# 1. Political engagement
Bridging the gulf? Britain's democracy after the 2010 election

Turnout increased somewhat in the 2010 election (up four points from 2005, to 65%), but was still relatively low by historical standards. This was despite, among other things, the introduction of televised leaders' debates and much greater use of the internet in political campaigning. This chapter examines the health of Britain's democracy in the wake of these developments, looking in particular at whether politicians were more effective in 2010 at reaching out to those who are least engaged in politics.

The small rise in turnout in 2010 masks some deeper problems concerning people's motivation to vote.

1987 **47%**

1997 **33%**

2010 **20%**
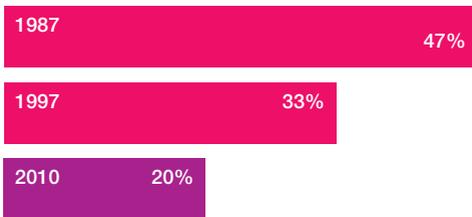
18%
Say it's not worth voting

Only 20% **trust British governments** to put the interests of the nation above those of their own political party at least most of the time, down from 33% in 1997 and 47% in 1987. One in five (18%) now say it is **not worth voting**, up from 3% in 1987.

There is no consistent evidence that those with least motivation to vote were particularly likely to return to the ballot box. At 33 points, the difference in turnout between those with most and least **interest in politics** was still much higher than in 1997 (20 points).

While relatively popular, the innovations of the 2010 election campaign – televised leaders' debates and more online campaign activities – were not particularly successful at reaching out to the less engaged.

51% **watched the televised leaders' debates**

Half (51%) watched the **televised leaders' debates**, making them one of the most popular ways of following the campaign. However the debates appealed primarily to those interested in politics, 74% of whom watched compared with 26% of those with little or no interest in politics.

Three in ten (31%) took part in some form of **digital election campaign activity**, up from just 13% in 2005. However the increase was much greater (from 34% to 65%) among those interested in politics than it was among those without much interest (from 9% to 21%).

31%
took part in digital election campaign activity

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Britain's democracy has been a source of concern in recent years (see for example, Power Inquiry, 2006). A gulf has seemingly opened up between rulers and ruled. During the last 20 years or so, there have been numerous allegations of 'sleaze' and of financial irregularities committed by politicians, culminating in the MPs' expenses scandal of summer 2009 that, among other things, forced the resignation of the Speaker of the House of Commons and resulted in three MPs being sent to prison. In response the public withdrew what little willingness to trust politicians they already had (Curtice and Park, 2010; Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2011). Meanwhile, some voters became inclined to shun the democratic process entirely. Whereas, between 1922 and 1997 turnout in general elections had never fallen below 70 per cent, in 2001 it fell to just 59 per cent, and thereafter recovered only slightly, to 61 per cent, in 2005. Younger voters in particular seemed especially inclined to stay at home (Curtice and Bromley, 2002; Clarke *et al*., 2004).

Unsurprisingly, these developments have been accompanied by a concern to find ways to reconnect voters with the democratic process. Such a concern was at least part of the motivation for the considerable programme of constitutional and regulatory reform introduced by the 1997–2010 Labour government (Curtice, 2011). That concern has also helped foster interest in the potential of the internet to increase levels of trust and participation in politics, both by making it easier to access information about what government is doing and by making it easier for people to get politically involved and organised (Negroponte, 1995; Dertouzous, 1997; Bimber, 2002). Certainly in the 2010 election campaign both parties and candidates made much greater use of the internet both to disseminate information and to try and get more people involved in their campaigns (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010; Wring and Ward, 2010). Although scepticism has also been expressed about whether the internet can promote participation (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Davis, 2005), its ability to do so nowadays would seem all the greater following not only the widespread use of broadband, but also the explosion of social networking sites and the spread of mobile 'smart phones' that provide unprecedented ease of access to the digital world.

Yet in practice during the 2010 election campaign it was a very familiar and long-established technology – television – that was the focus of greatest interest. Although commonplace in many countries, a UK general election campaign had not previously been graced by a televised debate between the leaders of the main parties, largely because incumbent Prime Ministers have felt such debates would be of greatest benefit to their rivals. However, way behind in the polls, in 2009 the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, agreed to participate in three debates with his two main rivals. Not only were the rhythm and tempo of the campaign heavily influenced by the three jousts that were held on the three Thursdays prior to polling day (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010), but the first debate, watched by over 10 million people and widely agreed to have been won by the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, was followed by a dramatic surge in the popularity of the Liberal Democrats in the opinion polls. As a result, much of the focus of the ensuing campaign was on what deal the Liberal Democrats might strike with whom in the event that the party held the balance of power in the new parliament.

