Power to the People Through ‘Real Power and True Elections’?
The Power Report and Revitalising British Democracy

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Abstract:
In common with many western democracies, the UK seems to face a crisis in public political participation. Turnout has fallen dramatically, particularly in recent general elections, faith in the political system is stretched, and citizens feel they are not consulted nor their views taken seriously by government. The search is on for a way out of the potential crisis. A recent major report by the Rowntree-funded Power Commission both offers a diagnosis of the problem of political participation in modern Britain, and suggests a strategy to remedy it. In this paper, we critically assess some of the Commission’s major analyses and recommendations.
A political science Rip Van Winkle, drowsily reading his brand new copy of *The Civic Culture* in 1963, might have been forgiven for taking a sanguine view of the state of British politics. Almond and Verba (1963, 315) had demonstrated that the national political culture was deferential but civic. Political activity was high by international standards. Around 79% of the electorate had voted at the last general election in 1959. There was widespread public support for, and even pride in, the political system. Most felt that, on the whole, government was efficient, effective, and trustworthy. The first results from the initial (1964) British Election Study’s (BES) pre-election survey (our hero had talked to the research team the previous week) indicated that three-quarters of the adult population identified fairly or very strongly with a political party: the vast majority of them identified with either Labour or the Conservatives. All is well, he might reflect dreamily as he slipped into a deep sleep.

Roused from his slumbers in 2005, he would have been in for shock. Compared to the exemplar of civic culture in which he had fallen asleep, 21st century Britain seems a radically different place. Electoral participation has declined markedly, down to just 61% in 2005, and much lower again in local elections. The latest data from the 2005 BES showed that party identification had weakened substantially: only 45% claimed to be fairly or very strong party identifiers. Furthermore, around 60% of these latest BES respondents felt that elections did not change anything. Nor did they think much of their elected representatives. When asked to indicate, on a 10-point scale, how trustworthy they thought politicians were, over 80% scored politicians at or below the middle point of the scale. And only around 1 in 5 of them expected the major parties to keep their election promises. As he rubs the sleep from his eyes, Professor Van Winkle might be forgiven for asking ‘What has gone wrong?’.

A few letters to colleagues in other countries (perhaps a younger member of his department might help by explaining e-mail to him) confirms that whatever political malaise has affected Britain is also being felt throughout the developed world: falling participation in elections, growing dissatisfaction with conventional party politics, declining trust in governments. But Prof Van Winkle is an optimistic soul. From initial despair (‘what happened?’) he turns to resolution (‘what can we do to rectify things?’). He has hit, not surprisingly, on one of the key political questions of the age: can public disenchantment with, and disengagement from, national politics be explained and (more importantly) reversed? In search of ideas, he starts to read…

Of course, Prof. Van Winkle is not alone. The diagnosis of and suggested cures for contemporary political malaise is a major growth industry. A recent contribution to the debate is provided by the report of the Power Commission (hereinafter, Power), published in early 2006 (Power Commission, 2006). Power was set up by the charitable Joseph Rowntree Trust in 2004 as part of its centenary activities. Chaired by the prominent barrister and Life Peer Helena Kennedy QC, its remit was both to understand why disengagement from formal politics had grown in Britain, and to offer remedies. Both aspects are discussed in Power’s final report (Power Commission, 2006). In this paper, we critically review Power’s proposals, with particular emphasis on their suggestions regarding the electoral process.\footnote{Action research? The Power Commission in operation}
Reflecting concerns that average citizens were increasingly alienated from conventional politics, Power sought to act in ways which both challenged and offered alternatives to political ‘business as usual’. The (originally) 10 Commissioners themselves came from a relatively broad spectrum compared to other, similar, bodies. This was not (just) a colloquium of ‘the usual suspects’. The Commissioners came from the left (Kennedy herself) and the right (her deputy, Ferdinand Mount, was an adviser to Mrs Thatcher) of politics, and from the unaligned. The gender balance was 50:50. Four of the 10 Commissioners were young adults, reflecting concerns over youth participation in politics: one of the four was a Radio 1 DJ, and another was a 21-year old sports coach from a community sports project who was selected to serve on the Commission after he responded to its national appeal for members.

In its working too, Power tried to be an exemplar of inclusive practice. In addition to evidence gathered from expert witnesses, the academic literature and from a specially commissioned survey, the Commission also held seven public hearings throughout the country and invited comments and input from the general public. Not only that, but over 400 ‘democracy dinners’ (‘self-organised’ events at which members of the public were invited to discuss ‘key questions about political participation’) were held across the UK. A ‘Citizen Panel’ of thirty randomly chosen individuals met regularly in Newcastle. And in Harrow, Power was involved in an innovative exercise which tried to include local citizens in the process of setting the local authority budget.

Based on its readings, meetings, evidence and discussions, Power offered a diagnosis of the causes of public disengagement from conventional politics, and a series of recommendations to remedy the problem. Its core concerns were set out in the Executive Summary as (p.15):

The Commission … believes it is vital to re-engage the British people with formal democracy if the following are to be avoided:

- the weakening of the mandate and legitimacy for elected governments – whichever party is in power – because of plummeting turnout;
- the further weakening of political equality because whole sections of the community feel estranged from politics;
- the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors;
- the weakening of effective recruitment into politics;
- the rise of undemocratic political forces;
- the rise of ‘quiet authoritarianism’ within government.

To achieve those ends, it identified three necessary changes to British political life (listed below) and to achieve those ends made 30 recommendations, in three groups identified as ‘Rebalancing power’, ‘Real parties and true elections’ and ‘Downloading power’. In the next section, we discuss Power’s diagnosis, and in the following we focus on its second set of proposed remedies.

