

At the Limits of Citizenship: Democratization and the Problem of Nonvoting in Britain and France, ca. 1848–2018

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The problem of nonvoting occupies a central place in the many and increasingly gloomy assessments of the present health of democracy in developed societies.¹ It does so because fewer people than ever are exercising their right to vote; and though the precise meaning of “democracy” remains disputed, all can agree that voting in competitive elections is one of its defining features, as practiced in its current form. With few exceptions, turnout in parliamentary elections in states belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has been lower in the past two decades than in the 1950s and 1960s, and in a handful of cases by a significant margin, as in the United States, Japan, Britain, France, and Canada.² Of course, the growth of electoral abstention is not the only index of what some term “democratic disenchantment”—the decline of party-political membership is another—but it is the one that has attracted by far the most attention. As Colin Hay notes in *Why We Hate Politics*, “No single issue has prompted greater concern or received greater empirical scrutiny in the broad literature on political disaffection than the question of voter turnout.”³ In the United States and Britain it has become common to joke that the “apathy party” is now a major electoral force.

Yet, while the present and recent past is served by a voluminous literature on the subject, most of it written by political scientists, the deeper history of nonvoting has been altogether neglected by comparison. Historians, in fact, have largely skirted around the phenomenon, citing statistics perhaps, but rarely exploring either long-term trends within or between nations or the significance of the problem as it was understood by contemporaries.⁴ The result is that

¹ Especially critical are Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge, 2004); Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London, 2013); and David Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*, trans. Liz Waters (London, 2016).

² Abdurashid Solijonov, *Voter Turnout Trends around the World* (Stockholm, 2016), <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/voter-turnout-trends-around-world>.

³ Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge, 2007), 12.

⁴ The issue barely merits a mention in recent general histories of democracy (e.g., John Keane’s *The Life and Death of Democracy* [London, 2009]), or handbooks on

nonvoting remains something of a hidden variable in the history of democracy and mass elections, despite the fact that—as the statistics cited by historians suggest—it was clearly a mass phenomenon in the past, involving millions of otherwise enfranchised electors. It is not just that basic questions remain unanswered, such as when and where nonvoting first emerged as an object of sustained comment and investigation. Key structural questions have also been overlooked, not least how the extent and profile of the problem—including its very formation as a discrete problem worthy of comment—relate to trajectories of electoral democratization and cultures of citizenship. To be sure, it may well be regarded by some today as a legitimate form of self-inflicted exclusion: as recent work on the “ethics of voting” has argued, electoral abstention might be defended on various grounds, among them that the democratic right to vote is valuable only insofar as any elector has the democratic right to abstain.⁵ Yet this only begs the question of when, where, and how nonvoting was first considered in this fashion, and how contested such conceptions were.

In this article we use the examples of Britain and France to help answer these questions. We do so over an unusually long span of time, from roughly the middle of the nineteenth century, when France first implemented direct universal male suffrage (1848) and when Britain enacted the Second Reform Act (1867), up to the present.⁶ The broad aim is to begin the task of rehabilitating nonvoting as a significant variable within the history of Western democracy and to recover its articulation as a problem worthy of censure, intervention, and inquiry—or indeed as something that should be tolerated. The argument is twofold. The first aspect is that nonvoting is a composite phenomenon, one whose shifting public profile and capacity to provoke comment and alarm has always been determined by the interaction of multiple elements. This includes its actual (statistical) dimensions, as we might expect; but ultimately, as we suggest below, it is only by looking beyond the numbers that we can explain the most notable and sustained difference between the two countries, namely, that nonvoting has always provoked more debate and

the subject (e.g., Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell, eds., *Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy* [Edinburgh, 2015]). In terms of the two countries examined here, focused studies are few, though nonvoting features in passing in multiple accounts. For focused studies, see Alain Lancelot, *L'Abstentionnisme électoral en France* (Paris, 1968); Malcolm Crook, “Getting Out the Vote: Electoral Participation in France, 1789–1851,” in *Problems in French History: Essays in Honour of Douglas Johnson*, ed. Martyn Cornick and Ceri Crossley (Basingstoke, 2000), 50–63; Sam Davies and Bob Morley, “Electoral Turnout in County Borough Elections, 1919–1938,” *Labour History Review* 71 (2006): 167–86; and Kevin Jefferys, *Politics and the People: A History of British Democracy since 1918* (London, 2007), where it is subject to scattered attention.

⁵ Jason Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton, NJ, 2012).