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However, despite the drama and speculation of the campaign, together with the greater use of 'new' technology, in the event there was no more than a modest increase in turnout. Just 65 per cent cast their vote, up four points on 2005 but still considerably less than what had once been regarded as the floor level of 70 per cent. Apparently the gap between politicians and voters was still rather wide.

In this chapter we examine the health of Britain's democracy in the wake of the 2010 election. We consider two questions in particular. First, what conclusions should be drawn from the no more than modest increase in turnout? Does it represent evidence of a continuing and deep-seated failure on the part of politicians to secure the interest and attention of voters, or does it herald at least a partial return to what might be considered a healthier pattern of electoral participation? Second, in what ways did people follow or get involved in the election campaign? How successful were the leaders' debates in reaching out to a wide audience? And is there any evidence that the internet enabled people to become more involved? In our conclusion we consider whether the relationship between Britain's politicians and people looks to be any stronger after the 2010 election or not.

Turnout

There are broadly two main influences on whether or not people go to the polls (Bromley and Curtice, 2002). One set comprises the motivations that voters bring to an election. Do they feel they have a duty to vote? How much interest do they have in politics? And do they have a strong sense of attachment to a political party they are keen to express on polling day? Those who do not feel they have a duty to vote, have little interest in politics and do not feel a sense of attachment to a political party are less likely to go to the polls than those who do.

The second set of influences on turnout comprises the context in which an election takes place – or rather voters' perceptions of the choice that they are being asked to make (Heath and Taylor, 1999). Voters are more likely to go to the polls if they feel the outcome of an election might make a difference. They would, in turn, seem more likely to think the outcome could matter if they feel the parties are presenting very different policy positions – though the impact of such a perception might be reduced if voters feel that parties and politicians cannot be trusted. Voters might also be thought more likely to vote if the outcome of the election appears to be close.

Context is, though, likely to matter more to some voters than to others. Those who are strongly motivated to vote can be expected to cast a ballot irrespective of the circumstances of a particular election. In contrast, for those with little motivation to vote, their propensity to go to the polls may well depend significantly on whether they feel that voting might actually make a difference. Thus when the context of a particular election fails to offer a strong stimulus to vote, turnout is likely to fall most among those with a weaker motivation to participate. As a result, existing differences in

10m

10 million people watched the first leaders' debate

electoral participation between those, say, with little interest in politics and those with a great deal, are widened.

Our previous research has suggested that such a pattern was in evidence in 2001 and 2005 (Bromley and Curtice, 2002; Curtice *et al*., 2007). At both elections voters were less likely to feel there was a great deal of difference between the Conservatives and Labour than at any previous election since 1964 – and this was particularly true of those with a weaker motivation to participate in the first place. The 2001 and 2005 elections were also ones in which there seemed to be little prospect of any outcome other than the re-election of the incumbent government. And turnout fell most heavily among those with little interest in politics and those without any sense of attachment to a political party.

But what of the context in which the 2010 election was held? In many respects it is one that we might expect would have encouraged more people to vote. When translated into seats at least, many opinion polls pointed to the possibility that no single party would win an overall majority, while the surge in the Liberal Democrats' poll ratings after the first of the leaders' debates added to the apparent excitement and uncertainty of the contest (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010; Pickup *et al*., 2011). At the same time, the election took place in the wake of the most serious financial crisis and recession since the 1930s. Not only might this have awakened public interest in how the economy was to be managed in the next few years, but also the parties disagreed about how to tackle the large public sector deficit.

Yet there was also one very large cloud hanging over the election – the scandal over MPs' expenses that dominated the newspaper headlines in the summer of 2009. This served to reinforce the perception many people already held that politicians were more concerned to advance their own interests than the public good. Trust in politicians descended to yet another new low (Curtice and Park, 2010). And a distrustful electorate is often thought to be reluctant to go to the polls (Almond and Verba, 1963; Crozier *et al.*, 1975; Wolfinger *et al.*, 1990; Pattie and Johnston, 2001).

So there are two important questions to ask of the pattern of turnout in 2010 and how it relates to people's motivations and attitudes. First is there evidence of a decline in people's motivation to vote that suggests that it may continue to prove more difficult to persuade voters to go to the polls in future, however exciting and polarised an election might be? Second, in so far as there was a recovery in turnout at the election is there any evidence that the less strongly motivated were particularly more likely to make it to the polls this time, and that therefore, to some degree at least, politicians had rather greater success than in 2001 and 2005 in reaching out to the less 'engaged' section of the electorate?