**Diagnosing the problem**

That there is, indeed, a problem to address is clear. The observations which struck our re-awakened Professor Van Winkle are testament to that. But what accounts for these trends? Power correctly placed considerable importance on developing the correct diagnosis of the problem, since the diagnosis leads to the appropriate cure. Power offers a myth, some red herrings, and what they see as the core of the issue.
The major myth is that we are riding a wave of growing apathy. According to this view, citizens no longer care, are bored, have other things to do, see politics as irrelevant to their lives, and so on. Not so, argues Power. And they are (broadly) right. Since the early 1970s, the BES has repeatedly asked voters how interested they are in politics. And since the 1960s, it has asked how many are interested in the outcome of the election. But neither time series shows any secular trend: levels of interest in conventional politics have not changed markedly in four decades (Clarke et al., 2004, 284ff). Furthermore, studies of civic activism report significant and continuing levels of public involvement: people, both in the UK and elsewhere, are still willing to act in order to influence decisions made in their society (Pattie et al., 2004; Verba et al., 1995). Since 1997, for instance, the United Kingdom has seen large public campaigns and mass demonstrations (some of the largest ever seen in the country) over the government’s rural policy (with much activity sponsored by the Countryside Alliance) and over its policy towards Iraq (the anti-war demonstrations in 2003 brought millions onto the street), not to mention events such as Live 8, and campaigns such as ‘Make Poverty History’ (aimed at influencing government policy on development and third world debt). Electoral participation has fallen dramatically in the last ten years, long-term support for the main parties has weakened, and trust in politicians has fallen, but there is no sign that people have become apolitical in the wider sense.

What of Power’s red herrings? In addition to the widespread apathy argument outlined above, Power identifies five further misleading diagnoses of disengagement (Power, 2006, 17):

- the public is affluent and content, and hence has no reason to register protests;
- the quality and trustworthiness of politicians has declined;
- recent elections have not been competitive, reducing the incentive to turn out;
- the news media are too negative, encouraging cynicism; and
- citizens do not have enough time for participation.

To what extent is each of these really a red herring? Several clearly are. The argument of widespread public contentment sits uneasily with clear survey evidence of public dissatisfaction. People may, on the whole, be better off than in the past, but that has not made them any happier (Layard, 2006). And, Power argues (p. 61), if contentment is the root of the problem, why do similar trends of disengagement appear in other polities with weaker recent records of economic growth and affluence than the UK, and why do surveys repeatedly reveal participation highest among the most affluent groups in society? Clearly, contentment alone cannot account for the problem.

Furthermore, it is not clear that the quality of elected politicians has declined from some putative golden age. MPs are more professional than in the past. Their constituency postbags have grown. They are more involved in the workings of the House of Commons (through select committees and so on), than many of their predecessors. And, despite claims to the contrary, they have not declined from robust individualists to sheep, easily herded by their whips: backbench MPs now are at least as rebellious as MPs ever were – indeed, in important ways, they are more so (Cowley, 2005).
Similarly, claims about the negativity of the media, and about growing time pressures on citizens, are rejected. For Power, (p. 69), ‘negative media coverage is a symptom rather than a significant cause’ of public disengagement.

However, not all of these possible reasons are quite as strong red herrings as Power suggests. For instance, a very different take on the effects of contentment emerges from JK Galbraith’s (1992) analysis. For Galbraith, the important issue is the emergence in the 1980s and 1990s, for the first time in western societies, of an affluent and contented majority, side by side with a poor (and often unemployed) minority. This, he argued, had changed the electoral arithmetic. Whereas for most of the twentieth century, parties wishing to gain office had to reach out to the poor majority, this was no longer the case by the century’s end. The poor now found themselves in a (marginalized) minority. The electoral incentives for political parties had therefore changed: to win office, they could not now risk losing the support of the contented and affluent new majority. As a result, those left behind by the new affluence also lost their access to political power. Under such circumstances, it would be possible to have both rising affluence and contentment (about life generally, if not about politics) along with growing political disengagement and disillusion, if the latter were largely concentrated among the left-behind sectors of society. Consistent with this is the observation that electoral turnout is lowest among the poorest voters, who are spatially concentrated in a relatively small number of (mostly safe Labour) constituencies and whose participation at elections is of little importance to the political parties. That said, of course, turnout has fallen among all groups in the electorate.

More problematic is Power’s rejection of the argument that one factor behind falling electoral participation has been the non-competitive nature of recent elections. Power notes, correctly, that the research ‘literature contained strong quantitative evidence to support this claim’ (p.64). Several studies have shown that overall general election turnout in the UK over the post-war period is correlated to the closeness of the electoral competition: the less predictable the election is before the event, the more voters turn out (Heath and Taylor, 1999; Pattie and Johnston, 2001; Whiteley et al., 2001; Curtice, 2005; Clarke et al., 2006). The three exceptionally low turnouts of the 1997, 2001 and 2005 UK general elections occurred in what were with little doubt the three most predictable contests since 1945 (and it is often forgotten that one of the highest turnouts of the post-war period occurred in 1992, when the result was widely anticipated to be on a knife-edge). Similarly, at a more local scale, there is a well-established correlation between constituency marginality and turnout locally: turnout in safe seats (especially safe Labour seats) is lower, other things being equal, than turnout in marginals (Denver, 1995, 2005; Denver and Hands, 1974, 1985; Johnston and Pattie, 1997).

Even so, Power sees uncompetitive elections as a red herring in explanations of declining electoral participation. Why? In part, Power’s case rests on cross-national comparisons: turnout has fallen, they claim, even where elections are competitive. True. But they also make some more questionable claims. For instance, that:

This analysis can only explain the recent decline in general election turnout: It cannot explain low turnouts in other elections … all of which predate the drop in general election turnout (p. 65).
Well, up to a point, Lord Copper! Actually, second order election theory provides an adequate, generally (though not universally) applicable – and well-tested – account of why turnout should be lower in local, regional and European elections than in General Elections, without the need to invoke a general crisis of political engagement (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Heath et al., 1999; Rallings and Thrasher, 2005). Similarly, Power argues – correctly – that even though the 2005 election was a considerably closer contest than either the 1997 or the 2001 contests, turnout rose only very slightly. Again, true, but few realistically expected any outcome other than a still substantial – even if much reduced – Labour majority in 2005 (and in a large proportion of the constituencies there was very little doubt about the likely result and so little incentive to vote unless you were highly committed to one party and/or thought it your civic duty to turn out): at the least, therefore, the jury is still out on what might happen in a truly competitive election (i.e. one in which the winner was in real doubt). And, similarly, the evidence used by Power to both illustrate and to discount the relationship between constituency marginality and turnout is flawed. The report argues that turnout in 2001, while higher in marginals than in safe seats, was not much higher: while average turnout in 9 ‘safe’ seats was just 61%, it was only 65.8% in 9 ‘marginals’. But why just look at nine safe and nine marginal seats: surely there are risks of substantial selection effects? Actually, if we look at ALL seats, we see a rather stronger pattern, with a steeper turnout gradient (table 1). To further argue, as Power does (p 66), that the ‘competitive elections’ argument is also weakened because the patterns can be explained by an alternative theory – that parties work harder to turn the vote out in a competitive than in an uncompetitive election – is rather disingenuous. Whether close elections generate turnout because voters are self-motivating or because they are motivated by more active parties is beside the point: if close contests generate more interest – from whatever source – then the ‘competitive elections’ argument still stands. Furthermore, parties are spending more than ever on mobilising voters, not only in the few weeks before a general election but increasingly throughout the inter-election years (see Cutts, 2006): at the 2005 general election, for example, Labour was clearly concerned that low turnout could lose it seats that it otherwise expected to win.

