



Rearranging the Deckchairs on the Titanic?

The impact of postal-voting-on-demand in Britain

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Synopsis: Do electoral reforms minimizing mechanical barriers to registration and balloting bring more citizens to the polls? And are they particularly effective in mobilizing special-needs or less-privileged social sectors? Debate about reform continues between advocates and critics. A growing body of research has examined procedural innovations in the United States but less is known about the situation elsewhere.

To consider these issues, this paper presents a case study evaluating the impact of amending balloting processes in Britain. *Part I* reviews the debate in the literature. *Part II* summarizes the Blair government's program of electoral modernization. *Part III* draws upon the BES survey evidence to analyze the impact of one initiative - postal-voting-on-demand - on electoral participation and the social composition of the voting population in the 2005 British general election. The conclusion in *Part IV* summarizes the core findings. The results suggest that procedural innovations designed to reduce the mechanical costs of balloting, exemplified by this case, while beneficial for some groups, may also disappoint the more optimistic hopes of reformers.

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In recent years many democracies have seen renewed interest in innovations in electoral administration designed to facilitate registration and balloting, exemplified in the United States by the use of election-day registration, the ‘motor voter’ legislation, absentee voting, early voting, and mail ballots¹. This issue has attracted considerable attention, well before debate about the pros and cons of reform was reignited in America by the Bush-Gore debacle in Florida and its aftermath. Perhaps the most important and influential argument by proponents of reform concerns the claim that turnout will be strengthened by more accessible electoral registration procedures and more convenient balloting facilities. Related contentions are that these developments will be particularly important by encouraging electoral participation among those with special needs, such as the elderly, home-bound carers, and the disabled, and those who are currently most politically marginalized. This process, it is argued, will produce a more socially-representative voting population.

These twin claims draw loosely upon Downsian theories where citizens’ decisions to vote in an election are assumed to reflect the rational calculus of costs and benefits². The costs involve becoming informed about the parties and aware of the issues at stake (the ‘psychological’ costs), as well as of registering and casting a ballot (the ‘mechanical’ costs). The proximity theory of voting assumes that the benefits of participation come from supporting the party closest to the voter’s ideological preference. All other things being equal, reducing some of the ‘mechanical’ barriers of the time and effort needed to get to the polls, it is argued, should therefore get more citizens to participate. This process should have most effect upon citizens who encounter the greatest practical difficulties in registering or casting a ballot in person, such as those confined to the home, or those tuned out of political debate.

Yet these arguments remain controversial. Cassandras warn that, at worst, procedural changes may open a Pandora’s Box of electoral fraud, vote-rigging, intimidation, and identity theft, thereby undermining public confidence in the integrity and security of the electoral process and generating unintended consequences which actually discourage participation. Alternatively skeptics suggest that, at best, mechanical reforms to registration and balloting will probably be unable to boost turnout by much, at least in the short-term. In this view, no instant panaceas or technological fixes will solve enduring problems of civic engagement.

This debate raises three questions examined in this case study: do procedural reforms designed to minimize the mechanical barriers to registration and balloting have the capacity to stimulate more citizens to vote? Are such initiatives effective for mobilizing special needs populations? And are

they particularly important for bringing less-engaged citizens to the polls? Analysis of specific reforms illuminate enduring theoretical concerns about what motivates people to cast a ballot, as well as being highly relevant to contemporary political debates within the policymaking community. A growing body of empirical research has evaluated the short-term impact of the administrative reforms introduced into American elections in recent decades, exemplified by Election Day registration and all-postal ballots. The cumulative results generally support the more skeptical interpretation, suggesting that these changes have produced only modest effects on overall levels of American turnout³. Far from creating more equal opportunities, studies suggest that reforms have actually exacerbated social inequalities in the composition of the voting population, by mobilizing those who are already most predisposed to be active⁴. A growing body of work in the United States now supports this conclusion, yet it remains unclear whether the results can be attributed to the well-known ‘exceptionalism’ of the US political system, such as the lower levels of American turnout and higher social disparities in the voting population, compared with most other democracies.

Will similar procedural reforms have similar effects elsewhere? To explore this question, this case-study focuses upon the introduction of postal-voting-on-demand in Britain. Conditional postal voting has been available since 1918 for certain groups in Britain, but in 2001 this facility became available on application for all electors, without any conditions attached. Just over 15% of all voters cast a ballot by mail in the 2005 general election. What was the impact of this initiative? *Part I* of the paper considers the debate in the literature. *Part II* describes the development of the Blair government’s program for modernizing British elections. The UK Election Commission was established in 2000 and this body monitored and evaluated the results of a series of electoral pilot studies, before making recommendations to parliament. The pilot studies trialed use of a rolling (continuous) electoral register, postal-voting-on-demand (PVD), all-postal ballots, changes in the hours and location of polling stations, and remote e-voting through new communication and information technologies. *Part III* uses BES survey evidence to evaluate the impact of ‘postal-voting-on-demand’ on voting participation and the composition of the voting population in the 2005 British general election. The study compares who voted in person and by post in each general election, including their social characteristics, political attitudes, and preference for each voting mode. The conclusion summarizes the core findings. The results largely confirm the more skeptical perspective; in the short-term, postal-voting-on-demand had little impact upon overall levels of voting turnout, and nor did it mobilize the politically marginalized. The implementation of postal ballots also raised some public concern about the safety and security of the electoral

process. Nevertheless the analysis provide some limited support for the reformers: postal voting proved popular and convenient; it was particularly important for special-needs groups, notably among the retired and disabled; except for the age-effects among the retired community, it did not exacerbate social inequalities in the voting population; and there is some evidence of a learning effect from prior use. On balance, the facility is more convenient for some people, but this initiative alone will not restore overall levels of voting turnout to those enjoyed in Britain during earlier decades, thereby disappointing the more exaggerated claims made on behalf of this reform.

I: Theoretical framework and literature review

Once regarded as a rather dusty and obscure sub-topic in public administration, interest in electoral procedures has risen on the political agenda in many nations. In transitional and consolidating democracies, initiatives have focused on the basic design of electoral systems, and more generally on issues of electoral procedures, voting facilities, campaign funding, voter education, election monitoring, and party capacity-building⁵. A host of agencies, such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), have provided technical assistance, training and advice to strengthen and monitor these reforms. International observers, technical aid experts, and constitutional advisers played a leading role as dozens of transitional elections occurred throughout Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America. The primary aims of initiatives in newer democracies have been to produce a fair, secure, transparent, equitable, and efficient process for registering citizens, casting ballots, and counting votes which reinforces the integrity and legitimacy of elections, so that all sides accept the outcome, generating political stability and reducing conflict⁶. In many established democracies, by contrast, the basic integrity and legitimacy of the voting process is usually taken for granted due to a long-standing tradition of democratic elections. In these countries, procedural electoral reforms have focused most attention on ways to improve convenience, accessibility, and efficiency, as well as ways to strengthen participation.

Reforms to electoral rules differ in their scope. Major electoral reforms alter the broad constitutional arrangements in any political system. In the UK these are exemplified by the *mélange* of systems now experienced by citizens following the introduction of Additional Member (Mixed) systems for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, a closed regional Party List proportional system for European parliamentary elections, the Single Transferable Vote system in the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly, and the Supplementary Vote for Mayoral elections in London, while the House of

Commons and local elections in England and Wales continue to use single-member plurality elections (First-Past-The-Post). In Britain, the Labour government also introduced an important new regulatory framework governing party finance, implementing standards of transparency and spending limits, following passage of the *Political Parties, Elections, and Referendums Act (2000)*. By contrast, minor electoral reforms concern specific administrative procedures which govern the more mechanical aspects of registration and balloting. These have also been subject to significant changes in the UK since the Blair government came to power, and these developments are the specific focus of this study.

