

Election-free democracy

The UK as the shape of the future

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Official reports show that the proportion of citizens on the UK electoral register has been falling steadily over the past fifty years from 96 percent in 1949/50 to 95.2 percent in 1991 and 90.5 percent in 2006. In 2010 about 10 percent of citizens in the UK could not vote because they were not on the electoral register. This adds up to about 4.5 million people – more than half the population of London. The rate of decline is accelerating.

Voting turnout of those on the electoral register is also declining, and at a faster rate than registration. The figures show a fall from 80.5 percent in the elections of the 1950s to 61.9 percent in the elections of 2000-2010, a decline of 18.2 percent. The decrease in the three most recent elections was a particularly steep of 12.5 percent. Whereas, more than eight out of every ten on the electoral register voted in the 1950s, barely more than six out of ten did so in the 2000s.

The percentage of votes cast for the two main parties forming the heart of government has also declined in the same period, and at a much faster rate than turnout and registration. As table 2 shows, the Conservatives averaged 46.2 percent of the poll in the 1950s; by the 2000s this had slumped to 33.4 percent. Labour's share of the poll fell from 45.6 percent to 34.9 percent in the same period, and the party recorded only 29.0 percent of the poll in the most recent election of 2010. In that year Labour secured the support of less than one third of those who voted, and only two thirds of those

on the electoral register bothered to vote, while 10 percent of the population was not even on the electoral register to start with. By recent standards the Conservatives had a good election in 2010. They took 36.1 percent of the poll, but only 65.1 percent of those on the electoral register voted, and another 10 percent of citizens were not registered, meaning that the party secured the political support of one in five adult citizens.

In sum, the percentage of citizens on the electoral register has fallen from 96 percent in 1950 to 90 percent in 2012, the voting turnout of the progressively smaller percentages on the electoral register has fallen from 80.5 percent in the 1950s to 62 percent in the 2000s, and the combined voting support for the two main parties has collapsed from 91.8 percent of those voting in the 1950s to 68.3 percent in the 2000s.

The long term decline of two-party support will have momentous results: if things continue at their present rate, by the year 2040, and probably earlier, not a single citizen in Britain will vote for any of the major parties of government. Even if all the winning and opposition candidates vote for the majority party, support for the winning party will be as close to zero as makes no difference.

Is this a good or a bad thing? The answer depends on whether one regards declining voting turnout and party support as good or bad. Some argue that it indicates political malaise, cynicism, hopelessness, alienation, dissatisfaction and loss of trust. Others claim, on the contrary, that it shows citizens are so satisfied with government and its performance that they see no need to vote. They point out that people are not by nature political animals, and life free of political involvement leaves more time for the truly important things of life – reading (Hello!) magazine, football, shopping, getting drunk, over-eating, sleeping and watching TV.

The latter theory is obviously the one that applies to the UK. Apart from a few small hiccups with the economy, life is getting better; people are living longer, the working week is getting

Summary: Developments in British elections over the past fifty years or so show important trends that have, curiously, never been noticed by political commentators. Yet these have remarkable and far-reaching consequences. They show that Britain, the pioneer of elected parliamentary government in the nineteenth century, now leads the world towards a superior form of democracy for the twenty-first century that works perfectly well without parties, elections and citizen involvement.

Table 1:

Turnout as a percentage of the electoral register

decade	turnout in percent
1950s	80,5
1960s	76,5
1970s	74,4
1980s	74,0
1990s	74,5
2000s	61,9

Table 2:

Labour and conservative percentages of the poll

decade	conservative percent of the poll	labour percent of the poll
1950s	46,2	45,6
1960s	46,7	44,2
1970s	42,9	40,0
1980s	42,3	29,2
1990s	36,3	38,8
2000s	33,4	34,9

shorter, students are working less and getting better exam results, ownership of large cars is increasing, the population is getting fatter, and sales of champagne, luxury goods and fashion labels are stronger than ever. The demand for luxury housing and foreign holidays is booming. The marinas are full of yachts. If they do not earn enough to buy whatever they want, the British have adopted the simple strategy of borrowing from the banks. And the government has decided that banks cannot go bankrupt so it borrows more money to keep them afloat. What could be better?

As British governments have repeatedly pointed out, their statistics show that the country has the best schools and universities in the world, the finest hospitals, the most advanced training and research facilities, the most effective motorway and railway networks, the lowest unemployment and inflation figures, the tallest, most beautiful and happiest people, the funniest comedians, and the finest food, beer and weather in the world. The present government is rapidly dismantling social and welfare services, showing how little need there is for such things nowadays. The British are the envy of the sporting world with the best cricket, darts and pushpenny teams in the universe. To top all this, the Royal wedding of Kate and Wills was a spectacular world-wide attraction and the prospects of a Royal baby brings joyous pleasure to the whole world.

In international affairs the country is sitting pretty. The Americans have helped the British

to achieve regime change in Iraq and destroy its weapons of mass destruction, down to the last battered pick-up truck. Together they have successfully established peace and stable democracy in Afghanistan and are doing the same in other parts of the world. The Brits and their American cousins are playing the key role in winning the drugs war, smashing international crime, solving the problems of global poverty, hunger and warming and bringing whistleblowers and leakers of secret intelligence to justice.

In modern Britain life is good and life is easy. As a result, the British are about to be set free of the burdensome business of being good citizens and the annoying matter of voting. They are on the verge of a new politics-free utopia without the irksome duties of civic responsibilities. There will be no need for keeping up with the news, joining parties, involvement in community affairs, forming sensible and informed choices about policies and, above all, the monstrous waste of time going to the voting stations to cast a ballot once every five years.

What few seem to realise is that the historical dialectic of democracy culminates, like the historical dialectic of the state, with the end of politics, parties and elections. In this sense Fukuyama was wrong: we are not witnessing the end of history and the universal acceptance of democracy, but the end of any need for democracy at all.

Literature

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