It is important, therefore, not to overstate the ‘red herrings’: some are at worst a pale pink!

What of Power’s ‘positive’ diagnosis: where do the Commissioners think the ‘blame’ for political disengagement lies? They flag five explanations as ‘persuasive’ (chapter 3):

- The main parties are too similar and too unprincipled: as the main parties converge on the political centre ground in search of the median voter, there is a growing sense among electors that those opposed to the government’s policies have nowhere to turn. Analysis of the drop in turnout between 1992 and 1997 confirms this (Pattie and Johnston, 2001). And it is exacerbated by a second factor:
- The electoral system wastes many votes, since only the decisions of swing voters in marginal seats matter. Under first past the post, most seats are uncompetitive. Parties therefore increasingly target campaign resources on the
marginals, taking the votes of citizens elsewhere for granted (Denver and Hands, 2004; Pattie and Johnston, 2003).

- The electoral mandate is questionable as one vote for one party does not mean support for all its policies: but few voters feel comfortable about endorsing every measure proposed by the party they vote for. For instance, the introduction of the poll tax in the early 1990s was not even on the Conservatives’ 1987 manifesto, and was deeply unpopular and contributed to Mrs Thatcher’s downfall (Butler et al., 1994). And in 2005, the government’s policy in Iraq was unpopular even with Labour voters, 57% of whom disapproved of it.4

- At least some citizens lack information about politics. This can range from procedural matters (how do I vote?) to substantive issues (how does Parliament work?; what do MPs do?). There is some evidence that political participation is lower among those with limited political knowledge than among those with greater understanding and/or confidence. In part, worries about information affect some parts of the public, especially younger and more marginalised groups, more than others, which helps explain why participation in these groups is particularly low. But quite why a lack of information should be particularly pressing at a time when education levels generally are rising is not clear.

- Voting procedures are inconvenient. Throughout much of the UK voting still takes place in person at a designated polling station on polling day itself. Power notes that its own research shows ‘44 per cent (of non-voters) said they were ‘very likely’ or ‘likely’ to vote if they were able to vote by mobile phone or on the internet’ (p. 93). Experiments with increased postal balloting have also proved popular (Electoral Commission, 2004a). That said, as Power also notes, ‘voting procedures are not a major cause of disengagement’ (p. 94). Part of the problem here is that of a lack of trust in new voting technologies: the security of electronic or postal voting is open to question. But even if these concerns could be addressed, there are probably limits to the effect new voting technologies could have. Non-voters are not homogeneous. They can be divided into at least two distinct groups: voluntary abstainers, who are deliberate in their decision not to vote; and involuntary abstainers, who would normally vote but are prevented from doing so by unforeseen circumstances (Pattie and Johnston, 1998; Johnston and Pattie, 2003). Such evidence as there is suggests that changing the voting technology mobilises the latter group (by easing short-term blocks on voting), but not the former (Karp and Banducci, 2000, Berinsky et al., 2001). Hard to reach groups remain hard to reach: technology is not a cure.

These factors are all argued to have a part to play, but Power subsumes them within a larger narrative. Overall, Power’s preference is for explanations which rest on a sense of major social forces at play. At root, the Commission argues, political disengagement is fuelled by social change unleashed in the move to a post-industrial society (chapter 4: see also Norris, 2002). Compared to voters in the past, modern citizens are better informed, better educated and expect a greater degree of control over their lives. They expect to be consulted and they expect to be listened to.

But, Power goes on, conventional politics has at best struggled to keep up with this social change or, at worst, has misunderstood it completely: we have an industrial-age
political system struggling to keep up with a post-industrial society. The British party and electoral systems were established in an era in which society was split into two internally homogeneous classes, and in which there was deference to leaders. As Duverger (1954) recognised half a century ago, first past the post majoritarian electoral systems tend to be dominated by two large parties: minor parties are squeezed to the sidelines. In Britain, the class cleavage helped fuel Labour and Conservative dominance. And, despite the emergence of significant third party vote shares and the relative collapse of class voting since the 1970s (Evans, 1999), this remains largely true in terms of parliamentary representation. But neither the electoral nor the party system has evolved, Power argues, to cope with a more fragmented, less deferential society: ‘the key problem … is that the British political system … has not adapted to these changes’ (p. 120). Westminster remains primarily an arena for Labour-Conservative competition.

The result? The public is left feeling disregarded by politics, which has remained a relatively closed world. Consultation via periodic visits to the ballot box alone is no longer sufficient, Power argues. Citizens now have the capacity to be, and the expectation of being, involved in complex decision-making, and they resent being shut out. The solution? More public involvement (via, for instance, citizen juries), more open decision-making, greater openness of government to public demands and concerns, clearer differentiation between the parties, and changes to the political and electoral systems to encourage greater diversity of view and more public accountability. But such initiatives will not necessarily change the party system: they may, however, lead to a decline in the quality of those willing to offer themselves for election because their role becomes increasingly that of implementers of the (possible contradictory) statements of the public will, with relatively few degrees of freedom.

Much of the diagnosis rings true, yet doubts remain. It is hard not to feel sorry for the poor old political parties. From Power’s analysis, there seems almost nothing they can do right. They (especially Labour and the Conservatives) are seen as trapped in the two-party, class-dominated political past from which they developed. The ‘big two’ see their electoral bases erode: classes are no longer cohesive, and are no longer party-aligned (and for Labour, things are even worse: its old core class is in numerical decline). Their mass membership is in serious decline (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). At the same time, voters feel put off by the yah-boo of Westminster, the ideological posturing, the point scoring, and say they want less argument and more cooperation. No wonder, Power tells us, that the public no longer feels attached to political parties.