As Louis Massicotte, André Blais and Antoine Yoshinaka document, registration and voting facilities vary substantially among democracies.⁷ Some of the main variations in the regulations used include the following aspects:

- Whether *registration processes* are the responsibility of the state or the individual, as well as whether the register is continuous or periodic, whether it is compulsory or voluntary, whether house-to-house inquiries are used, and whether political parties are involved;
- The employment of *special voting procedures*, beyond in-person voting at a polling place, including the use of postal ballots (conditional, on-demand, and all-postal), as well as absentee, advance (early), assisted, overseas, proxy, and tendered ballots;
- The *distribution of polling facilities* for special populations, including the elderly, ill, infirm, or disabled resident in nursing homes, hospitals, and care institutions, rural residents in dispersed communities, and the use of convenience polling stations in shopping centers and malls;
- The *length of the polling period*, with extended hours for the weekend or holidays rather than a workday; and,
- The use of *remote voting* from home or work, a more recent innovation, casting voting preferences via the Internet, telephone, fax, or Teletext outside of the polling station.

Events in Florida vividly illustrated the importance of seemingly minor and routine practices such as the design and layout of the ballot paper, the security checks used for verifying registration lists, and the type of counting mechanism. These developments generated a substantial research literature about the potential consequences of procedural reforms in American elections. Reformers commonly argue that participation is encouraged by arrangements

allowing citizens greater flexibility, convenience, and choice about where, when and how they cast their ballot, so long as reforms do not reduce the security and integrity of the electoral process. This represents part of broader trends in the public sector management where government officials are encouraged to regard citizens as ‘customers’ by delivering more convenient and efficient services, cutting red-tape and unnecessary bureaucracy.

In general, there is now substantial evidence that ‘institutions matter’ for many aspects of electoral behavior, such as the impact of the basic type of proportional or majoritarian electoral system, and the use of compulsory voting laws with sanctions, on national levels of turnout⁸. For example, comparative studies by Powell established that turnout in established democracies was boosted by the use of compulsory voting laws, by automatic registration procedures, and by the strength of party-group alignments, while it was depressed in one-party predominant systems allowing no rotation of the parties in government⁹. Jackman and Miller confirmed that political institutions and electoral laws provided the most plausible explanation for variations in national-level voter turnout, including levels of electoral proportionality, multi-partyism, and the use of compulsory voting¹⁰. Blais and Dobrynska analyzed parliamentary elections in 91 democracies from 1972-1995 and concluded that voter participation was influenced by the use of compulsory voting, the age at which citizens became eligible to vote, the type of electoral system, the closeness of the electoral outcome, and the number of parties, as well as by levels of socioeconomic development and the size of the country¹¹. Franklin analyzed postwar elections in 22 established democracies and argued that an important part of the reason for any turnout decline experienced during the last decade in these countries concerned reforms to the institutional rules, notably the abandonment of compulsory voting laws and the lowering of the age of qualifying for the franchise, not changes in the political culture. Franklin emphasized that the impact of reforms was lagged rather than immediate, as there was a cohort effect upon new generations entering the electorate¹².

American studies comparing variations in state electoral facilities also suggest that turnout is related to institutional factors. For example, an early study by Wolfinger and Rosenstone argued that if all states allowed election day registration, American turnout nation-wide would rise by about 7-10 percentage points¹³. More recently, Wolfinger, Highton and Mullin found that other procedures also mattered, with turnout higher in states using longer polling hours and where registered electors were mailed sample ballot information¹⁴. Yet research analyzing the social consequences of these facilities provides less support for the reformers. Briens and Grofman examined Election Day registration in the United States and concluded that even the

most liberal easing of registration deadlines nation-wide would have only a modest impact upon overall levels of voting turnout and it would also fail to alter the long-standing socio-economic bias in who participated¹⁵. After reviewing a series of initiatives designed to make it easier for registered voters to cast a ballot in American elections, Berinsky concluded that these usually have modest effects and they often serve to exacerbate, rather than reduce, social inequalities at the ballot box¹⁶. Karp and Banducci report that all-postal voting in Oregon increased turnout most effectively among those who are already predisposed to vote, including more affluent social sectors, so that relaxing the administrative requirements is unlikely to improve participation among less privileged groups.¹⁷ Berinsky, Burns, and Taugott confirm similar findings, with all-postal voting in Oregon improving turnout among the resource-rich, thereby increasing social inequalities in the voting population¹⁸.

Although there are different findings in the literature, the growing body of US research generally serves to support the more skeptical perspective about the impact of procedural reforms. It remains to be seen, however, whether similar findings are evident elsewhere, or whether this proves to be another case of ‘American exceptionalism’, for example due to the exceptionally low turnout in the United States and marked patterns of social inequality in political participation, the use of voluntary and individual rather than state-initiated and compulsory registration processes, and the lack of uniform registration and standardized balloting procedures used across the whole country. As discussed later in detail, the UK Electoral Commission’s evidence evaluating the use of all-postal ballots in local and European elections recorded significantly higher turnout, ranging from 5 to 15%, in areas which tried the pilot studies. The only available study which has been published to date analyzing the impact of postal-voting-on-demand on the outcome of the 2005 British general election, by John Curtice, drew upon a BBC survey estimating the number of postal ballots had been issued in a sample of 345 constituencies compared with levels of turnout in these areas¹⁹. The study concluded that the wider availability of postal-voting-on-demand had, at most, an extremely minor impact on constituency-level turnout in the 2005 general election. “Making it easier for people to vote by post may give people the right to choose how they vote but it evidently does not, unlike all postal ballots, make them more the significantly more likely actually to cast a ballot.”²⁰ The 2-point rise in national turnout which occurred in this election, he suggests, cannot be accounted for by the wider availability of postal voting. To understand the British case in more detail, we need to consider the reforms which were introduced and analyze the effect of postal-voting-on-demand on participation using the BES in the 2005 general election.

II: The case-study of British procedural reforms

What procedural changes were considered and implemented in recent British elections? The Blair government which came to power in 1997 was concerned to ‘modernize’ British electoral administration, including improving its efficiency and transparency, as part of their broader panoply of constitutional initiatives²¹. Their concern was strongly reinforced by the haemorrhaging level of voting turnout evident in Britain, down from 71.5% of the British electorate when new Labour swept to victory to 59.1% in the 2001 general election (see Figure 1). This was the lowest participation in any general election since the ‘khaki’ contest of 1918. Equally remarkable, it was also the worst turnout recorded in any postwar general election in any European Union state. Local elections told a similar story, with turnout reaching its nadir in 2000 when only 27% of the electorate cast a ballot. Many commentators and politicians believed that this situation reflected (at best) widespread public disinterest in electoral campaigns and citizen apathy with public affairs. Or even (at worst) lack of trust in the government and a pervasive alienation with representative democracy, especially among the young. If the erosion of voting turnout continued unchecked, there were worries that the legitimacy of the electoral process, and the mandate of the government, might eventually be undermined.