In many respects the 2010 election is one that we might expect would have encouraged more people to vote

Motivation

Certainly one motivation to vote remains as strong – or as weak – as it has been at the time of previous elections. When asked how much interest they "generally have in what is going on in politics", in recent years consistently around a third have said they have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of interest, one third indicated they have "not much" or no interest at all, while one third have fallen somewhere in-between (see Table 1.1). Evidently, only a minority take a deep interest in the nation's political affairs, but equally only a minority affect not to have any interest at all.

Table 1.1 Trends in interest in politics, election years between 1997 and 2010

	1997	2001	2005	2010
How much interest in politics	%	%	%	%
Great deal/quite a lot	30	31	34	31
Some	33	35	34	34
Not much/none at all	37	34	32	34
Base	*1355*	*3287*	*4268*	*1081*

In contrast, as has often been noted (Crewe and Thomson, 1994; Clarke *et al*., 2004), there has been a long-term decline in the proportion who feel a strong sense of attachment to, or identification with, a political party.[1] Table 1.2 shows that the proportion who say they identify "very" or "fairly" strongly with a political party is 10 percentage points lower now than it was at the time of the 1987 general election, at which point the decline was already well in train. Half a century ago the party partisan was commonplace in Britain. Now he or she is a rarity. And in so far as a strong sense of attachment does help bring voters to the polls, there is no doubt that today's politicians have a harder task securing the engagement of the electorate than their predecessors did.

Table 1.2 Trends in strength of party identification, election years between 1987 and 2010

	1987	1997	2001	2005	2010
Strength of party identification	%	%	%	%	%
Very strong	11	10	7	7	7
Fairly strong	35	27	29	28	29
Not very strong	40	46	49	46	41
None	8	10	12	13	16
Base	*2847*	*1355*	*3282*	*4268*	*3297*

However, there is not that marked a difference between the position now and that at the time of the 1997 election, when turnout was still above the 70 per cent mark – indeed the proportion of "very" and "fairly" strong identifiers together has barely changed since then at all. All that has happened is that there has been a six point increase in the proportion who say they have no party attachment at all, with a commensurate fall among those whose identification is "not very strong" anyway. To that extent at least, it is not immediately obvious that voters were markedly more difficult to get to the polls in 2010 than they had been at other recent elections.

But what of the third and perhaps most powerful motivation of all, the feeling that one has a duty to vote? We ascertained this by asking:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view about general elections? In a general election...

> *...it's not really worth voting*
> *...people should vote only if they care who wins*
> *...it's everyone's duty to vote*

In our 2008 survey we found that there had been a noticeable decline in the proportion of people who felt that there was a duty to vote, a decline that was largely replicated a year later (Butt and Curtice, 2010; Curtice and Park, 2010). Table 1.3 shows that at 61 per cent, the proportion who say that, "it's everyone's duty to vote" is in fact five percentage points higher now than it was in 2008, suggesting that by the election at least civic duty had recovered somewhat. Yet if we look at all three readings obtained between 2008 and 2010 and compare them with earlier measures, the level is consistently lower than the 65 per cent or so mark that was the norm during the previous decade. Moreover, the proportion who give the most negative response – that "it's not really worth voting" at all – remains at the all time high of 18 per cent, first recorded in 2008. All in all, it appears that there was some erosion of the sense of civic duty during the course of the last parliament.

There was some erosion of the sense of civic duty during the course of the last parliament

Table 1.3 Trends in civic duty, 1987–2010

	87[+]	91	94	96	98	00	01	04	05	08	09	10
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
It's not really worth voting	3	8	9	8	8	11	11	12	12	18	17	18
People should only vote if they care who wins	21	24	21	26	26	24	23	27	23	23	23	20
It's everyone's duty to vote	76	68	68	64	65	64	65	60	64	56	58	61
Base	3413	1224	970	989	1654	2008	2795	2609	1732	990	1017	921

[+] *Source: British Election Study*

So there are some signs that voters' motivation to go to the polls was weaker in 2010 than it had been even just a decade previously. However, the changes since 1997, when turnout was still above the 70 per cent mark, have not been dramatic. It would not seem impossible for turnout to have returned to that level once more – if the election had been regarded as sufficiently exciting and important.