Parties, of course, are not static: they evolve. A clear example is provided by Labour’s shift from an ideologically-driven, left wing socialist party in 1983 to the centre-ground, ‘modernising’ New Labour of 1997 (Shaw, 1994: Heath et al., 2001). Although the exact shape of Labour’s transformation was never pre-determined, without change the party was headed for possible oblivion. And it adapted to the new political climate: less ideological and more concerned with valence issues (what works), more centre ground, more focussed on message and communications, able to operate without a mass grassroots (hence, for instance, the growing interest in targeted campaigning), and so on. Belatedly, the Conservatives have also begun to move in the same direction.
So parties have been too ideological in the past (putting voters off) but are now not ideological enough (also putting voters off): damned if they do and damned if they don’t! Power does recognise a role for parties, despite their apparent failings, but their endorsement is equivocal. ‘Our political system would be more chaotic and less effective without political parties’, Power argues, but ‘(n)one of this is to say … that parties as they are currently formulated cannot be radically rethought’ (p. 188). The implication seems to be that if parties have tried to adapt, they have adapted in the ‘wrong’ way.

That parties have tried to adapt is recognised by the Power report (see e.g. pp108-9). But at the same time, Power holds a curious nostalgia for parties as they used to be, which is at odds with its critique of the ancien régime. For instance, Power claims:

> It can be argued that the first-past-the-post system is one of the reasons why managerialism has replaced vision. An almost mathematical election methodology combined with good public relations can secure victory without any reference to a philosophy. A central feature of this disengagement is the sense that the main political parties are no longer distinct enough and no longer base their policies on core principles (p. 100, emphasis in the original).

(One could also, not unreasonably, point out that first-past-the-post long precedes the current state of party competition: if the electoral system is the reason for the rise of managerialism, why did it take so long to emerge?)

**The way forward?**

That there is a problem of citizen engagement is clear. The question is what can be done. Power argues that governmental responses to date, focussing on experiments with different balloting procedures, consultations, civic education and strengthened measures for the scrutiny of public bodies, are insufficient to deal with the problem. Useful, Power says, but by no means enough to make a real difference. Having offered a diagnosis, Power proposes a series of reforms by means of which they hope the civic culture will be revitalised. Their proposals are far-reaching and diverse, but are aimed at achieving:

…three fundamental shifts in the way politics is conducted in Britain.

- A re-balancing of power between the constituency elements of the political system: a shift of power away from the Executive to Parliament and from central to local government…
- The creation of an electoral and party system which is responsive…
- The creation of a culture of political engagement…’ (p. 121).

These overarching goals are to be achieved via the adoption of numerous distinct recommendations (30 in total). Some suggest changes to the working of Parliament, and some involve electoral reforms. But others are more far reaching, recommending the extension of citizen involvement in decision making. Extending civic involvement reflects Power’s analysis of growing public capacity in post-industrial society. As
Power notes, ‘(a) system based largely or entirely on parliamentary representation no longer encourages people in the way it once did’ (p. 117).

In Power’s view, all 30 recommendations need to be adopted *en masse*:

> we do not believe that the three major shifts … can logically be cherry-picked or weakened if the genuine aim is the creation of a newly vibrant democracy for Britain in the twenty-first century (p. 122).

In what follows, however, we set aside that injunction and concentrate on the 13 recommendations aimed at elections and representation: most of those on ‘Rebalancing power’ (basically away from the Executive towards Parliament and local government) and ‘Downloading power’ (concerned with public involvement in the continuing political process) are linked to the goal of improving electoral representation, but separate from it. The recommendations considered here are listed in table 2, under the titles for the report chapters in which they are made.

Perhaps inevitably, the recommendations themselves vary substantially in their likely ability to evoke support or controversy. Some are the standard stuff of political reform arguments. Some seem to contradict the overall tenor of the Commission’s analysis. And some – the recommendations regarding party funding – have been at least partly superseded and overshadowed by events since the publication of the Report.

*Adjusting the rules*

Least controversial of all is the recommendation that the conduct of constituency boundary reviews should be accelerated. Any electoral system which retains some degree of local representation will require periodic boundary realignments, if equality of representation is considered desirable, in order to deal with the effects of population change. As some areas grow while others decline, constituencies become less able to deliver electoral equality. If we start from a situation in which all constituencies have roughly equal electorates (and hence the value of an individual vote is roughly constant everywhere), then voters in seats which are declining in size have more electoral power (since it takes fewer of them to elect an MP) than voters in seats which are growing. In the UK, Labour has traditionally received more support than other parties in areas of declining population and hence has benefited from ageing constituencies (Johnston et al., 2001) – although given the repopulation of many inner cities through apartment building and conversion this trend may currently be somewhat reduced in its importance.

Boundary reviews are therefore vital to minimise this source of electoral bias. Under the current British system, these take place on a roughly decennial basis, are conducted by independent Boundary Commissions, and involve a drawn-out process of initial recommendations (made on a county by county basis), public inquiries in almost all areas, and then final recommendations, which are ratified *en masse* by Parliament (Rossiter et al., 1999). However, the process is slow: it can take several years to go from the initiation of a Review to the introduction of the new constituencies. The most recent completed national Review, for instance, began in 1991 and reported to Parliament in 1995: the new constituencies were first used in the
1997 election. (In England, the currently on-going review started in 2000, and is based on electorate data for that year: it will produce constituencies that will be first used in a general election held probably nine years later and could remain in place until 2016!) Inevitably, the seats are already out of date before they are even introduced, since local electorates have changed in the interim. A more rapid review process is possible (many countries can do so) and desirable. (Although differences in constituency size are only one component of an electoral system which, because of the ways votes and abstentions are distributed across the constituencies, has delivered extremely biased results to the last three general elections, with Labour getting much larger shares of the seats relative to its vote share that would probably be the case for the Conservatives in similar circumstances: Johnston, Rossiter and Pattie, 2006. As a consequence, a small Conservative victory in 2005 in terms of vote share could have resulted in a Labour majority in the House of Commons.)