[Figure 1 about here]

The UK Electoral Commission

In the light of these developments, the Blair government evaluated and implemented a number of steps designed to modernize UK elections. The first major initiative in 2000 was establishing the UK Electoral Commission as the official independent body responsible to the Speaker of the UK parliament, charged with improving the integrity, involvement, and effectiveness in the electoral process. The Commission provided the first central agency in the UK responsible for monitoring all aspects of elections, including registering political parties; publishing significant donations to parties; regulating spending by parties on election campaigns; reporting on the conduct of elections and referendums; reviewing electoral law and procedures; advising the Government on changes; advising those involved on the conduct of elections and referendums; promoting public awareness of our electoral systems; and reviewing electoral boundaries. The day-to-day administration of elections remained the responsibility of local Returning Officers. The Department of Constitutional Affairs is the central government department with responsibility for English and Welsh elections to the UK parliament, while the Scottish Office plays this role north of the border. In establishing a central monitoring

body, the British government was following practices used elsewhere; Massicotte, Blais and Yoshinaka found that two-thirds of all democracies have a central electoral authority, appointed through a variety of mechanisms.²²

Once established, the UK Electoral Commission gathered evidence through commissioning research, conducting surveys and focus groups, and initiating a range of pilot trial studies. The results have been published in a series of reports, including those containing recommendations to parliament. The Commission sought to evaluate the effect of technological experiments with remote e-voting (from the home and workplace), using the Internet, TV teletext, mobile phones, palm pilots, all-postal ballots, and text messaging, with the analysis of the results of the pilot studies evaluated in an earlier study²³. The Commission considered initiatives designed to strengthen civic education and voter mobilization among specific target populations, such as young people, women, and ethnic minorities²⁴. And they have recommended the introduction of some important procedural reforms, notably the implementation of a rolling electoral register and the use of postal-ballots-on-demand.

The rolling register

In terms of the specific procedural reforms, the government was concerned that turnout was reduced by outdated records contained in the electoral register determining elector eligibility. The register used to be compiled by an annual household census distributed every autumn by local electoral registration officers, which came into effect the following spring. A more geographically mobile population meant that a significant minority were no longer resident at the address for which they were officially registered to vote. In February 2001 the *Representation of the People Regulations* introduced a 'rolling register' which enabled people to apply voluntarily to be added at any time to the electoral register, or to change their residential address to another constituency. A simple application form could be downloaded from the Commission's AboutMyVote website. The availability of this facility was publicized by the Commission, including with TV and newspaper ad campaigns. The register is now updated monthly on a continuous basis except when the annual census is taking place²⁵. In adopting a continuously updated register, Britain followed practices adopted in the majority of democracies, such as Canada, Belgium and New Zealand²⁶. The registration process remains under review and the Department of Constitutional Affairs issued a policy paper immediately after the 2005 general election announcing further changes under discussion, leading towards new legislation designed to tighten security and administrative effectiveness while also improving the accessibility of elections.²⁷ These proposals include the use of individual rather than household registration, a change which would facilitate collection of signatures and date of

birth, allowing verification checks on postal votes and polling station records. At present electoral registration records are held locally and there are no safeguards against electors registering in more than one constituency²⁸. The government proposes to develop a standardized central electoral registry which would allow more secure cross-checks and which would allow people more flexibility about where they vote, as well as facilitating future electronic voting. The period that people could register to vote would also be extended to 11 days before poll.

Postal-Voting-on-Demand

The UK has long allowed a range of special ballots including assisted voting (for example, for the illiterate, sight-impaired, or disabled); proxy voting (allowing an elector to appoint another person, for example a close relative, to vote on their behalf); and postal voting. There are three distinct types of postal ballots, which may differ in their impact:

- *Conditional* postal ballots, available upon application only for certain specific categories of need;
- *Postal-ballots-on-demand*, available by individual voluntary application without any specific conditions attached; and lastly,
- *All-postal ballots*, where this is the only way to cast a ballot, the ballot forms are mailed out automatically by the state to all those currently listed on the electoral register, and no traditional in-person voting polling stations are provided.

Conditional postal ballots were first introduced into British elections in 1918, for those with a physical incapacity or requiring a journey by air or sea, prompted by the number of servicemen who had not yet returned home from the First World War. The conditions were gradually liberalized to include certain other categories of electors, namely those who were disabled, or away from their designated local polling station on business or on holiday. The *Representation of the People Act 2000* abolished the conditionality of postal ballots and made these available to all electors upon voluntary request more than six days in advance of the poll. Registered elector could apply for such a vote either for a particular election, for a specified period, or permanently. The procedure involved completing and returning a simple (downloadable) form. No reason was required for the request, nor was any evidence of need, nor was any form of identification necessary, although a witness signature was needed on the application form. With a postal ballot, any elector could vote from the comfort and convenience of their own home or when traveling. In this regard, Britain followed the procedures adopted by many other countries

which used on-demand ballots, including Canada, Lithuania, and Spain. The most comprehensive review of voting facilities in 63 democratic states, by Massicotte, Blair and Yoshinaka, found that about one third of the democracies under comparison used postal voting, with various degrees of leniency concerning the specific conditions for qualifying²⁹.

Internet voting and e-enabled elections

These reforms were regarded as the first step and the government wanted to consider a range of further innovations in electoral administration and voting facilities, including remote voting using the internet and all-postal ballots. To gather evidence, the Electoral Commission initiated a series of pilot studies from 2000 to 2004 which trialed alternative administrative procedures³⁰. Pilot studies evaluated the role of new information and communication technologies in voting, including remote electronic voting via the internet, telephone, SMS text messaging, or interactive digital TV. Pilot areas also tried all-postal ballots, where all electors in a district could only cast a ballot by mail and there are no in-person polling stations. Elections using all-postal ballots are relatively uncommon in many other countries, but both the state of Oregon and New Zealand local elections exemplify this practice. Other pilots monitored the effects of early voting before polling day, electronic counting, electronic kiosks in polling stations, new locations for polling stations such as in shopping centers, and extended voting hours. These pilot schemes were implemented in selected areas during local elections in the May 2000, May 2002, and May 2003 local elections, and in the English local government and European Parliamentary elections held in June 2004. Comparisons were made across areas, and both surveys and focus groups monitored public reactions. The Commission published a series of reports evaluating the results.

The general conclusion was that of all these initiatives, all-postal ballots worked most effectively for strengthening participation: for example, in May 2003, voting turnout rose on average by about 15 percentage points in local areas which had used all-postal voting when compared with the previous equivalent election held in that area. In the June 2004 elections to the European parliament, all-postal pilots used in the North-East, East Midlands, Yorkshire & the Humber, and the North West saw voter turnout about 5 percentage points higher than in other regions. All-postal ballots also improved voter satisfaction with the electoral process. As shown in an earlier study, however, the all-postal ballots had most impact by boosting turnout most among those groups who were already most motivated to participate, as well as among the older generation and among women³¹.

Implementing all-postal voting schemes in subsequent elections was discouraged, however, by subsequent police investigations and court cases which revealed that some cases of postal ballot abuse and voting fraud had occurred, notably in Birmingham. This sparked campaigns in the press and considerable debate about whether the integrity, security, and legitimacy of the voting process were being undermined by the easier availability of postal ballots. Critics suggest that fiddling with election procedures violates the golden rule that physicians use when deciding whether to intervene: ‘First do no harm’. In Birmingham, the Electoral Commissioner and deputy high court judge reported evidence of ‘massive, systematic and organized’ electoral fraud that he felt would ‘disgrace a banana republic’. Anyone who was listed on the electoral register could download the official form and apply for a postal vote, and even have this delivered to another address, without any official identification required. The application could also be collected by third parties, such as local party workers and candidates, and delivered to the local electoral registration officer. The Electoral Reform Society argued that the system was open to abuse by identity thieves unless stronger forms of identification were required, and better safeguards were introduced concerning the direct delivery of these forms to the registration office³².