Context
We have suggested that one reason why voters might have regarded the 2010 election as relatively important was if they felt there was more difference between the parties than in 2001 or 2005. To assess this we asked respondents:

Now considering everything the Conservative and Labour parties stand for, would you say that there is a great difference between them, some difference, or, not much difference?[2]

As Figure 1.1 illustrates, at 23 per cent, the proportion who felt there was a great deal of difference between the two largest parties in 2010 was 10 percentage points higher than it had been five years earlier. However, the level in 2010 was still at least 10 points lower than it had been at any previous election between 1964 and 1997, and certainly was nowhere near the peak of 88 per cent seen in 1983.[3] By historical standards then, the two largest parties were still regarded as relatively indistinct from each other.[4]

Meanwhile, there was the question of trust, which had fallen to an all time low in 2009 in the immediate wake of the MPs' expenses scandal. Table 1.4 reveals that trust had been restored somewhat by the time the 2010 election had concluded. Now 20 per cent said that they "trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party" at least most of the time, four points up on 2009. At the same time, the proportion saying they "almost never" trust them fell seven points to 33 per cent. Indeed both figures were very similar to the equivalent figures in 2006, obtained long before the MPs' expenses scandal broke.

Figure 1.1 Percentage saying there is a great difference between Conservative and Labour, election years 1964–2010

■ *Great difference*
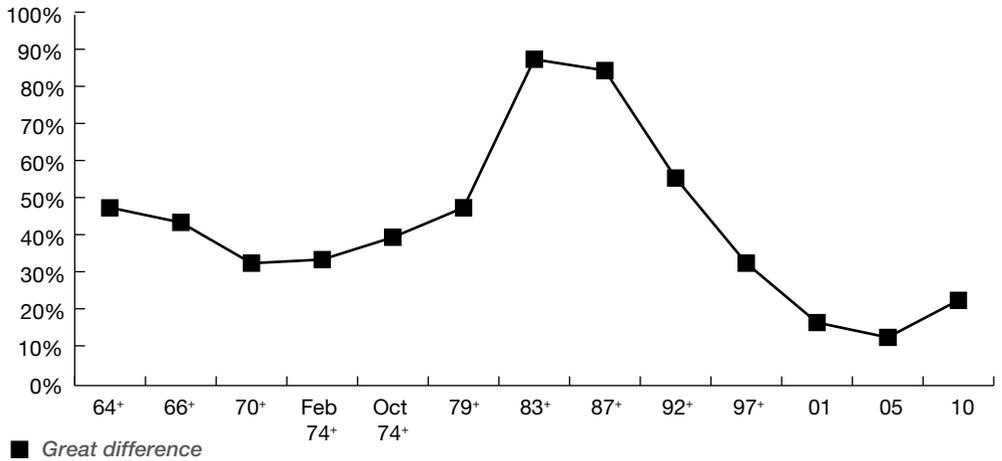
The full data on which Figure 1.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
+ Source: British Election Study

Table 1.4 Trends in political trust, 1987–2010

	87 (1)	87+ (2)	91	94	96	97 (1)	97+ (2)	98	00
Trust government	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/most of the time	37	47	33	24	22	25	33	28	16
Only some of the time	46	43	50	53	53	48	52	52	58
Almost never	11	9	14	21	23	23	12	17	24
Base	1410	3413	1445	1137	1180	1355	3615	2071	2293

	01	02	03	05	06	07	09	10
Trust government	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/most of the time	28	26	18	26	19	29	16	20
Only some of the time	50	47	49	47	46	45	42	45
Almost never	20	24	31	26	34	23	40	33
Base	1099	2287	3299	3167	1077	992	1143	1081

+ Source: British Election Study
Columns that are shaded indicate they are taken from surveys conducted shortly after a general election

However, on closer inspection of Table 1.4, we can see that levels of trust are always higher after an election than they are immediately beforehand (Curtice and Jowell, 1997). This can be seen most clearly in the two entries for 1987 and 1997. In each case the first of these readings was taken shortly before a general election was held, while the second (which, like all the post-election election readings in the table, are shown in a shaded column) was taken in the weeks immediately afterwards. Both pairs of readings reveal that the proportion that trusted governments at least "most of the time" was eight to ten points higher after the election in question than beforehand. Similar spikes in the level of trust are also to be found in the post-election readings for 2001 and 2005.

What we should then compare is the level of trust in 2010 with the position after other previous elections. It is clearly lower. In 2005 the level of trust was already below what it had been after the 1987, 1997 or 2001 elections; indeed it had fallen consistently from one election to the next. But in 2010 the proportion that trusted governments at least "most of the time" was another six points lower, while the proportion that "almost never" trusted them was seven points higher. The parties may have been thought to be a little further apart, but at the same time their policies were, thanks perhaps to the continuing fallout from the expenses scandal, also being met with a considerable air of scepticism. And importantly, those voters who say that they do not trust governments at all are noticeably less likely to vote; only 59 per cent said that they did so in 2010, compared with 75 per cent of those who trust governments at least "some of the time". So it seems that the marked increase since 2005 in the proportion who do not trust governments at all did help to depress turnout in 2010.

