

I do not trust political parties  
with one exception.

In general, I trust all  
the political parties.

3: Please circle the statement you agree with most:

In general, I believe  
all politicians.

I don't believe most politicians,  
with one or two exceptions.

I believe most politicians,  
with one or two exceptions.

In general, I do not  
believe any politicians.

4: Please circle the statement you agree with most:

I am very happy with the way I  
am represented in Parliament.

I am fairly happy with the way I  
am represented in Parliament.

I am fairly unhappy with the way I  
am represented in Parliament.

I am very unhappy with the way I  
am represented in Parliament.

5: Would you be willing to take part in further research? This would consist of an interview at a later date, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Please tick the box to indicate your consent. Thank you for taking part in this research project.

## **Appendix C: Consent Form**

### **Information and consent form.**

This study is a psychological investigation of voting abstention: the attitudes and beliefs of people who actively decide not to vote. The technique used is called interpretative phenomenological analysis, and the data to be investigated comes from semi-structured interviews with people who have decided not to vote.

This interview will be recorded and transcribed onto paper for later analysis. Once the transcripts have been verified as accurate, the recordings will be erased. The transcripts will be made anonymous by the removal of names, places and so on, so you will remain anonymous.

The final report may contain brief extracts from the interviews, but following the transcription process, the content of the interviews will be entirely anonymous. No personal information about you will appear in the report or any related literature.

This study is taking place under the supervision of Dr. Sally Wiggins at the University of Strathclyde's Department of Psychology. It is required to adhere to the ethical codes of the Department, the University, and the British Psychological Society. There are contact details for all of the above on the other side of this form.

You are under no obligation to take part in this study, and you are free to withdraw at any point without having to give any reason. If you understand and agree to all of the above, please sign in the space below to indicate that you are giving your informed consent to take part in this study.

**I have read and understand this information about this study and I give my informed consent to take part.**

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

Contact details: Roy Hunter  
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Department of Psychology: <http://www.strath.ac.uk/departments/psychology/>

Departmental Ethics Code: <http://www.strath.ac.uk/Departments/Psychology/Department%20Ethics%20Checklist%20and%20Approval%20Form.doc>

British Psychological Society: <http://www.bps.org.uk/>

BPS Ethics Code: <http://www.strath.ac.uk/Departments/Psychology/Bpscode.pdf>

## Appendix D.

### Pre-interview introduction.

- Historical decline of voting.
- Non-voting as a common behaviour these days - I am a non-voter.
- Voting abstention is not necessarily voter apathy.
- Political issues still affect us all.
  - Iraq
  - Taxation vs. public spending
  - The NHS
- Politics as different from Government.
- Influence of the media.
- How the study works
  - I am looking for answers too
  - Devil's Advocate – I am not having a go at you
- Ethics.

## Appendix E: Interview Schedule.

### Voting abstention:

What prompted you to decide not to vote? / How did you arrive at a decision not to vote?

How does not voting make you feel? (Angry; sad; disappointed; disgusted; guilty; indifferent)

How does that make you feel that the business of Government is going on without your input or your opinion?

### Efficacy and honesty of politicians and parties:

How much do you trust politicians and political parties?

How useful and effective a job do you think they do?

What could they do differently?

### Politics in the media:

Do you think that the media reports politics well and fairly?

Do you think the media are part of the problem, or part of the solution?

### Just for fun:

If you became Prime Minister tomorrow, how would you sort it all out?

### If the opportunity arises:

How do you view yourself / your family in terms of class?

Did you take part in Make Poverty History / Don't Attack Iraq etc?

What kind of person becomes a politician?

## Appendix F: Master Themes Table.

<b>Marge</b>	<b>Homer</b>	<b>Lisa</b>	<b>Maggie</b>	<b>Bart</b>	<b>Patty</b>	<b>Selma</b>	<b>Milhouse</b>
Low value of own vote	Low value of own vote	Low value of own vote	Low value of own vote	Low value of own vote	Low value of own vote	Low value of own vote	Low value of own vote
Party & pol. homogeneity	Party & pol. homogeneity	Party & pol. homogeneity	Party & pol. homogeneity	Party & pol. homogeneity	Party & pol. homogeneity	Party & pol. homogeneity	Party & pol. homogeneity
Competition over function of Government	Competition over function of Government	Competition over function of Government	Competition over function of Government	Competition over function of Government	Competition over function of Government	Competition over function of Government	Competition over function of Government
Lack of impartial source of information about politics	Lack of impartial source of information about politics	Lack of impartial source of information about politics	Lack of impartial source of information about politics			Lack of impartial source of information about politics	Lack of impartial source of information about politics
Media have different motivations from people	Media have different motivations from people	Media have different motivations from people	Media have different motivations from people	Media have different motivations from people	Media have different motivations from people	Media have different motivations from people	Media have different motivations from people

## Themes from interview with Marge.<sup>1</sup>

### Homogeneity

No choice between parties

Campaigns too slick and commercial

Wrong issues / not all issues addressed in campaigns

### Lack of value of own vote

### Motivations of media are different

Partisan media confusing

Competitive media do not report issues important to self

Media are hypocritical in the name of 'truth'

Misleading use of statistics and 'facts' by the media

### Lack of impartial information about politics

### Political competition more important than Government

Politicians' motives different to the electorate's

No trust for politicians

No trust for parties

Politicians & parties have duplicitous policies

Politicians are personally duplicitous – public image

Misleading use of statistics and 'facts' by politicians

Gender of MPs mostly male

Politicians behave badly in Parliament

Important political issues sorted out in private, not public

Politicians unaccountable between elections

No 'payback' for voting, paying taxes, obeying laws

Self maybe guilty of apathy?