To address public concern, in August 2004 the Electoral Commission published its report, *Delivering Democracy? The Future of Postal Voting*, summarizing its evaluation.³³ In April 2005, before the general election campaign, they issued new guidelines about postal voting procedures. As a voluntary code, candidates, party canvassers, and community leaders were advised not to handle postal applications or ballots. Despite these, the OSCE team observing the 2005 UK general election reported that there were flaws in the electoral process, suggesting that the use of postal ballots could reduce secrecy and security from intimidation, there should be safeguards against multiple registrations, citizens should present some form of identification at ballot stations, and local returning officers should use more uniform practices³⁴. One question arising from the adverse publicity is whether postal voting on demand generated doubts about the security and integrity of British elections, and perhaps eroded confidence in the quality of British democracy. In response to criticism, after the general election the Department of Constitutional Affairs announced that further reforms were under discussion, leading towards publication of an *Election Administration Bill* designed to enhance security.³⁵

III: The impact of postal-voting-on-demand

Did postal-voting-on-demand vindicate the claims of reformers by generating higher turnout in the 2005 British general election? During the

campaign a widely-quoted BBC survey of constituency registration officers, used in the Curtice study, estimated that 12% of the electorate had applied for a postal ballot, triple the proportion in 2001³⁶. This figure, combined with the results of the all-postal voting pilot studies conducted earlier, generated a flurry of media speculation that British turnout might revive on polling day. In the event, levels of voting turnout in Great Britain did recover but up by only 2-points from 59.1% in 2001 to 61.2% in May 2005. This level remained far lower than the average turnout common during post-war Britain (see Figure 1). Still there was a slight rise – did postal ballots on demand contribute towards this?

To examine the evidence we can draw upon the 2005 British Election Survey, a panel survey of a representative sample of the electorate contacted before and after polling day. The pre-campaign data were gathered by in-person CAPI interviews carried out in February and March 2005. Survey fieldwork was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research (NATCEN). The post-election data was also based on face-to-face surveys using similar procedures. The pre-post total recontacted sample involved 2,959 respondents. The post-election wave of the 2005 British Election Study survey monitored the self-reported mode of voting, so we can examine the characteristics and attitudes of those who reported voting in person compared with those who reported voting by post. The initiative came into effect just five months before the June 2001 British general election, and it was not widely publicized, but it might be expected to have had more influence by the time of the May 2005 general elections. (It should be noted that the official figures for the number of postal ballots issued by local registration officers have not yet been released; once they become available this will facilitate constituency-level comparison with levels of turnout in each seat. In subsequent releases the self-reported vote in the BES will also be verified against official records, increasing the accuracy of the analysis.)

The BES survey estimates suggest that 15% of all British voters (four million people) returned their ballot by mail in the May 2005 general election, up from 4% in 2001. Overall about one in ten of the electorate (12%) used this mode of voting in 2005. This proportion is strikingly similar to the BBC estimate derived from their survey of constituency registration officers, lending further confidence to these figures. The growth in postal voting over successive elections attests to its increasing popularity but the obvious question arising is whether those who used this mode are likely to have cast a ballot in person anyway, or whether the mode of balloting attracted people who might otherwise have failed to participate. And were there any partisan effects associated with the mode of voting?

Respondents were asked in the pre-campaign wave of the BES about their probability of voting in the forthcoming general election and in subsequent local and European elections (using 10-point scales). The survey also monitored both their probability of becoming politically active through a variety of channels, such as working for a party or going on a demonstration, their party membership, and their vote in the general election. The initial results of the simple cross-tabulation of these factors are presented in Table 1, without controlling for any prior social or attitudinal characteristics of voters. These initial results suggest that compared with in-person voters, postal voters have a significantly higher propensity to vote and to belong to a party, although both groups were similar in many other dimensions of activism and in their party vote choice. What this profile indicates is that postal-voting-on-demand - where it should be stressed that the initiative is upon the individual elector to apply voluntarily for this facility - is more likely to reinforce the engaged than to broaden the electorate by reaching those who have tuned out of electoral activism.

[Table 1 about here]

Nevertheless numerous factors usually influence both voting participation and the selection of ballot mode, so multivariate analysis is required to explore these initial results further. In addition the results of the cross-tabulations need treating with caution as self-reported voting participation is notoriously unreliable, both due to faulty recall of past histories as well as the social desirability of this act, and this measure usually produces an exaggerative bias. The BES also asked about the hypothetical propensity to act, and the debate about measuring 'protest potential' suggests that this is a less reliable indicator of behavior than asking about whether the respondent has actually acted.

To examine this issue further, binary logistic models are used in Table 2 to analyze the factors determining voting turnout and then to see whether similar factors also predict the mode of balloting. The logic of the research design is that if variables such as age, education, and political interest are associated both with voting participation and with use of postal ballots, then the impact of this reform is likely to reinforce existing biases in the composition of the voting population. By contrast, if different factors predict patterns of voting participation and the use of postal ballots, then the wider availability of postal-voting-on-demand is likely to broaden the composition of the voting population. The models used in this study specify a range of social structural, cultural, and partisan factors which are expected to prove important for predicting voting turnout.

The models enter the standard social structural variables, including age, gender, social class, household income and ethnicity, as well as cultural attitudes, with the technical details of the coding and scale construction given in Appendix A.

The social-psychological theory of political participation associated with the work of Sidney Verba and his colleagues emphasizes the importance of structural resources, which are commonly believed to be important for electoral activism, since time, money, and civic skills make it easier for individuals who are predisposed to take part to do so³⁷. Since resources are unevenly distributed throughout societies this helps to explain the commonly reported disparities in voting participation related to gender, race/ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status (combining education, income and occupation). Education, in particular, has been widely established as one of the best predictors of many types of civic engagement, furnishing cognitive skills and civic awareness that allows citizens to make sense of the political world and to increased feelings of subjective competence³⁸.

The most important civic attitudes commonly found to predict turnout include a sense of internal political efficacy (the belief that the voter can influence the outcome of the electoral process), feelings of civic duty, political knowledge, political interest, and the strength of partisan identification.

Alternative accounts of turnout also stress the importance of ‘pull factors’ which bring people to the polls, including, as Rosenstone and Hanson emphasize, mobilization by parties³⁹. British party organizations contact supporters, use get-out-the-vote drives, and conduct telephone and doorstep canvassing.

Lastly reformers argue that, all other things being equal, reducing some of the ‘mechanical’ costs should get more citizens to the polls. This process might be expected to prove most important for special needs populations, notably the elderly and the disabled, where the mechanical costs of getting out physically to the local polls are not inconsiderable. It was anticipated that home-workers, those with children, and those working exceptionally long hours (more than 50 hours per week), might also find postal ballots more convenient. If there was a learning effect, those with recent experience of using all-postal ballots in the pilot regions might also be more likely to want to use them again. The analysis therefore includes each of these sets of factors in the models.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 presents the results of this analysis. Model 1 confirms that voting participation in the 2005 British general election was significantly associated with social structural characteristics, as expected, with higher turnout among older age groups, those with greater education, and electors with professional or managerial occupations, while turnout was lower among ethnic minority populations. Motivational attitudes also proved significant, as many other studies report, with higher electoral participation among those paying most attention to the campaign, people with a sense of civic duty, and also the more politically knowledgeable. The strength of party identification was also associated with voting. By contrast, some of the factors which might have been expected to predict voting turnout failed to do so, including party contact and a sense of internal efficacy, which were not significant. The overall model explained a moderate amount of variance in voting participation ($R^2=.347$).