Possibly more controversial, but surely sensible, is Power’s recommendation that electronic voting methods should only be considered after other reforms have been made. As we argue above, existing evidence suggests that such measures are more likely to enable participation by those who would normally vote but who are prevented by quotidian circumstances than to mobilise those who do not vote out of either apathy or conviction. However, the grounds for delay go further than just this. The technology surrounding electronic voting is controversial and concerns have been expressed over the security, integrity and transparency of e-voting (Gibson, 2001; Jefferson et al., 2004). Should an electronic ballot prove flawed, the damage to public confidence in the electoral process could be considerable. Better to delay and make sure systems are safe than to rush their introduction and risk a scandal.

Power also turns its attention to some of the financial costs of election campaigning. Party fund-raising is a long-running area of controversy (see e.g. Pinto-Duschinsky, 1981; Johnston and Pattie, 1993). Legislation in the 19th century sought to prevent the corrupt purchase of votes in constituency contests by introducing a secret ballot and setting tight limits on permitted campaign expenditure in constituency contests. In the 1920s, the abuse being legislated against was the sale of peerages for party donations. And following sleaze allegations raised against the Conservative government in the early 1990s, the New Labour government passed the 2000 Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA) which, among other things, placed campaign spending limits on the (previously unregulated) national contest alongside the long-standing limits for constituency campaigns and required greater public disclosure of party fundraising. British parties now operate under greater regulation than at any time in the past. Even so, public disquiet continues: a May 2006 ICM poll conducted for BBC Radio 4’s Today programme found that 82% of the public felt that the current (post-PPERA) system of party finance in the UK made people suspicious of politicians, while 74% felt it placed too much power in the hands of big business and rich donors. Coincidentally, very shortly after Power was published, renewed scandal emerged around the alleged provision of peerages for Labour party donors.

Power responds to these anxieties with two recommendations on party finance: one seeks to cap individual and corporate donations to political parties; the other suggests the introduction of a system of state support for parties, whereby voters would be able to indicate which party they wished to nominate for support from public funds. These proposals would put party finance in the UK even further into the European
mainstream: donation limits and substantial state funding for parties are common elsewhere on the continent (Alexander, 1989; Gunlicks, 1993). And, to some extent, Power’s recommendations have (after the 2006 cash for peerages scandal) been superseded by events, as the government seeks to recover its position: shortly after becoming Leader of the Commons in the 5 May 2006 Cabinet reshuffle (itself in part a consequence of the political fallout from the scandal), Jack Straw announced he was working to reach agreement between the major parties on new rules on party finance, aimed specifically at donation limits and public support for parties, with a view to introducing legislation before the next General Election. That said, convincing voters of the case for public support will be an uphill struggle: the ICM poll discussed above also found that only 26% of voters felt parties should be funded ‘mainly from public taxes’, while 58% (despite their reservations about the current system) felt the system of party finance should stay as it is now. Furthermore, given the high incentives for doing so, and human ingenuity, it is very likely indeed that parties will find legitimate ways round any legislation, just as they did with the PPERA (and just as parties have done elsewhere: the United States experience is instructive: Grant, 2005).

What has to be realised in this context, however, is the increasing ‘need’ for money in order to enable parties to contact the electorate, not least during the campaign period immediately prior to a general election. Until the last few decades, parties have been able to rely on activists’ free labour to contact voters at their homes, in their workplaces, and on the streets: such labour is no longer available – not only because of the decline in party membership (in part a consequence of weakening sense of party identification) but also because those who join and make donations are unwilling (even unable?) to commit time to such activities. Parties then have to rely on paid labour – such as the employees of telephone call centres – for an increasing proportion of the work undertaken in mobilising voters, work which is also increasingly sophisticated in its reliance on modern media, requiring the expensive inputs of professional labour in, for example, polling, focus groups, and the design of advertising material. Unrealistic attempts to constrain the amounts spent could be to the detriment of the political process, therefore, since the ‘golden days’ of mass party membership and extensive freely-undertaken party activity are very unlikely to return.

Proposals for the financial reform of British electoral politics are not restricted to party finance, however. Power also recommends that the financial threshold for participation in elections in the UK, the deposit which must be paid by candidates, should be abolished, to be replaced by the collection of the signatures of a specified proportion of the constituency electorate backing the candidacy. The argument is that the deposit sets a financial restriction on candidacy which erects a hurdle that potential candidates with few resources will be unable to jump, hence restricting access to Parliament for a significant – and under-represented – portion of the population. That said, the level of deposit demanded has not kept pace with inflation: only £500 at the 2005 election, it was something of a bargain. There is little real evidence that the deposit now truly serves as a deterrent to candidates. In fact, as the value of the deposit has declined in real terms, the number of candidates standing for election in the UK has risen dramatically over the post-war period, with particularly dramatic rises in the number of minor party and independent candidates (figure 1). Whereas in 1950 there were only 2.6 candidates on average per seat (because most seats were two-candidate fights, with third parties contesting only a few), by 2005 this
had risen to an average of 5.5 candidates per seat: multi-candidate contests are now the norm.

Even if one does agree that the deposit is a deterrent, however, it is not obvious that Power’s alternative, the collection of signatures from around 0.25% of the voters in a constituency, is any better at opening up the possibility of candidacy. Power underestimates the size of the task. The Commission estimates that 0.25% would ‘equate to about 150–200 signatures in a Parliamentary constituency’ (p. 194). However, that is only true for the current, first-past-the-post constituencies. Adopting proportional representation, as recommended by Power (see below), implies significantly larger constituencies. For instance, a single transferable vote system might require constituencies which elect 5 members in order to achieve rough proportionality (and hence would have c. 5 times the electorate of current seats). To gain the backing of 0.25% of the electorate in such a seat, a candidate would need signatures from up to 1000 people – a considerably more onerous task (not least in checking the signatures’ validity). Indeed, one might go further and ask whether there should be any restriction on candidacy at all. Even frivolous candidates have a democratic right to be frivolous! A truly radical reform would entail the removal of any candidacy restriction, barring that of being a registered voter. If we are in favour of opening Parliament up to the widest possible intake, why not give the widest possible access to candidacy?