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<sup>1</sup> These themes are what remained after most of the non-superordinate themes were eliminated. There were more themes initially, but the common patterns would be difficult to spot with all of them in place.

### **Themes from interview with Homer.**

#### **Homogeneity**

Party system ineffectual – lack of choice  
 Homogenous party system could lead to a homogenous country?  
 Politicians do not distinguish themselves – no political heroes  
 Selective ‘marketing’ approach to policies  
 Homogeneity is bad for society

#### **Lack of value of own vote**

Voting system wastes votes  
 Taxation more important for representation than voting  
 Abstention does not equal marginalisation  
 Elections do not really change anything

#### **Motivations of the media**

Media are irresponsible – Sunday Sport  
 Media are unaccountable  
 Using alternative media requires more critical faculties  
 Selective issue presentation – homogeneity of media  
 Competition within the media more important than the news itself

#### **Lack of impartial information**

Government does not take political education seriously  
 Partisan media bad for democratic process

#### **Political competition more important than Government**

Ministers appointed on basis of political clout, not suitability for job  
 Are politicians engaged with the electorate, or with themselves?  
 Political action often short-term and reactionary

Sectarianism / religion has no place in politics

The electorate has a long memory for political events  
 You cannot force the electorate to re-engage  
 Changing the electoral system would be a good thing

### Themes from interview with Lisa.

#### **Homogeneity**

No choice between parties

No choice between policies

Continuity between one Government and the next

#### **Lack of impartial information**

Competitive media means news is not impartial

Lack of political education

#### **Political competition more important than Government**

Electioneering is dishonest (necessary due to competition?)

Politicians and parties unreliable with promises

Politicians never admit they cannot do the impossible

What do politicians actually do for you?

#### **Lack of value of vote**

Impossibility of changing Government

Voting system flawed

#### **Motivations of the media**

Media do not address relevant issues

Media cynically manipulate politics

Selective of issues

Alternative media difficult to use

Britain does not compare well to other countries

Government is difficult to understand

Change is necessary, but difficult to accomplish

Politics does not have an impact on own life

**Themes from interview with Maggie.**

**Homogeneity**

Cannot tell difference between parties

**Political competition more important than Government**

**Lack of impartial information**

Higher education exposes you to politics?

**Motivations of the media**

Media motivations different from politicians

**Lack of value of vote**

Voting does not affect issues

Other measures like consultation similarly flawed

Political process has no real impact on own life

Centralised power breeds mistrust

**Themes from interview with Bart.****Lack of value of own vote**

Unfairness of electoral system  
Voting for minority party = wasted vote  
Voting cannot change anything

**Political competition more important than Government**

Presentation is more important than function  
Negativity towards others more important than own performance

**Homogeneity**

Parties all the same (except SSP)  
Politicians equally duplicitous and lying?

**Motivations of media**

Partisan press are lazy  
BBC is not impartial – Government control

Politics is an insular community – self serving

The electorate has a long memory

**Themes from interview with Patty.****Homogeneity**

Cannot distinguish between major parties on specific issue – education  
Minor parties distinctive, but not to be taken seriously  
Continuity between Governments

**Lack of value of own vote**

Tactical voting more effective than preference voting

**Political competition more important than Government**

Politicians don't deal with own issues  
Behaviour in Parliament

**Motivations of media**

Partisan media balance each other out  
Media & politicians do not act naturally  
Distortion of message inevitable

### **Themes from interview with Selma**

#### **Homogeneity**

Parties deliberately do not define policies well?  
Own issues not being addressed  
Politicians like another species

#### **Value of own vote**

Electoral system unfair  
Tactical voting more effective than preference voting  
Change either inevitable or impossible

#### **Motivation of media**

Partisan media are bad for democratic process  
Media prurience puts people off

#### **Lack of impartial information**

#### **Political competition more important than Government**

Parties make unrealistic election promises  
Politicians are power-hungry  
Government do not really run the country?

Citizenship is a duty

Citizens should be incentivised to participate – cf Australia

**Themes from interview with Milhouse.****Homogeneity****Lack of value of own vote**

Voting choice only offered on trivial issues

Issues not important to self

Parties not interested in own vote?

**Political competition more important than Government**

Does Government lack control of issues, or lack will to control issues?

**Motivations of media**

Partisan media annoying but not serious

Too reliant on bad news

Prurience puts people off

Media misjudge their audience

Lack of trust for media

**Lack of impartial information**

Doubts own ability to make important judgements

Discerning customer when shopping: same with voting?