Model 2 then uses the same factors to see whether they predicted how people cast a ballot, as well as whether they voted. The results show that none of the variables which proved significant overlapped in both models. The only factors which proved significant in predicting mode of voting were whether there were special needs, with people who were retired or disabled proving more likely to use postal ballots, and whether the elector lived in a region which had used all-postal ballots in the 2004 European elections. This pattern was clear even though living in one of these regions was associated with slightly lower turnout. The study by John Curtice found that this pattern was also evident in regional election results at aggregate level⁴⁰. It appears that familiarity with using postal ballots seem to encourage its use in subsequent contests. What the comparison suggests is that the use of postal ballot will not reinforce most of the existing biases in the British voting population, except those of age; instead these facilities reach a wide cross-section of the public. Beyond the special needs populations, however, neither will postal-voting-on-demand broaden the basis of the voting population to reach more disengaged groups.

The age profile is particularly interesting and deserves further scrutiny. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the mode of balloting against each age group. The youngest category (under 25 years old) is equally likely to use either mode. Among the retired population, however, postal ballots are twice as popular as traditional visits to the polling station. The striking popularity of this mode of voting for the elderly was also evident in the all-postal pilot studies conducted in 2003⁴¹.

[Figure 2 about here]

So if motivational attitudes and most social characteristics fail to predict mode of balloting, what does explain its growing popularity? The BES also monitored the reasons why people opted for each mode (using multiple response questions) and also perceptions about the security and secrecy of each. Among those who used a postal ballot, the main reason given were that it is more convenient to vote by post than in person (mentioned by 35%), while health reasons which prevented the elector from getting to the polling station was also important (mentioned by 17%), as was the habitual effect of having voted by post in the past and liking the process (mentioned by 13%). (See Figure 3). The reasons offered by voters for using postal ballots therefore reflected and further confirmed the pattern which emerged from the regression models. By contrast, when people who used in-person visits to the polling station were asked for the reason why they chose this mode, traditional habit and familiarity was the most important factor, mentioned by more than half. But there was also public concern about potential fraud and abuse from other ways of casting a ballot, a reason mentioned by one quarter of those who voted in person.

[Figure 3 about here]

This raises the broader question about perceptions of the safety and security of changing the traditional way of casting a ballot. Critics charge that the changes have thrown up serious problems of fraud and abuse, notably the legal charges in Birmingham, as well as problems of potential intimidation once the protection of the secret ballot has been discounted. Some of the news media have devoted extensive coverage of this issue and, as mentioned earlier, the official report on the election by OSCE observers raised concern about these matters. Evidence in the BES suggests that to some extent the public shares these concerns. Among those who voted in person, there was an almost unanimous consensus that the process was safe from fraud (93% though their ballot was 'very' or 'fairly safe) and the same proportion thought that the secrecy of their vote was maintained (see Figure 4). Among those who voted by post, on the other hand, there was less confidence in the safety and security of their ballot; indeed one quarter who used this method thought their vote was very or fairly unsafe from fraud. These concerns indicate that the introduction of postal-voting-on-demand has reduced confidence in the integrity of the electoral process to some degree, a matter which the government intends to address by tightening safeguards against the potential abuse of postal ballots.

[Figure 4 about here]

IV: Conclusions and discussion

To summarize the key findings to emerge from the study, the analysis of the BES survey data largely confirms the more skeptical perspective. The results suggest that the introduction of postal-voting-on-demand proved popular: in the May 2005 general election, 15% of all British voters (four million people) returned their ballot by mail, up from 4% in 2001. Overall about one in ten of the electorate (12%) used this mode of voting. Postal voting was particularly important for certain specific groups with special needs who commonly experience most difficulty in attending a polling station in person, notably the disabled or physically immobile, and the retired community. In particular, the availability of postal-voting-on-demand slightly reduced the ‘costs’ side of the equation: the investment of time and energy required for citizens to cast a ballot expressing their preferences; many who used this method reported that it made the act of voting more convenient. But beyond specific populations, the initiative failed to generate much greater turnout overall and nor did it generate greater social equality in the voting population; the political attitudes and social characteristics predicting voting turnout failed to explain the mode of balloting used. Moreover there is public concern about the safety and security of this mode of voting which needs to be addressed.

Nevertheless it should be noted that this study has only explored the short-term impact of this reform and we have not been able to consider any lagged impact which takes many years to become evident. Downsian accounts suggest that reforming voting procedures will alter the calculus of the mechanical costs when rational citizens decide whether to participate, which should therefore alter behavior shortly after the new facilities are implemented. By contrast, the standard social psychological models of voting participation suggest that patterns of behavior reflect long-term cultural habits and taken-for-granted traditions within each society, so that any effect from changing the mechanical rules can only be expected to occur over a long series of elections. Social psychological accounts suggest that political attitudes and orientations are acquired in early childhood and they subsequently become engrained through experiences over successive elections. In this view it would be misguided to expect that levels of voting turnout will respond immediately to procedural reforms. Rather than consciously calculating the potential rewards and benefits of voting, these accounts emphasize that the propensity to participate or abstain is a ‘habit of the heart’ learnt during the formative years and reinforced through experience, along with other closely related civic attitudes and values such as partisan attachments and political trust. In the longer term, however, in this view administrative reforms may have a more

glacial cumulative impact, if younger generations gradually start to participate at higher levels by using the new opportunities, with the process of demographic replacement eventually transforming the composition of the electorate. This process is exemplified by the expansion of the franchise to women; it took many decades after the franchise was granted in most established democracies before women eventually achieved parity with men at the ballot box, before subsequently overtaking them in levels of voting turnout⁴². In a comparison of established democracies, Mark Franklin also emphasizes the role of generational cohorts in ‘dampening’ the immediate effects of regulatory change, for example the impact of lowering the age of the franchise from 21 to 18.⁴³ Perhaps successive elections using the new facilities would generate a cumulative impact which cannot be studied at this time.

In the British case, therefore, from this evidence we can conclude that simplifying balloting facilities slightly reduced some of the practical barriers towards participation for groups with special needs. This is a valuable step in itself. Unless other more deep-seated causes of low turnout are addressed, however, these mechanical reforms are essentially akin to ‘rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic’. By itself, the introduction of postal ballots-on-demand is incapable of fundamentally altering the distribution of cultural attitudes, the socioeconomic resources, and the patterns of party competition which mobilize citizens. More radical initiatives would be required, probably moving to all-postal voting, for the mechanical costs to be lowered sufficiently to generate greater impact on voting participation. Popular hopes for the impact of postal-voting-on demand were dashed because too much was expected of too little, and the underlying causes of voter turnout were underestimated. Moreover because of the cases of electoral fraud associated with postal voting in certain areas, and the widespread publicity these developments received in the news media, this change raised broader doubts about the security and integrity of the electoral process. The potential benefits of reforms to established practices need to be carefully weighed because, beyond any potential gains for special needs groups, the implementation of this initiative also carries the risk of generating some serious negative externalities for confidence in the British electoral process.