Trends in turnout

Against this decidedly mixed backdrop perhaps it was remarkable that turnout increased at all in 2010. Maybe the excitement of the contest brought some voters to the polls. In so far as it did, is there any evidence that the increase in turnout occurred primarily among those with a weaker motivation to vote, thereby helping to narrow the gap in levels of turnout between the 'engaged' and the 'disengaged' that had become noticeably wider in 2001 and 2005? Table 1.5 shows that in one respect at least this does appear to have happened. At 86 per cent, turnout in 2010 among those who do feel a sense of civic duty to vote was much the same as it was in 2001 and 2005. In contrast, between 2005 and 2010, turnout increased by seven points among those who feel it is not worth voting at all, and by 10 points among those who say that people should only vote if they care who wins. Even so, the level of participation among these two groups, and especially those who say that people should only vote if they care who wins, was still notably down on 1987.

31%

of people who say "it's not really worth voting" turned out to vote

Table 1.5 Turnout, by civic duty, 1987–2010

	1987[+]	Base	2001	Base	2005	Base	2010	Base
% who voted								
It's not really worth voting	36	109	24	317	24	210	31	157
People should only vote if they care who wins	75	697	49	644	50	379	60	169
It's everyone's duty to vote	92	2586	85	1798	85	1122	86	579

[+] *Source: British Election Study*

In any event, the picture of an apparent narrowing of the gap between the 'engaged' and the 'disengaged' in 2010 is not replicated when we look at the relationship between turnout and political interest. Table 1.6 suggests that, if anything, turnout increased primarily (by four points) among those with most interest in politics. Indeed, at 86 per cent turnout in this group returned to its level in 1997 (87 per cent). In contrast, turnout changed little between 2005 and 2010 among those with less interest in politics, with the consequence that the difference in turnout between those with more and less interest in politics remains much wider than it was in 1997. Meanwhile, much the same is also true of the relationship between turnout and the degree to which people feel a sense of attachment to a political party (not shown). Although turnout increased most (by eight points) among those with no party identification at all, the difference in the level of turnout between this group and those with a "very" or "fairly" strong sense of attachment was still much bigger than it had been in 1997.

Table 1.6 Political interest and electoral participation, 1997–2010

	1997[+]	Base	2001	Base	2005	Base	2010	Base
% who voted								
Interest in politics								
Great deal/quite a lot	87	939	81	1009	82	1422	86	333
Some	81	1066	72	1107	72	1484	71	369
Not much/None at all	67	901	51	1171	52	1362	53	365

[+] *Source: British Election Study*

The lessons of 2010

Despite the modest increase in turnout in 2010, there are still some question marks about the health of Britain's democracy so far as electoral participation is concerned. People's motivation to participate has continued to weaken. In addition to a long standing, continuous decline in partisanship, there now also seems to have been some decline in people's sense of civic duty. Meanwhile, following the MPs' expenses scandal, trust in politics and the political system has been eroded yet further. And although rather more voters felt there was something of a difference between the parties, and even though the election may have generated somewhat greater excitement, it is far from clear that this did a lot to close the gap between politicians and those with relatively little motivation to vote. The gulf between ruler and ruled in Britain has, it seems, still to be bridged.

Following the election campaign
The leaders' debates

Of course, turnout is just one key measure of the health of a nation's democracy. Also often regarded as important is whether or not voters are sufficiently well informed to be able to cast a meaningful vote (Bartels, 1996; Milner, 2001; Luskin *et al*., 2002). And voters would seem more likely to be adequately informed if they have read something about what the parties are saying and followed some of the campaign coverage in the media. They might also have refined their opinions through discussions about the election with friends and family.

The advent of televised leaders' debates might have been thought to have helped in that regard. Broadcast live at prime television viewing time, the degree to which the media focused their attention on the debates might have been expected to have ensured that they attracted the attention of voters too, and perhaps in particular the attention of those who otherwise take little or no interest in politics. On the other hand, with plenty of other programmes to watch, perhaps those voters with little interest in the election opted to give a 90 minute diet of undiluted politics a miss.

The 2010 column in Table 1.7 shows the proportion of our respondents who said they watched one of the leaders' debates, and demonstrates how that compares with their reported level of involvement "during the campaign in the run up to the general election" in other kinds of 'conventional' political activity – by which we mean activities that did not involve the use of email or the internet (to which we turn below). As we can see the debates certainly had a wide reach – around half (51 per cent) say they watched. However, people were no more likely to watch at least one of the debates than they were to undertake many other conventional campaign activities. Even though they have long since ceased to be the centrepieces of the campaign, just as many people watched a party election broadcast (52 per cent) as watched a leaders' debate. Equally more or less as many did something even more traditional – read a leaflet published by a party or candidate (50 per cent). Meanwhile only slightly fewer read about the election in a newspaper (42 per cent) or watched some other kind of television programme about the election (41 per cent).

