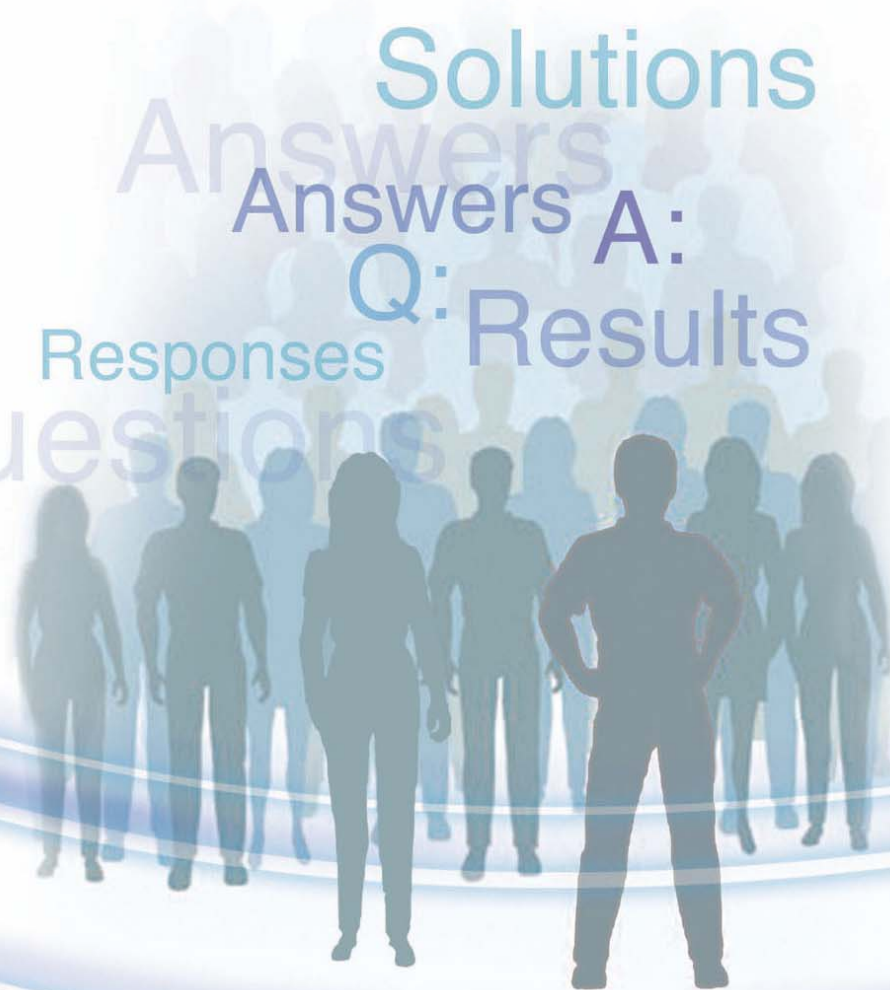


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**Explaining low turnout in the  
2001 General Election**

**Nick Sparrow**

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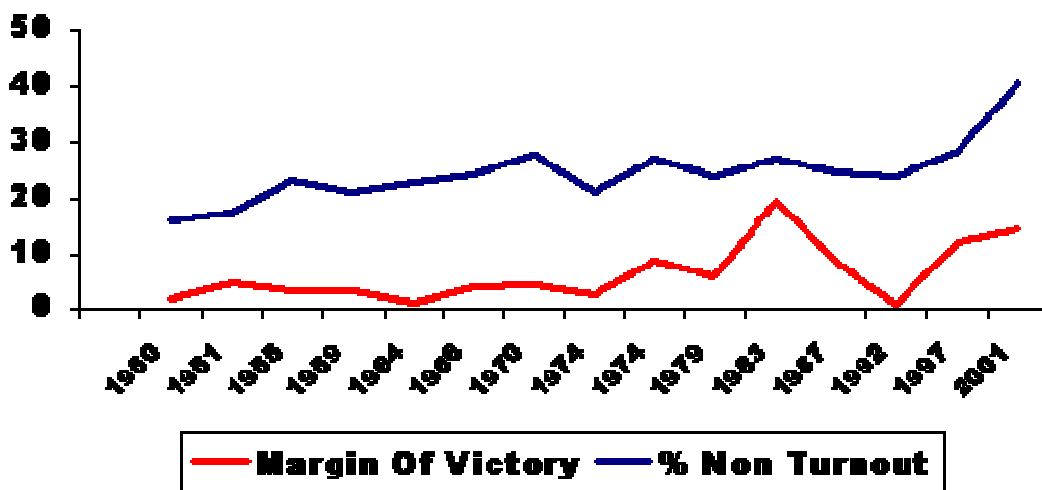
**The following article was written by Nick Sparrow, Managing Director, and was published in The Guardian on 6th November, 2001.**

Turnout at the 2001 election hit an all time low. If the trend continues it won't be long before fewer than half the electorate bothers to vote in general elections. Politicians are quite right to be concerned and to ask for explanations.