Table 1: Indicators of activism and partisanship by mode of balloting

	<i>Voted via in person ballot</i>	<i>Voted by postal ballot</i>	<i>Coef</i>	<i>(Sig)</i>
<i>% 'Very' likely to...</i>				
Ask someone to get involved	20	28	.20	***
Vote in the May 2005 general election	64	73	.19	***
Vote in the next local elections	53	64	.19	***
Vote in the next European elections	51	60	.12	***
Work actively with a group on an issue	5	6	.10	**
Participate in a rally or demonstration	4	5	.10	*
Be active in a voluntary organization	16	17	.05	
Try to convince someone how to vote	5	3	.05	
Discuss politics with family or friends	19	19	.03	
Join a boycott	9	12	.03	
Give money to a political party	2	5	.02	
Work for a party or candidate in an election	2	3	.01	
<i>% who have been or are...</i>				
Very active in a voluntary organization	18	16	.07	
Member of a political party	4	10	.45	***
<i>% who voted for each main party in May 2005</i>				
Labour voter	40	43	.06	
Conservative voter	34	36	.05	
Liberal Democrat voter	24	21	.05	

Note: 'Very likely' was defined as point '10' on the 10-point scale. The coefficient of association was measured by gamma. Sig p.***=.001 **=.01 *=.05 (otherwise not significant). See Appendix A for details of the questions and coding.

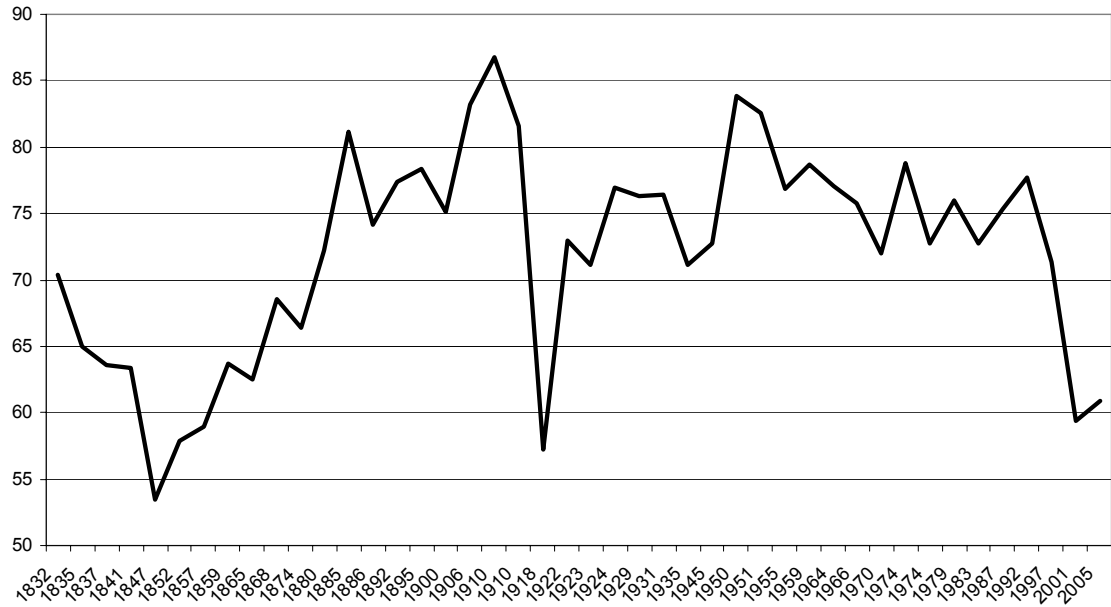
Source: Post-election wave of the British Election Study 2005 (NatCen) Weighted by National Representative Weight (Release August 2005)

Table 2: The models of voting turnout and mode of balloting

	<i>(i)</i> <i>Reported voting</i>			<i>(ii)</i> <i>Mode of balloting</i>		
	B	s.e.	Sig	B	s.e.	Sig
SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS						
Age (Years)	.037	.007	***	.000	.010	
Gender (Male=1)	-.245	.176		.176	.220	
Ethnicity (White=1/Non-white=0)	1.23	.221	***	-.388	.367	
Education (Highest education 18-pt scale)	.043	.018	**	.009	.021	
Occupational class						
Professional and managerial	.562	.235	**	-.248	.333	
Skilled non-manual	.225	.236		-.526	.368	
Petit bourgeoisie	.137	.375		.113	.485	
Skilled manual	.293	.259		-.540	.390	
Income (10-pt scale)	.031	.027		-.061	.036	
Live in region with 2004 postal voting pilots	-.041	.178		.898	.200	***
SPECIAL NEEDS						
Disabled from fulltime work	-.350	.238		.784	.252	**
Retired	.236	.404		.846	.333	**
Home worker	.214	.333		.507	.434	
Children (With at least one child living at home)	.422	.161	***	-.322	.239	
Work long hours (50 hours+/week)	-.240	.237		.011	.273	
MOTIVATIONAL ATTITUDES						
Attention to politics	.103	.042	**	-.011	.056	
Civic duty (30-pt scale)	.109	.019	***	-.015	.028	
Political knowledge (7-pt true-false scale)	.115	.056	*	.050	.080	
Internal efficacy	.007	.017		.013	.020	
Left-right ideological position (10-pt scale)	-.066	.056		.052	.054	
PARTY						
Strength of party identification	.389	.112	***	.063	.135	
Saw Party Political Broadcast	.056	.175		-.324	.214	
Contacted by party during campaign	.175	.127		-.050	.139	
SUMMARY						
Constant	-1.77		**	-1.71		
Percentage correctly predicted	83.2			88.1		
Nagelkerke R square	.347			.145		
Weighted N. cases	1256			1000		

Note: The models are the result of binary logistic analysis (with Beta, Standard Error, and Significance) where the dependent variables are (i) whether someone reported voting in the 2005 British general election, and (ii) the Mode of Ballot used (where postal=1, in-person=0). The models were checked to be free of problems of multicollinearity. Sig p.***=.001 **=.01 *=.05 (otherwise not significant). See Appendix A for details of the questions and coding.