Table 1.7 also shows how many people undertook the same activities (other than, of course, following a leaders' debate) in 2005. This reveals there is no sign either that the leaders' debates helped increase the overall proportion of people who engaged in some kind of conventional campaign activity. Indeed, at 80 per cent, the proportion who undertook at least one of the activities listed in the table was actually slightly less

than the 83 per cent who did so in 2005. A number of those activities proved to be somewhat less popular in 2010 than they had been in 2005, including most notably watching or listening to an election programme other than a leaders' debate.

Table 1.7 Conventional campaign activities, 2005 and 2010

	2005	2010
	%	%
Undertook at least one 'conventional' activity	**83**	**80**
Watched party election broadcast	56	52
Watched/listened to leaders' debate	n/a	51
Read party/candidate leaflet	56	50
Discussed election with friends/family in person or by phone	46	45
Read newspaper election articles	47	42
Watched/listened to (other) election programme	51	41
Contacted by party/candidate in person or on phone	15	14
Tried to persuade someone how to vote by phone	5	7
Contacted party/candidate in person/by phone/letter	4	6
Attended election meeting	2	3
Wrote to/phoned media	1	1
Base	*3167*	*1081*

n/a = not asked

However, although the leaders' debates may not have increased the proportion who did something conventional to follow the campaign, perhaps they were particularly successful at reaching out to the politically uninterested and less engaged section of the electorate? To assess this Table 1.8 shows the proportion of those with different levels of political interest that watched one of the debates and how that pattern compares with following the election campaign in other ways. The analysis fails to support our speculation. Only around a quarter (26 per cent) of those with little or no interest in politics watched a leaders' debate, while three-quarters (74 per cent) of those with at least "quite a lot" of interest did so. Indeed, watching the debates seems, if anything, to have been particularly the preserve of the politically interested; in the case of the other ways of following the campaign shown in the table, the difference between the politically interested and uninterested in their reported level of involvement was consistently less than it was for the debates. If we bear in mind also that no less than 96 per cent of those who watched a leaders' debate also reported undertaking at least one of the other activities listed in Table 1.8, it seems safe to conclude that the leaders' debates proved primarily to be yet another way in which

Watching the debates seems, if anything, to have been particularly the preserve of the politically interested

those who were already inclined to follow or even become involved in the election campaign opted to pursue their interest.

Table 1.8 How people followed the 2010 election campaign, by political interest

| | Degree of political interest | | |
	Great deal/ quite a lot	Some	Not much/ none at all
	%	%	%
Watched/listened to leaders' debate	74	55	26
Read party/candidate leaflet	68	50	30
Watched party election broadcast	68	50	27
Read newspaper election articles	64	44	21
Watched/listened to other election programme	58	44	22
Base	333	369	365

Using the internet
But if the leaders' debates did not succeed in reaching out to a wider, more politically disengaged section of the electorate, perhaps the internet did? As we noted earlier, one of the hopes set out for the internet was that it might help to reach out to groups conventionally disengaged from British politics because it would be easier for people to get involved. If so, perhaps that potential was finally realised in 2010 now that usage has exploded. On the other hand perhaps those who used the internet to follow the campaign proved largely to be much the same kind of people who get involved in conventional activity (Norris, 2006; Norris and Curtice, 2008).

To ascertain which of these perspectives is correct we first of all asked our respondents about their involvement in various 'digital' election campaign activities, such as looking at websites, reading a blog or tweet, and using email or the internet to contact parties, candidates, the media or friends and family about election issues (see Table 1.9). We had also asked much the same question in 2005. The comparison reveals that far more used the internet to follow or get involved in the 2010 election campaign than did so five years previously. Overall, nearly one in three people (31 per cent) undertook one of the 'digital' activities in the table compared with one in eight (13 per cent) in 2005.[5] In part this reflects the fact that more people had access to the internet in their own home than was the case five years previously; that proportion now stands at 78 per cent, an increase of 16 percentage points. But at the same time, those with access to the internet were nearly twice as likely to use it to follow or get involved in the campaign in 2010 compared with 2005. Two in five (40 per cent) home internet users undertook a digital campaign activity compared with just over one in five (21 per cent) in 2005.

