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## Apolitical Apathy Vs. Protest Voting

Voter turnout has increased in recent elections, but the issue of non-voting remains a prominent concern. According to van Deth's (2001) model of political participation, almost every activity by a citizen can somehow be understood as a form of engagement in politics. However, activities such as: party membership, contacting politicians, signing petitions, demonstrations, blocking streets, reading information and volunteering amongst others do not necessarily lead to the problem of non-voting being reduced. The issue of non-voting can be due to protest voting where individuals vote in order to demonstrate their dissatisfaction either to their 'real' party or to the government of the day. Protest votes are sometimes cast for a leading opponent or for a single-issue minority party and voters sometimes spoil their ballots (Myatt, 2015). Alternatively, apolitical apathy can also lead to individuals not voting due to feelings of disinterest towards politics and political activities. These feelings can be categorised as the indifference of an individual and a lack of interest in participating in political activities (Harder and Krosnick, 2008). The paradox of voting theory analysed by Downs (1957) suggests that many voters believe that the cost of voting does not outweigh the benefit and therefore choose not to vote which contributes to the issue of non-voting which can be considered an aspect of apolitical apathy. This essay will seek to examine the effects of both protest voting and apolitical apathy and prove that it is significantly the latter that results in non-voting.

The contemporary problem of non-voting in British politics can be contemplated as diminishing since evidence proves from general elections, within the United Kingdom (UK), that voter turnout has increased as it has risen in every general election since a sharp fall around the beginning of the millennium (Parliament. House of Commons, 2017). This rise in voter turnout may be due to the opportunities of new technologies widening the scope and modes of participation (van Deth, 2001). The internet is a two-way communication system allowing those working in the political sphere such as councillors, MPs and peers to directly interact with citizens and vice versa whereas during the use of the printing press or traditional broadcast media contact was largely one-way. Additionally, the internet and other forms of modern technology allows citizens to sign political petitions online with the possibility of them being debated in Parliament, contribute to online donations, join social media campaigns such as the Me Too movement which spread virally in October 2017 as a hashtag on social media in an attempt to demonstrate the widespread prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, especially in the workplace (Carlsen et al, 2018). People can also contact public officials and other like-minded citizens to discuss, argue and converse current issues, with the potential of the message reaching millions of people increasing political participation. Activists are often able to deliberate with people that they would not usually meet via this medium.

Arguably it can be said that non-voting is not a critical issue as through the means of modern technology there has been a rise in political participation. Yet this does not necessarily correlate to an increase in voter turnout. The online medium provides a platform for a number of ordinary people however it has been suggested that online political behaviour fails to achieve conventional standards of significance in the offline participation model (Best and Krueger, 2005). It should be questioned how effective political participation through 'liking' or 'sharing' a post is and how often this leads to a vote. This form of participation can be considered low cost; as long as one has an internet connection, they are able to spread political information.

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This information is not always truthful and is often biased and created to be shared and influence others opinions. From this it can also be inferred that citizens may simply end up to talking to like-minded people who have similar ideological views or support the same party. While an increase in political participation can be treated as a positive it may not directly affect voter turnout.

A substantial cause of non-voting is protest voting which can take a variety of forms such as: blank ballots with no markings on them, null ballots where votes are cast incorrectly and cannot be accepted and spoiled ballots that have been defaced, deformed or otherwise marked in a way that makes the ballot ineligible (Driscoll and Nelson, 2014). These particular forms of protest voting exacerbate the issue of non-voting as evidence indicates that in the 2015 general election, the UK total of rejected or spoilt votes was 97,870 (Vote or Vote None, 2017). If these votes were valid and not dismissed as spoilt ballots or 'voter's mistakes' then they would have the potential of possibly changing the results of the election and significantly making a difference. These type of protest votes have a consequence for official statistics as these invalid votes cannot be counted yet in a sense they cannot be classed as non-voting either because voters have shown that they are passionate about an issue causing them to turn up to vote and spoil ballots.