A survey by the Independent Television Commission suggested that a quarter of all those eligible to vote had ignored TV coverage of the election altogether, compared to just 6% in the 1997 election campaign. The ITC survey found 40% had switched channels during the 2001 campaign in order to avoid election news, 70% said they had little or no interest in it. The tempting explanation is to blame broadcasters for failing to engage the audience with interesting election programmes. The BBC has begun a three-month review to "come up with fresh ideas to ensure the way we report politics remains relevant and engaging in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century".

Another poll apparently confounds the view that voters have become more apathetic. An Electoral Commission survey conducted during the summer suggested that 58% were very or fairly interested in the election, 6% higher than in 1997! It goes on to suggest that 66% of non voters would have been more likely to vote if they could have done so by phone and 51% would have voted by post if they had known it was possible to do so and got themselves organised. A neat research outcome for the Commission, whose statutory duties include "participation in pilot schemes for innovative electoral procedures".

So the programme makers need to sharpen up their act, and the Electoral Commission should spend money on some exciting new pilot schemes aimed at making it easier for people to vote. But a closer reading of the data would point us in another direction altogether.



The chart shows the margin of victory predicted by the final polls in each general election since 1950 together with the proportion of all voters who did not bother to turn out in those elections. There is a correlation between the two. Indeed the statistics suggest that a large proportion of the variation in turnout is potentially explained by the margin of victory predicted by the final polls. Polls may be viewed with suspicion but feed public opinion. If people perceive that the result of any election is a foregone conclusion, why bother to go and

vote? If the election looks to be tight then more people will reason that their vote may be important.

Of course polls are not the only factor determining turnout. In the run-up to the 2001 election many voters questioned in focus groups felt disillusioned that more had not been achieved under Labour but were nevertheless sure the Conservatives could do no better. Furthermore, few could think of any big issues on which the two main parties offered radically different and attractive solutions. The Tory campaign on the Euro failed on the first criteria; it was never as important to voters as it was to Tory politicians. On tax Tory proposals lacked credibility. For many voters there was little to choose between the parties and little to suggest that their vote would make a jot of difference to the outcome. This interpretation suggests that programme makers were fighting a losing battle, to make a dreary campaign seem exciting and the outcome uncertain.

Obviously, some people make a decision not to vote in an election because they are not interested in politics, can't see the outcome will make any difference to their everyday lives and therefore can't be bothered. Only about 1 in 6 people approached by pollsters agree to be interviewed and the indications are that those who are interested in politics are most likely to vote in elections and are also more likely to agree to participate in polls on the subject. The Electoral Commission results were based on re-interviews with people previously asked political questions at the start of the campaign. Only 20% of them said they hadn't been to vote, half the proportion that ought to have been found. The technical details explain that there were some differences between the original sample and those they managed to get back to. In particular re-interviews were with people "more likely to say that they are interested in politics and always vote at general elections". It seems some who found the subject of the original interview boring were not going to get caught twice.

Nevertheless the results from the 208 non-voters re-interviewed after the election have been reported widely. The survey found that a fifth of non-voters couldn't get to the polling station because it was "too inconvenient", 16% were "away", 15% claimed they were not registered and 11% hadn't received a polling card. According to this research voter apathy is the least important reason for not voting; only 10% of the Electoral Commission sample of non-voters replied that the reason they hadn't voted was because they were "not interested". Music to those eager to spend lots of taxpayers' money on "schemes for innovative electoral procedures". But the real answer lies with the people the Electoral Commission didn't interview, not with those who decided to participate in the poll. It seems highly likely that many who decided not to vote because they couldn't be bothered also refused to answer the pollsters questions for the same reason. In short voter apathy should have come top of the list by a country mile, not bottom.

These investigations are likely to lead us all in the wrong direction. Politicians will have to look a lot closer to home to work out why so many could not be bothered to vote. The apathy of focus group respondents suggests that low turnout in 2001 was a consequence of unfulfilled promises from Labour on the big issues they promised to tackle coupled with a feeling that there was no alternative.

**Nick Sparrow is managing director of ICM Research. He has been conducting political opinion polls for The Guardian and other media organisations since 1984 and is an industry acknowledged expert on political opinion research. He won the Market Research Society Silver Medal for his work on the development of accurate opinion research, and was pollster for the Conservative Party from 1996 to 2003.**

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