That of course still leaves use of the internet to follow the election campaign trailing a long way behind the more conventional activities we detailed in Table 1.7. However, the balance of activities undertaken digitally appears to be different from those

undertaken conventionally. In line with some of the claims that have been made on behalf of the medium, people were more likely to use digital technology to interact with others rather than be the passive recipients of information; the single most popular activity for which the internet and email were used was to discuss the election with family and friends. Nearly one in five (18 per cent) of all voters, or nearly one on four (24 per cent) of those with access to the internet at home, used the internet in that way.

Table 1.9 Digital campaign activities, 2005 and 2010

	2005	2010
	%	%
Undertook at least one 'digital' activity	**13**	**31**
Discussed election with family/friends	7	18
Looked at non-party website for election information	6	14
Looked at party/candidate website	6	13
Read blog/twitter about election	1	7
Contacted by party/candidate	1	6
Tried to persuade someone how to vote	1	3
Contacted a party/candidate	1	2
Contacted media	*	1
Base	*3167*	*1081*

* Less than 0.5 per cent

So the 2010 election saw the internet begin to become part of the regular fabric of the way in which voters follow and become involved in an election campaign. But is there any evidence that the internet is helping politicians to reach the less politically interested in a manner that we have already seen more conventional forms of campaign activity fail to do?

Table 1.10 shows how far involvement in both 2005 and 2010 in any form of conventional and any form of digital campaign activity varied according to people's level of political interest. In the case of digital activities our proportions are based only on those with access to the internet at home. The results suggest that, if anything, those less interested in politics are relatively less likely to get involved in a digital activity than a conventional one, and that this was even more clearly the case in 2010 than in 2005. For example, those with "some" interest in politics were almost as likely (in both 2005 and 2010) to have been involved in at least one conventional activity as were those with at least "quite a lot" of interest. In contrast the most politically interested were almost twice as likely as those who only have "some" interest to have engaged in at least one digital activity; in 2010, for instance, the relevant figures are 65 per cent and 36 per cent respectively. Meanwhile, at 31 percentage points, the increase between 2005 and 2010 in the proportion of the politically interested engaging in a digital activity was far greater than the equivalent 12 point increase among those with little or no interest in politics.[6]

Table 1.10 Involvement in conventional and digital campaign activity, by political interest, 2005 and 2010[7]

	Degree of political interest		
% involved in any…	Great deal/ quite a lot	Some	Not much/ none at all
2005			
…conventional activity	94	89	64
…digital activity	34	17	9
2010			
…conventional activity	94	89	62
…digital activity	65	36	21

The question on "digital activity" is only asked of those who use the internet for their work or for any other reason

Political interest is, of course, far from being the only factor that influences whether people use the internet to follow or get involved in an election campaign. Age also matters. Exactly half of those under 35 with access to the internet at home used the internet for that purpose compared with only around a third (34 per cent) of those who were 35 or older, whereas younger people were just as likely as their elders to undertake at least one conventional activity. But that does not mean the internet is helping to engage a generation that might otherwise be lost politically. Turnout continued to be particularly low in 2010 among younger people – only 47 per cent of those under 35 voted, far lower than the 73 per cent who did so in 1997.[8] Rather, the internet is a medium that is enabling both younger and older voters who already have a strong motivation to become involved in politics to pursue that interest further. No less than 99 per cent of those who engaged in any digital political activity in 2010 also undertook at least one conventional activity.[9] Rather than helping to reduce inequalities in participation the advent of the internet is, so far at least, serving, if anything, to widen them.

We perhaps should not be surprised at this. Leaflets come through people's doors uninvited and may secure at least a glance. A party election broadcast may appear just before a favourite programme is about to start. A newspaper may be bought for its sports coverage, but then its political front page catches the reader's eye. In contrast, much of what people see and read via the internet is what they themselves have sought out. Consequently, internet campaigning is less likely than more conventional communications to secure the attention and involvement of those for whom politics is not a passion.

Conclusions

The 2010 election has secured its place in history because of what happened immediately thereafter – the formation of Britain's first coalition government since 1945. There has been much speculation about how well this arrangement would work and its

possible consequences for the future of British politics (Bogdanor, 2011). As a result, perhaps, relatively little attention has been paid to the question of how many people and who participated in the election in the first place.

Our evidence suggests the question of who participates in British elections remains a pressing one. Although overall turnout in 2010 was four points higher than in 2005, by long-term historical standards at least, once again an awful lot of people failed to cast a ballot for any of the options before them – even though the election was clearly more closely contested than any since 1992. Although popular, the introduction of leaders' debates did not prove to be an effective way of reaching out to the uninterested, while increasing use of the internet as a way of following and participating in politics has done little to ensure that Britain's politicians reach out to all voters rather than just those with a mind to listen.