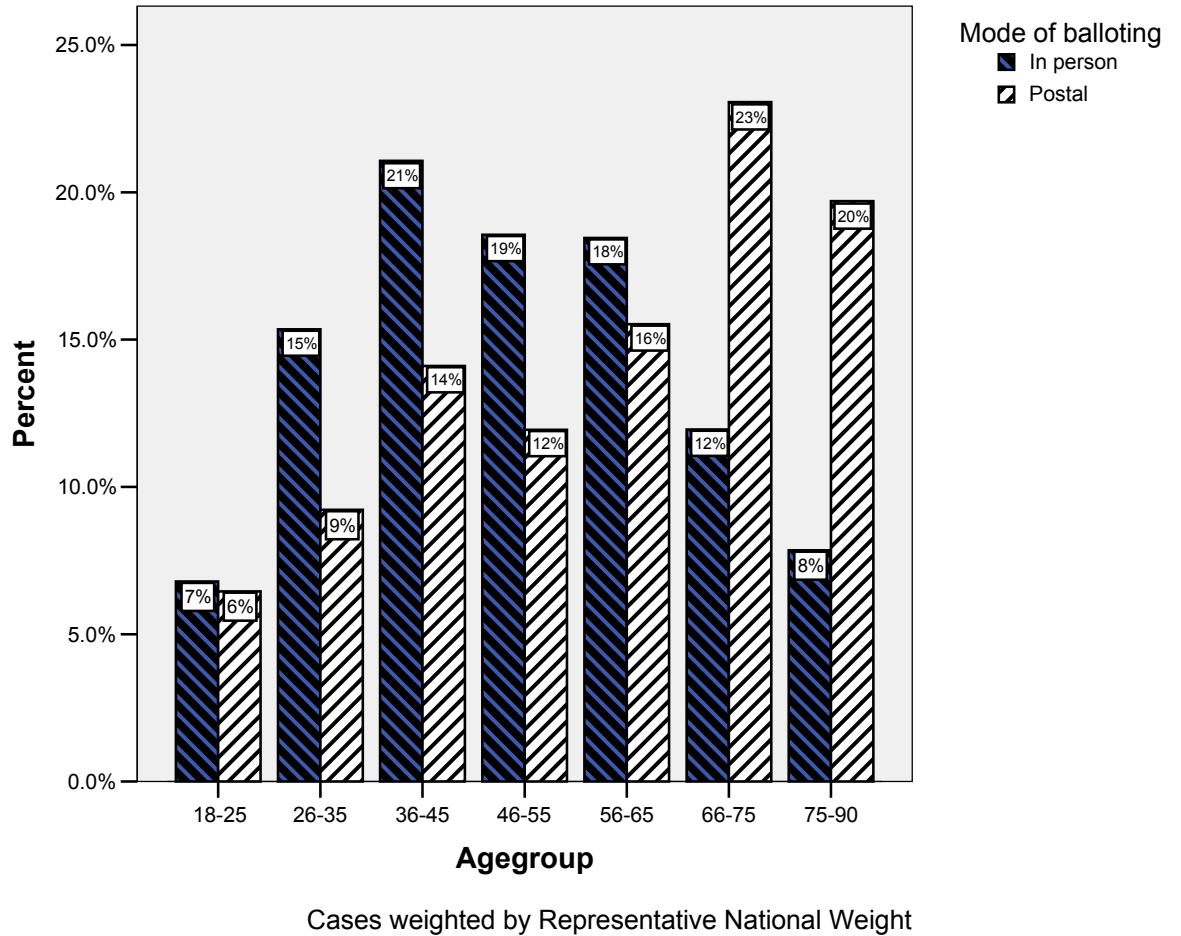
Source: Post-election wave of the British Election Study 2005 (NatCen) Weighted by National Representative Weight (Release August 2005)

Figure 1: UK turnout 1832-2005

Note: The number of valid votes cast as a proportion of the eligible UK electorate.

Sources: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher. Eds. 2000. *British Electoral Facts 1832-1999*. Aldershot: Parliamentary Research Services/Ashgate; *The British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992-2005*.

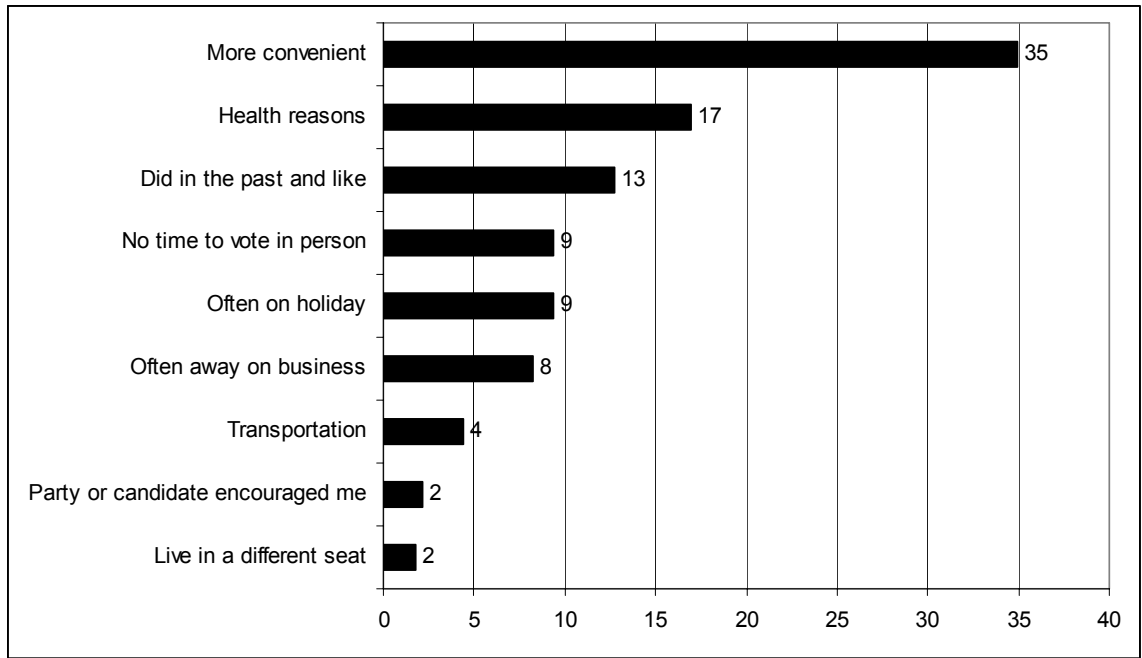
Figure 2: Mode of voting by age group



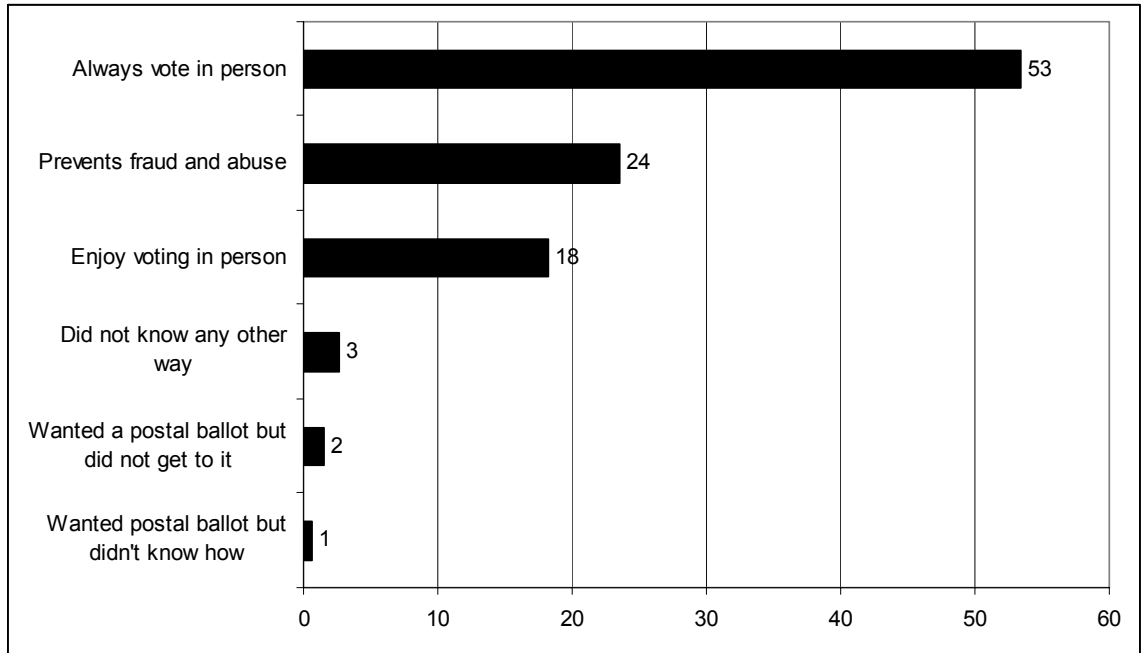
Source: British Election Study 2005 Post-election wave (NatCen) N. 2205 July 2005