Electoral reform

The recommendation that first past the post be replaced by a ‘responsive electoral system’, while not uncontroversial, is also certainly in the mainstream of demands for political reform. The reasoning behind Power’s advocacy of proportional representation verges occasionally on the hyperbolic: have we really ‘now reached a point in our political history where democracy is at risk because our electoral and party system has become … a major block to popular engagement with political decision-making’ (p. 189), for instance? But behind the dramatic licence lies a serious point: first past the post wastes many votes for all parties, especially in safe seats. (At recent elections, for example, only c.40 per cent of all votes cast for Labour were effective – i.e. helped it to win seats – as were just c.35 per cent of those cast for Conservative candidates: Johnston, Rossiter and Pattie, 2006.) Without some electoral reform, there is little incentive for parties to campaign intensively everywhere (and they don’t!), or for citizens to participate in many areas (and they don’t either!). With certain types of electoral reform, every vote really can count, everywhere. Furthermore, PR increases the incentives for more parties to compete in elections. Duverger’s Law holds here too: the more proportional the competition, the more effective parties are likely to compete, increasing the choice for voters, both in terms of the absolute number of parties competing and, more often than not, in terms of the political and ideological variation on offer. Whereas first past the post encourages broad-church catch-all parties, PR encourages both more ideologically focused parties and also parties focused on single themes and issues. By making more votes count, and by increasing the incentives for parties to campaign widely, PR should, one would expect, increase public involvement in the electoral process. Comparative research does suggest that, other things being equal, electoral participation is higher in countries with PR electoral systems than in those employing majoritarian rules (Franklin, 2002).
Power’s insistence on a greater elected component for the House of Lords (they advocate 70% of peers being elected by ‘a responsive electoral system’ – i.e. PR) is also in the reform mainstream. New Labour’s 1999 reform of the Lords, removing the membership of most hereditary peers, was an unsatisfactory half way house solution, neither open enough to satisfy democrats, nor closed enough to satisfy traditionalists (Russell, 2003). Most working peers are now nominated by the leaders of the major parties in the Commons, leaving considerable patronage powers in their hands. The 2006 scandals over peerages for party donations and for contributions to the establishment of City Academies demonstrate the potential problem (as well as the absurdity of linking a reward to a place in the country’s legislature). A second chamber in which the majority of members is directly elected would put Britain into line with most western democracies. Power’s solution to the risk of a coattails effect, whereby simultaneous elections for both chambers might lead to the same party (or parties, if PR is adopted) holding a majority in both is interesting and worthy of consideration. They suggest that elected Lords should serve for three parliamentary terms (an unspoken implication here is that the UK should move to fixed term parliaments), with a third of the elected members standing for election at each parliamentary election. The intention is to produce both regular turnover and relative stability (as with the US Senate), such that the upper chamber is not a simple mirror of the lower. But this will surely involve a much more detailed examination of the relative powers of the two Houses than undertaken by Power (although Power does recommend that a concordat be drafted to define the relative powers of Commons and Lords: p. 136-7).

However, a shift to a more proportional electoral system will not inevitably increase participation. First, although proportionality is related to absolute levels of turnout, it is not related to change in turnout over time (Franklin, 2002): countries using PR electoral systems have been just as prone to declining turnout as those using majoritarian systems. Second, closer inspection reveals that the relationship between proportionality and electoral participation can be curvilinear (Norris, 2002). Where an electoral system is very disproportional and where elections are uncompetitive (i.e. one party tends to win repeatedly), turnout tends to be low. But highly proportional electoral systems which result in a high degree of party fragmentation and in potentially unstable coalition governments tend to have lower than average turnouts too, other things being equal. In the former case, participation is low because many citizens feel their involvement will make no difference to the overall result of the election, or (more important) to the formation of a government. In the second situation, ironically, it is much the same! Extreme proportionality and many parties lead to considerable uncertainty over the membership of ruling coalitions, and to problems of government accountability. Greater proportionality alone is not enough to generate participation.

Greater proportionality is not the only aspect of electoral reform advocated by Power, however. In addition (and like the Arbuthnott Commission on elections to the Scottish Parliament: Pattie and Mitchell, 2006), the Commission sets itself against the use of closed list PR. Citizens, Power argues, should be able to choose the individuals they wish to be represented by. Closed list elections (as used for election of Members of the European Parliament from Great Britain but not Northern Ireland – where STV is deployed), by restricting citizen choice to one between parties only and leaving decisions on which candidates are elected to the parties, who set the order of
candidates on the list, are an affront to this principle. Whichever electoral reform is adopted should therefore include open list voting, Power recommends. This recommendation certainly fits with survey evidence, which suggests that voters want to choose the individuals who represent them, not just the parties.\(^9\)

It would be naïve, however, to expect that open list elections will usher in a new era of citizen choice. And it would also be naïve to take survey support for candidate choice at face value. There is a real risk of confusing what people say they would prefer when faced with an abstract question with what they actually would do in a real election. It is hardly surprising that voters voice a preference for choosing the individual candidate rather than just a party apparatchik. In doing so, they are expressing support for an idealised democracy. However, against that must be set the fact that, at present in the UK, around 40% of voters cannot name any of the candidates standing for their constituencies at the time of an election, and many more are ignorant of who is standing for any particular party: only around a third can name either their Conservative or Labour candidate and only 16% can do so for the Liberal Democrat (Pattie and Johnston, 2004). Constituency campaigning at election time does raise candidate profiles locally, but a large gap remains. In other words, voters might say the individual candidate matters to them. But if that is really true, then it cannot matter much, since so few even know who the candidates are!

What do other real-world examples tell us? Ireland’s single transferable vote system, for instance, does produce relatively high volumes of voter selection between candidates, both within parties and between them. Many voters do not vote a simple party ticket, starting with the first-named candidate on their party’s list and working down. Rather, they spread their votes around. But this does not mean the open list removes party power. Indeed, parties can manipulate their lists to provide different candidates who are likely to appeal to different parts (whether geographical or social) of the constituency, hence maximising the party’s overall support. Furthermore, the highly localist nature of politics (including campaigning within STV constituencies) in much of Ireland, and the historically small ideological distance between the major parties, encourages a higher degree of candidate-based voting than is the case in some other polities.