Another form of protest voting is where citizens will vote for a fringe or less preferred candidate or party hoping to indicate a sense of frustration to the party they would typically vote for. Alternatively, the voter may adopt a desire to constrain the expected winner. This may arise where the voter wishes to humble a party that is poised to win an overwhelming margin (Franklin, Niemi and Whitten, 1994 pg. 552). However, this type of protest vote can be fairly undistinguishable as if a minor party option is available and taken, then the intent of protest voters is further compromised as the message they are sending is both unclear and likely to siphon votes from their true party of preference (Damore, Waters and Bowler, 2012). This specific type of vote does not worsen the issue of non-voting directly as voters are still participating by voting due to a rational choice nonetheless this action does not reflect their true attitude to politics but rather show a dissatisfaction for a party or candidate in that particular election.

Furthermore, abstention can be regarded as a form of protest when it is not the result of apathy naturally intensifying the concern of non-voting. This action may show disillusionment with the system itself as citizens may choose to abstain due to a feeling of alienation from politics as a whole if they feel that the political system is not serving their interests or is not aligned with their values (Shryane, Fieldhouse and Pickles, 2006). Politically dissatisfied voters may temporarily withdraw their support from their preferred candidate or party even if that party has a good chance of winning, in the hope that this signal of dissatisfaction will lead to downstream improvements in that candidate's or party's performance (Kselman and Niou, 2011). Actively spoiling or defacing ballots in order to 'send a message' to a party or candidate may be more effective than simply abstaining that may be mistaken for apathy and impacts the non-voting controversy. The concept of anarchism which favours statelessness and opposition to hierarchy and rejects representative democracy in favour of direct participation in decision-making has historically called for abstention as a form of protest. Unlike the other forms of protest voting, abstention, to some extent, can negatively influence the matter of non-voting to a substantial extent.

Protest voting carries a common theme of a voter feeling disappointed however protest voting is

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not in itself an apathetic behaviour; it assumes the configuration of a complete electoral act performed as an expression of disaffection against the established parties and/or those for whom they usually voted (Kang, 2004). Although this act can be considered as a rational, politically informed choice, it still effects the issue of non-voting. In order to try and overcome this problem, a small number of countries have attempted to introduce compulsory voting. For example, in Brazil it is compulsory for literate citizens between 18 and 70 years old to vote as they believe it is the citizen's duty and responsibility to vote (Power, 2009). On the one hand, this reduces the problem of non-voting as it has been made compulsory but on the other hand, those who are determined to either abstain or protest will continue to do so.

Unlike some forms of protest voting where voters still turn out to vote and non-voting isn't affected as directly as abstaining, apolitical apathy can have a larger effect on this topic. Apathy can lead to a low voter turnout and stagnation in a state's government (Merrifield, 1993). Similar to protest voting, apolitical apathy can take form in a numerous amount of ways. Firstly, the paradox of voting, suggested by Downs (1957), explains one theory why people refuse to vote as for many people the cost of voting in the form of transport and time is too valuable compared to the benefit, they would potentially receive from voting which is perceived as very low. These voters often feel that their one vote wouldn't have much influence. This also relates to chequebook voting when people will only vote if they feel that they will benefit from it which can also possibly lead to apathy as if voters don't feel that they are likely to benefit personally from voting they will not participate.

Additionally, Downs suggested that in democracies the aggregate distribution of political opinion forms a bell-shaped curve, with most voters possessing moderate opinions; he argued that that this fact forces political parties in democracies to adopt centrist positions (Rogers, 1959) enforcing the opinion that parties often direct their policies to the median voter. The theory of the median voter states that a majority rule voting system will select the outcome most preferred by the median voter (Holcombe, 2006). From this it can be inferred that, in theory if policies are adapted and geared towards the mass population then there should be no question of non-voting as the majority of citizens will agree with the objectives of the planned policies presented by parties. However, in reality this theory is broadly one-dimensional as often voters make their decision on who to vote for based on several policies rather than just the one. Moreover, for those who are apolitically apathetic and do not care about voting, whether or not policies are tailored towards them will not make a difference therefore continuing to aggravate the issue of non-voting.

