

VOTERS TO STAY AT HOME? BRITAIN'S DECLINING SENSE OF CIVIC DUTY

Many people vote simply because they feel they have a 'civic duty' to do so. However, according to the latest NatCen British Social Attitudes report, the number of people who feel that way has fallen sharply during the last two decades. The drop has been particularly marked amongst both young people and those who say they have little or no interest in politics.

Having a sense of civic duty is clearly linked to whether or not someone votes:

- No less than 85% of those who think 'it's everyone's duty to vote' cast a ballot at the last election in 2005. In contrast, just a quarter (24%) of those who don't think it is worth voting did so.

However, now fewer people in Britain feel an obligation to vote than at any time since the question was first posed on BSA in 1991:

- Only just over half (56%) now think that 'it's everyone's duty to vote', down from two thirds (68%) in 1991.
- Although only a minority of people (18%) go as far as to say that 'it's not really worth voting', this figure has more than doubled since the early 1990s, when it stood at just 8%.
- Only just over two in five (41%) of under 35 year olds feel they have a duty to vote.

Sarah Butt, co-author, comments:

"Young people have always been less civically minded than their elders. However, young people today are markedly less likely to feel a sense of civic duty compared with people of the same age 20 years ago."

Civic duty has fallen most heavily among the 'politically disengaged':

- Around a third of people (32%) are politically disengaged, that is they say they have 'not much' or 'no interest' in politics. Perhaps surprisingly, this proportion has changed little over the years.
- In 1991, over half (52%) of the politically disengaged felt they had a duty to vote. This has now fallen by 18 points to 34%.
- In contrast, amongst those who say they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics, the equivalent figures are 80% (in 1991) and 73% (now), a drop of just 7 points.

Sarah Butt, co-author, comments:

'Low turnout has been a feature of recent elections with just 61 per cent of people turning out to vote in 2005. The decline in civic duty means it is possible that, regardless of whether the next election provides voters with a clear choice between parties or a more closely fought contest, we could again see large sections of the population remaining at home on election day'.

ENDS

This summarises 'Duty in decline? Trends in attitudes to voting' by Sarah Butt and John Curtice, in British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report, published by Sage for NatCen.

Notes to Editors

- 1 **British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report** is published on Tuesday 26th January, 2010 by SAGE, price £50.00. It is edited by Alison Park, John Curtice, Katarina Thomson, Miranda Phillips, Elizabeth Clery and Sarah Butt. SAGE is at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book234304&series=Series30&>.
- 2 The report includes two additional chapters not covered by this press release. Findings from these chapters, on religion, were released earlier in the year.
- 3 British findings are from the British Social Attitudes survey, with the exception of the chapter by Andy Ross and Amanda Sacker, which also uses data from the British Household Panel Study, and the chapter by Rossy Bailey, Elizabeth Fuller and Rachel Ormston, which also uses data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey and the Health Survey for England. Findings that compare Britain with other countries are taken from the European Social Survey (www.europeansocialsurvey.org) or the International Social Survey Programme (www.issp.org).
- 4 The British Social Attitudes survey series has been conducted annually since 1983. The 2008 survey consisted of 4,486 interviews with a representative, random sample of people in Britain.
- 5 The survey is funded by charitable and government sources. The questions in the 2008 survey were funded by the following government Departments: Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (now Business, Innovation and Skills); Children, Schools and Families; Health; Transport; and Work and Pensions. Other funders came from: the Economic and Social Research Council; the Food Standards Agency; the Gatsby Charitable Foundation; the Hera Trust; the John Templeton Foundation; the Leverhulme Trust; and NORFACE.
- 6 NatCen, Britain's largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research (www.natcen.ac.uk).

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