A counter-example is provided by the electoral system adopted for the New South Wales Legislative Council (Sawer, 2005). Ballot papers are divided in two by a horizontal line: parties are listed above the line, and below it are listed their candidates. Voters can vote either ‘above the line’ or ‘below the line’. To do the former, they place a cross against the party of their choice, and forgo any opportunity to express a choice between candidates: in effect they endorse the party’s candidate list, and effectively agree to the list order imposed by the party. If they wish to express an opinion regarding individual candidates, they must vote ‘below the line’, ranking each candidate in turn (and there may be a large number of them: the parties provide ‘how to vote’ cards to ensure that they order the candidates in their – i.e. the parties’ – best electoral interests). Very few voters bother to vote ‘below the line’: most (98% in 2003, for instance) are satisfied to endorse a party and leave it at that. Faced with the opportunity to either express a simple preference for a party or choose between candidates, most NSW voters opt for the former. It is hard to see why things should be any different in the UK.
Changing the mix of candidates and voters

Another major plank in Power’s proposed remedy comprises recommendations which have the intention of changing the social composition of those who engage in electoral politics, both as voters and as candidates. The intention is laudable: some groups are less likely to participate than others, so find ways of drawing them in. But how might this be achieved?

A long-standing concern is that young people’s participation in conventional politics is low. In part, this reflects a life cycle effect: the young have always been less involved in formal politics than older citizens, but as they age their involvement increases. More worryingly, however, there is now growing evidence of a cohort effect too. Not only are new entrants to the electorate less likely to vote or to stand as candidates than older electors, but, increasingly, they seem to remain relatively disengaged as they age: the self-correcting process which typified earlier generations is weakening. Franklin (2004), in one of the most extensive cross-national analyses of the issue to date, argues that a common factor in producing this cross-national phenomenon was lowering the minimum voting age to 18. Late teens are relatively unlikely to vote and, as time goes on, this becomes a habit for them. Abstain in one election, and there is a reasonable chance one will vote in the next. Abstain in two, and that chance drops. Abstain in three, and the chances of ever voting become very small. Increasing the eligible voting population by lowering the voting age reduces the take-up of voting, with the effect persisting throughout the lives of the new voters.

But what can be done? Paradoxically, but perhaps unsurprisingly for a Commission containing a DJ and a member of the Youth Parliament, Power’s solution is to reduce the voting age yet further, to 16. But most ‘expert’ opinion is against the proposal, on the grounds that younger voters would be even less likely to vote than 18-year-olds, further driving down turnout and building even larger long-term problems (see, for instance, the evidence summarised in Electoral Commission, 2004b). And public opinion is opposed too: a 2004 ICM poll commissioned by the Electoral Commission found that 64% of the population (and even 52% of 15-19 year olds) favoured retaining 18 as the age of electoral majority.

That said, there is an argument which suggests that reduction of the voting age to 16 might actually help increase participation. Franklin (2004), for instance, suggests that if the voting age goes down to 16, many first time voters will do so when still at school. Voting could then become part of their civics education (especially if, as Power also recommends, the civics curriculum is made more practical than at present and carries a qualification, and voter registration becomes automatic at 16). Under such circumstances, Franklin claims, more young voters would vote (because they would be encouraged to do so by school: the problem with 18 year olds is that they have left school and its influence), and hence would gain the voting habit young. And having gained the habit, they should carry it on through their adult lives. The case is attractive and seems plausible. But it is untested. What if it is wrong, and 16 year olds, as critics fear, really do prove even less likely to participate than 18 year olds or, alternatively, use their vote unsophisticatedly – even irresponsibly – as a result of teacher and/or peer pressure? If so, a measure designed to make things better may actually make them worse. But having once reduced the voting age, it would be almost impossible to reverse the measure if it did turn out to be counterproductive.
which government would want to be presented as withdrawing a democratic right? Reducing the voting age is a risky strategy, therefore.

But Power is not consistent in its desire to extend access. The second strand of Power’s proposals for Lords reform recommends that there should be a lower age limit of 40 on candidates standing for election to the Lords. The justification is that older candidates will have more life experience on which to draw, and will be less likely to be career politicians. But this clearly runs against the argument that candidacy should be open to all. Why should 40 year olds have privileged access to membership of the Lords? Nor is it clear why the measure should reduce the prevalence of career politicians. A 40 year old neophyte candidate for the Lords might indeed be extremely likely to have previous experience as a councillor, an MP in the Commons, or a party apparatchik. Candidacy is thus likely to be dominated by the ‘usual suspects’. How probable is it that other, non-party-political individuals will take a mid-career break in order to spend 12 years in the Lords – and be able to raise the money to finance a campaign if they are not to stand for one of the main parties? And what effect will limiting Lords candidacies to the over-40s have on attempts to mobilise younger citizens, who could legitimately argue that the new chamber does not reflect their views or concerns? Overall, the recommendation seems slightly bizarre, not least given the tenor of Power’s other recommendations.

Similarly, the recommendation that the Electoral Commission take a more active role in promoting candidates from BME populations, those on low incomes, women, independents, and the young (as long as the latter do not want to stand for the Lords!) may well prove difficult in practice. Just what powers could the EC have to enforce such a role? Could it be argued to be an unwarranted intrusion of the state into the electoral process? However laudable the intention, this opens a can of worms.

Alternative routes of influence

A final area where Power’s recommendations have implications for electoral issues is in its proposal to increase citizens’ rights to initiate legislative processes and public inquiries – though not, as is the case in Switzerland, to vote in referendums on issues raised by the government/Parliament. In effect, Power is pointing to the use of public petitions and publicly-initiated referendums to inform legislators to bring public concerns into the legislative arena, and to ensure that citizens can influence government agendas. Modern citizens, Power argues, are sophisticated and intelligent enough to use such powers sensibly.

Similar provisions are available to citizens in some other democracies. For instance, in countries like Switzerland, and in some states of the USA (notably California, Oregon and Washington), citizens can demand referendums on issues of concern, subject to gaining a threshold of support for the ballot. Sometimes these referendums are mandatory on government; sometimes they are advisory. And the new Scottish Parliament has a petitions committee, which considers petitions raised by members of the public and decides which will be debated by the Parliament.

So far, so laudable. But there are risks too. There is evidence, for instance, that the more citizens are consulted (whether via elections or via referendums), the more fatigued by conventional politics they become. The USA and Switzerland are the two
countries which make the greatest demands of their voters in terms of the number of times people can be asked to go to the polling station in a year. Both make extensive use of referendums, which can be initiated by citizens (in both, the extent of referendum use and public initiation can vary from state to state). And in the USA, elections are held for a very wide range of public bodies, from the very local and mundane through to the national Presidency. But those countries also have the lowest electoral turnouts in the western world – as well as among the most educated populations. This is not accidental!