Apolitical apathy significantly fluctuates in certain groups, for instance young people and ethnic minority groups are generally considered to often refrain from voting. A study conducted by Franklin (2004) analyses electoral trends and concluded that age in Britain as in many other countries is a significant predictor of turnout. There is evidence to support this as in the General Election of 2001, only 39% of eligible 18-24 year olds voted and in the following election this fell even lower to 37% (Electoral Commission, 2005). This trend may be simply due to the reason that young people feel disconnected and uninterested in politics or there may be a fault with the education system in place which isn't providing enough knowledge for school leavers. Many believe that within the current education system and curriculum in place schools are not effective at communicating current political and economic affairs (Morris, 2017). In the long run, this will significantly affect the issue of non-voting as if the current generation are uninterested in politics now, as they grow older it will become difficult to engage them and for them to become unapathetic. Although this is concerning, turnout within this group increased to 44% in 2010

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(Ipsos MORI, 2010) which was largely due to the university tuition fees campaign motivating a lot of young people to politically participate. This further proves the theory of chequebook voting where voters will only participate when they will receive some benefit personally from voting which can be seen in this case specifically.

The leadership effect can impact the decision of a voter as arguably leaders are the face of election campaigns especially since the development of mass media. This has resulted in a suggestion that many voters may only vote if they like the party leaders. It has been argued that parliamentary elections in the UK have become 'presidentialised' (Bean and Mughan, 2014). Even though theoretically in the UK, citizens vote for parties who campaign for seats, in reality it is claimed that occasionally voters would cast their vote for whichever party leader they would most prefer to see as prime minister. Alternatively, if voters do not find party leaders charismatic, motivating and relatable it may cause them to become apathetic making the issue of non-voting worse. An example of this can be seen during the time Tony Blair was prime minister as he was constantly described as 'charismatic' and 'approachable' (Brown, 2010) which may have resulted in those who are typically non-voters to vote as they found Blair's personality captivating. There is a possibility that the leadership effect could potentially reduce apolitical apathy amongst some and the issue of non-voting.

Similarly, to young people, ethnic minorities have often felt disconnected from politics and thus not voted in elections. Votes from ethnic minorities can cause a consequential effect for non-voting and may be due to apathy. On the one hand, a reason why this group of people don't frequently vote may be simply because English is not their first language and they can't understand how to vote. Additionally, minorities may not understand the system which prevents them from voting. Ethnic minorities may also feel that policies don't impact them and feel neglected by politicians (Wigmore, 2014) causing them to not vote. Minorities may also feel anxious about giving details of their status as it might result in a loss of benefit, raise debt problems and they may face immigration questions (Wigmore, 2014). This may not be directly due to apathy but considerably impacts non-voting. However, ethnic minorities may choose to not vote because they are apathetic and do not care about voting as it doesn't impact their home country. As ethnic minorities make up a significant amount of the population, without their votes, the issue of non-voting continues to deteriorate.

In conclusion, when analysing the effects of both protest voting and apolitical apathy on the political sphere, and answering the question, 'is the issue of non-voting a matter of political protest or apolitical apathy?' it is significantly apolitical apathy that causes non-voting. When comparing the two aspects, it is clear to see that in many forms of political voting, citizens are still technically casting a vote. Whereas with apolitical apathy, people do not care about the political activities occurring in their country and will simply not vote at all causing the issue of non-voting to become even weaker. Political apathy occurs within a number of groups, that either believe their vote won't count or make any difference, who collectively make up a large amount of the population and have the potential to change certain results and reduce the problem of non-voting. Countries who introduced mandatory voting have attempted to tackle this problem of apathy and disinterest. For example, both Belgium and Turkey have political participation rates over 80% (Desilver, 2018). While some forms of protest voting such as spoiling and defacing ballots and blank ballots also make the problem of non-voting worse, it is significant to note that several forms of protest voting mean that a vote is still cast by a citizen therefore not effecting non-voting directly. From this it can be deduced that apolitical apathy causes the issue of non-voting to worsen to a larger extent than protest voting does.

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