Figure 3: Reasons for the choice of ballot mode

Reasons for postal voters

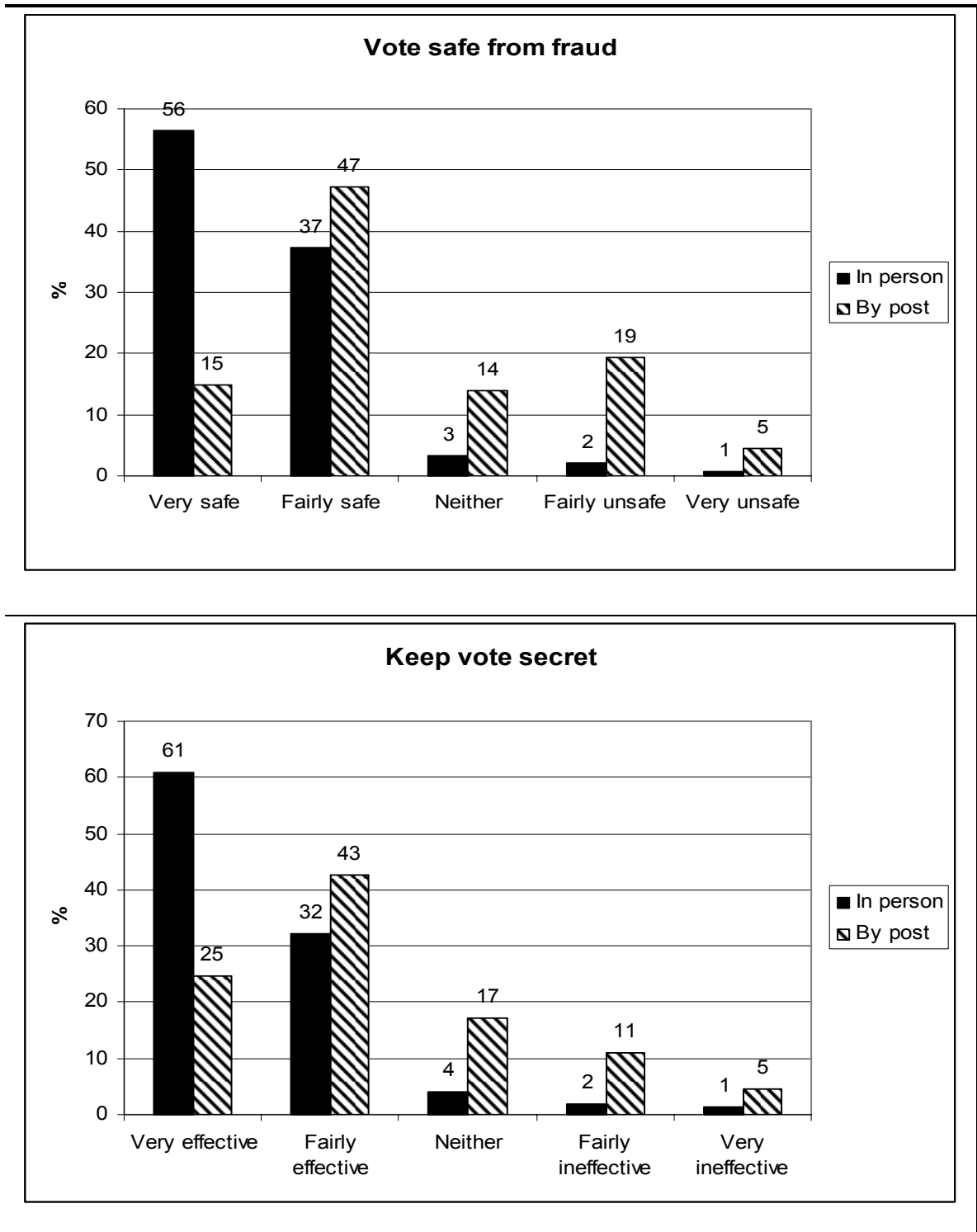


Reasons for in-person voters



Source: British Election Study 2005 Post-election wave (NatCen) N. 2205 July 2005

Figure 4: Perceptions of the safety and security of the ballot



Source: British Election Study 2005 Post-election wave (NatCen) N. 2205 July 2005

Appendix A: Variables and coding

<i>Variable</i>	<i>BES Q</i>	<i>Coding</i>
SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS		
Age	tq77	In years
Gender	tq76	Male (1)/Female (0)
Ethnicity	aq60	White (1)/Non-white (0)
Education	tq82b	Highest educational qualification (18-pt scale)
Occupational class	aq58a	R's employment
Income	tq84	(10-pt scale)
Live in region with 2004 all-postal voting pilots	bregion	North West, Yorkshire & Humber, North East, or East Midlands
SPECIAL NEEDS		
Disabled from fulltime work	bq98	0/1
Retired	bq87	0/1
Home worker	bq87	0/1
Children (With at least one child living at home)	aq57b	0/1
Work long hours	bq97	(50 hours+ /week) 0/1
MOTIVATIONAL ATTITUDES		
Attention to politics	aq43	10-point scale
Civic duty (30-pt scale)	aq41g, aq41f, aq41a, aq18f, aq41e, aq41d.	Factor analysis was used to construct a scale based on summing these six items. These included: Satisfaction From Voting; Voting Change Way Britain Governed; Democracy Only Work if Vote; Feel Very Guilty if Not Vote; Not Vote-Serious Neglect Duty
Political knowledge (7-pt true-false scale)	bq64a-h	A scale was constructed by summing seven true-false statements.
Internal efficacy	aq44	
Left-right ideological position	bq39a	Self-placement (10-pt scale)
PARTY		
Strength of party identification	bspid	3-pt scale
Saw Party Political Broadcast	bq72a	0/1
Contacted by party during campaign	ac11a, bq60a, bq70a, bq71a	4-pt scale constructed from reported being contacted before campaign, or canvassed, knocked up, or phoned during the campaign)
ACTIVISM		
Reported voting in the 2005 general election	bq12a	Voted (1), did not (0)
Model of ballot used	bq13	Postal (1), in-person (0)
How likely to (activism indicators)	bq49	10-point scales for each item
How likely to vote in the 2005 GE	aq10a	10-point scale

Note: Details of the Blaise questionnaire and the dataset for the British Election 2005 Post-Election Wave (August 2005) are available from <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/> 'aq' questions are from the pre-campaign wave and 'bq' questions from the post-campaign wave.

Notes: Many thanks are due to the Principal Investigators of the British Election Study 2005, David Sanders, Paul Whiteley, Harold Clarke and Marianne Stewart, and to the ESRC for supporting the BES survey. These data were gathered by in-person CAPI interviews. Fieldwork was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research (NATCEN) under the supervision of Research Director, Katarina Thomson.

¹ See, for example, the collection of articles in Ann Crigler, Marion Just and Edward J. McCafferey. Eds. 2003. *Rethinking the Vote*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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