More worrying is the ever-present risk of ill-thought through populist measures gaining credibility because they have been endorsed in a referendum. It would be naive to believe that all citizens are liberal and tolerant, for instance: many are anything but. Petitions and referendums can be – and in the past have been – open to manipulation by organised minorities, and can be hijacked by media campaigns. If British voters were to be given the right to initiate referendums, how long would it be before we faced a vote on repatriating all asylum seekers or the return of the death penalty, for instance, and who would like to bet on the outcome?

Against such claims, Power suggests that time be given for debate to take place before deciding whether a proposal is an appropriate subject for a referendum. Disputes, they propose, should be dealt with by the Electoral Commission. But measures to pre-vet petitions and referendum requests are risky on two grounds. If people feel strongly about something, no matter how misguided their view might be, they are unlikely to be easily swayed by an extensive debate. And if some topics are deemed beyond the pale for a referendum by some public body (say the EC), that is likely to generate cynicism among those supporting it. Or again, say a controversial proposal gets through all stages, is put to a referendum, is supported by a sizable majority of those who vote, but is then rejected by the government. How ‘included’ will the proponents of the measure feel? Once again, an apparently straightforward and democratic proposal might end up making things worse rather than better. Another can of worms.

Conclusions

The Power Commission has identified a number of key concerns regarding the operation of the UK’s current electoral system and its link to popular attitudes to, and participation in, formal politics. The recommendations stemming from those concerns are aimed at increasing involvement in formal politics and thereby improving Britain’s civic culture – if not back to the levels identified by Almond and Verba (1963) and experienced by our Prof van Winkle before he fell asleep. But, as we have suggested here, those thirteen recommendations themselves raise important issues which, even if discussed by the Commission, do not appear in the Power report. Changing the enabling conditions so as to improve British democracy is not going to be straightforward.
Notes

1 Our own expertise is largely confined to this part of the political process, and we leave critiques of both how and where power is exercised by elected representatives and public engagement in that exercise to others.

2 One Commissioner, Barbara Gill, died before the Commission had completed its deliberations.

3 In the early 1960s, a satirical BBC show, That Was The Week That Was, scored a notable hit when it poked fun at a number of long-serving backbenchers who had never taken part in a Commons debate. When the MPs raised the Issue in the Commons as a breach of privilege, the response from their peers was laughter.

4 Data from the 2005 British Election Study.

5 With an electorate of some 45 million, if 60 per cent were to turn out at the next general election and all ticked that a party should receive a donation of £3 – as proposed by Power – the total allocation would then be £81m (which they recognise – p. 212 – is a maximum, assuming that all those who vote tick the relevant box indicating support for state funding – at the next election), little more than spent by the country’s three main parties at the 2005 general election alone, let alone their spending elsewhere in the electoral cycle. (Power’s figures show that six parties between them spent £65million in 2004 – a non-general-election year: p. 207.)

6 The deposit was raised between 1983 and 1987 – from £150 to £500 – when the share of the votes cast which had to be won in order for the deposit to be returned was reduced from 12.5 to 5 per cent.

7 In the United States, where large numbers of signatories are required in order to get issues placed on a referendum ballot, it is common for interest groups involved to employ agencies to collect the requisite number of signatures.

8 It is not totally clear what they mean by ‘responsive’ – we assume that it is one in which shifts in voter attitudes are more closely reflected by the allocation of House of Commons’ seats than is the case with the current system.

9 Interestingly, the Commission does not address the issue of what PR system would best meet its goals of: ‘to increase the number of parties or parliamentary alliances competing for the voters’ support which have a serious chance of winning representation; to enable candidates who have no organisational allegiance a chance of winning a seat in Parliament; to allow voters a chance to express their preference for a particular wing of a party or a particular candidate; to ensure that all votes count by having some influence on the final outcome of an election’ merely noting that ‘Current thinking seems to suggest that such goals could be best achieved by the Single Transferable Vote system, but we have no firm views on this’ (p.190).
Bibliography


Table 1 Constituency marginality and turnout at the 2001 General Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1997 marginality</th>
<th>average turnout 2001</th>
<th>N of seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ultra-marginal: majority lt 4.9%</td>
<td>64.37</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly marginal: majority 5.0-9.9%</td>
<td>62.04</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly safe: majority 10.0-14.9%</td>
<td>62.59</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very safe: majority 15.0-19.9%</td>
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<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultra-safe: majority gt 20%</td>
<td>55.41</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Power’s recommendations for elections and representation (source: Power, 2006, 21-25).

Rebalancing power

- 70% of the House of Lords should be elected by a responsive electoral system … for three parliamentary terms. To ensure that this part of the legislature is not comprised of career politicians with no experience outside politics, candidates should be at least 40 years of age.

Real parties and true elections

- A responsive electoral system – which allows voters a greater choice and diversity of parties and candidates – should be introduced for elections to the House of Commons, House of Lords and local councils in England and Wales to replace first-past-the-post.

- The closed party list system should have no place in modern elections.

- The system whereby candidates have to pay a deposit which is lost if their votes fall below a certain threshold should be replaced with a system where the candidate has to collect the signatures of a set number of supporters in order to appear on the ballot paper.

- The Electoral Commission should take a more active role in promoting candidacy so that more women, people from black and minority ethnic populations, people on low incomes, young people and independents are encouraged to stand.

- The voting and candidacy age should be lowered to sixteen (with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords).

- Automatic, individual voter registration at age sixteen should be introduced. This can be done in tandem with the allocation of National Insurance numbers.

- The citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification.

- Donations from individuals to parties should be capped at £10,000, and organisational donations capped at £100 per member, subject to full democratic scrutiny within the organisation.

- State funding to support local activity by political parties should be introduced on the allocation of individual voter vouchers. ...(A)t a general election a voter would be able to tick a box allocating a £3 donation per year from public funds to a party of his or her choice to be used … for local activity.

- Text voting or email voting should only be considered following other reform of our democratic arrangements.

- The realignment of constituency boundaries should be accelerated.

Downloading power

- Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management.
Figure 1 Number of candidates standing in general elections, 1945-2005 (source: Electoral Commission, 2006, 32)