It thus perhaps should not come as much of a surprise that in the event the politically uninterested again stayed at home in particularly large numbers. Meanwhile, beneath the electoral surface there are signs that the notion that people have a duty to vote is being eroded while trust in politicians has continued to be worn away. How Britain is governed may now have changed, but the by now all too familiar gulf between politicians and the electorate remains.

Notes

1. The *direction* of someone's party identification is ascertained via a sequence of questions as follows. First, all respondents are asked:

   Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?

   Those who do not name a party in response are then asked:

   Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?

   Those who still do not name a party are then asked:

   If there were a general election tomorrow, which political party do you think you would be most likely to support?

   The *strength* of party identification as reported in Table 1.2 is then ascertained by asking all respondents who named a party in response to any of the above three questions:

   Would you call yourself very strong (party), fairly strong, or not very strong?

   where 'party' refers to the name of the party with which the respondent identifies.

   The row labelled 'none' in that table refers to those who did not name a party in response to any of the first three questions above.

2. Between 1964 and October 1974 the question read, "Considering everything the parties stand for would you say there is a good deal of difference between them, some difference or not much difference?"

3. The 1983 figure comes from that year's British Election Study, as quoted in Crewe *et al*. (1995).

4. There also seems to be little doubt that voters were more likely to be expecting a close result in 2010. A poll conducted by Populus just before polling day found that as many as 47 per cent thought the result would be a 'hung' parliament in which no single party won an overall majority (Populus, 2010). In 2005 the same company's eve of poll survey reported that only five per cent were anticipating a hung parliament (Populus, 2005).

5. We would note that although our two sets of questions are worded very differently, this estimate of the degree to which people used the internet to follow the campaign is very similar to the 33 per cent figure reported by Gibson *et al*. (2010), thereby lending weight to the apparent robustness of our figure.

6. It might be thought this picture is a result of the fact that our list of digital activities contains a somewhat different mix of activities than our list of conventional activities. Perhaps the activities in our digital list are ones that appeal more to the politically interested irrespective of the medium via which they take place? However, much the same result is obtained if we look specifically at discussion about the election with family and friends, a relatively popular activity that appears on both lists. Using the internet to conduct such a discussion is close to being the exclusive preserve of the politically interested. As many as 41 per cent of those with at least "quite a lot" of interest in politics used the internet in that way compared with just 17 per cent of those with "some" interest and 13 per cent of those with little or no interest at all. In contrast, while those with "some interest" (41 per cent) are less likely than those with at least "quite a lot" of interest (65 per cent) to discuss the election by conventional means, they are still clearly more likely to do so than those with little or no interest at all (24 per cent).

7. Bases for Table 1.10 are as follows:

	Great deal/ quite a lot	Some	Not much/ none at all
2005			
conventional activity	1044	1104	1019
digital activity	681	705	465
2010			
conventional activity	333	369	365
digital activity	295	376	239

8. As the following table illustrates, the difference in turnout between those aged less than 35 years and those 65 years and over remained as large as it was in 2005 – and much bigger than it was in 1997.

% voted	1997[+]	*Base*	2001	*Base*	2005	*Base*	2010	*Base*
Age group								
18–34	73	770	50	793	49	957	47	236
35–64	85	1403	71	1734	74	2313	74	555
65[+]	88	508	82	755	85	996	88	286

[+] *Source: British Election Study*

9. Equally, as many as 78 per cent of those who used the internet to discuss the election also discussed the election either face to face or on the phone. In contrast only 41 per cent of home internet users who did not use the internet to discuss the election did discuss the election via more conventional means.

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Appendix

The data on which Figure 1.1 is based are shown below. The figure simply shows the proportion saying "great difference", while the table gives the relevant statistics for all responses.

Table A.1 Perceived difference between the parties, 1964–2010

	64[+]	66[+]	70[+]	Feb 74[+]	Oct 74[+]	79[+]	83[+]	87[+]	92[+]	97	01	05	10
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Great difference	48	44	33	34	40	48	88	85	56	33	17	13	23
Some	25	27	28	30	30	30	10	11	32	43	39	43	43
Not much	27	29	39	36	30	22	7	5	12	24	44	44	34
Base	*1699*	*1804*	*1780*	*2391*	*2332*	*1826*	*3893*	*3776*	*1794*	*2836*	*1076*	*1049*	*1035*

[+] *Source: British Election Study. Figures for 1964–1992 as quoted in Crewe et al. (1995). Note that exceptionally in this table, those who said "Don't know" or "Refused" to answer the question have been excluded from the base*