⁶ Since the preparation and submission of this article in 2018, there have been further elections in Britain and France. None of them have disrupted the general trends, or the comparative differences, detailed in the first section of this article.

disquiet in France compared to Britain, despite the fact that France has enjoyed consistently higher levels of electoral participation.

In particular, we argue for the importance of conceptions of citizenship and electoral legitimacy in terms of understanding these contrasting levels of civic participation and what we might call levels of civic anxiety, in the form of critical debate and commentary on the subject. Of course, Britain and France have long been held to embody different political traditions. Pierre Rosanvallon is the most prominent historian to have reflected on these peculiarities in recent years. In his *Le Modèle politique français* he has argued that the revolutionary decade of the 1790s inaugurated a culture of “democratic generality” and civic equality that, for all its ceaseless reworking, has nonetheless distinguished the country’s political development.⁷ Its key feature, he suggests, is the privileged place accorded to institutions of national scope and uniformity—not least the franchise—over the particular and divisive attachments of civil society (e.g., churches and political parties) as a means of expressing citizenship and civic belonging. The British, by contrast, have long upheld a more eclectic conception of citizenship, embracing and even privileging the importance of civil society and its multiple interest groups and identities. More commonly, historians have contrasted the early development in France of radical principles of uniform, proportionate electoral representation (e.g., “one man, one vote” and equal electoral districts) and Britain’s more hesitant development of the same, in keeping with its gradualist, patrician-led culture of reform.⁸ Contrasts, too, have been drawn between a French “republican” tradition of citizenship, which is prescriptive and egalitarian, with a British “liberal” tradition that is pluralist and voluntarist.⁹ It is striking, however, how little has been done to scrutinize the development and durability, and ultimately the significance, of these peculiarities from a long-term, comparative perspective. What the following analysis helps to illuminate is just this, and in relation to the core civic arena of electoral participation and the meaning of voting or not. Briefly, if these peculiarities were indeed significant, as we argue, informing both the relative incidence of nonvoting and when and how it was regarded as problematic, this is not to the exclusion of other factors, among them considerations of party-political interest.

⁷ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Modèle politique français: La société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris, 2004), and Rosanvallon, “Citoyenneté politique et citoyenneté sociale au XIXe siècle,” *Le Mouvement social* 171 (1995): 9–30.

⁸ Patrice Gueniffey, *Le Nombre et la raison: La Révolution française et les élections* (Paris, 1993); Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution: An Apprenticeship in Democracy* (Cambridge, 1996); and Melvin Edelstein, *The French Revolution and the Birth of Electoral Democracy* (Farnham, 2014).

⁹ Bernard Crick, *Essays on Citizenship* (London, 2000); Derek Heater, *A Brief History of Citizenship* (Edinburgh, 2004); and Cécile Laborde, “Citizenship,” trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, ed. Edward G. Berenson, Vincent Duclert, and Christophe Prochasson (Ithaca, NY, 2011), 136–44.

Equally, our analysis helps to illuminate the relative intensity of these peculiarities over time, for as the case of nonvoting suggests, from the interwar period the two countries began to confront and debate the problem in more comparable—if still far from identical—ways.

This brings us to the second aspect of the argument, which relates to what the two countries have in common, namely, that in both nonvoting has provoked a variety of competing appraisals regarding the precise problem it poses, prompting debate about the extent to which it should be tolerated and what, if anything, should be done about it, including making voting compulsory. It is indeed a liminal practice, and not just because it has long served as a stark reminder of the limits of civic participation—of the millions of citizens who have historically failed to vote in any given election, despite having the ability to do so. It has also generated conceptual challenges in terms of the functioning of representative regimes and what it means to be a citizen. That levels of nonvoting have been increasing in recent decades clearly suggests the need to uncouple the development of democracy from any necessary connection with growing levels of popular involvement at the ballot box; but the significance of abstention goes deeper than this, for the long-standing inability to generate consensus regarding the challenge it poses points toward a conceptual ambiguity at the heart of democratization regarding the nature and importance of electoral participation.

It is here that the existing historiography of Britain and France most requires challenging, in particular the way it operates with a binary understanding of electoral inclusion and exclusion, whereby it is the possession and use—rather than the possession and *nonuse*—of the franchise that dominates analysis. Most obviously, in the case of elections, the focus has been on the actions of the enfranchised, the conduct of campaigns and their electoral outcomes, and how the culture of elections changed as more and more people assumed the right to vote.¹⁰ Likewise, when it comes to associated conceptions of citizenship, the principal preoccupation has been with shifting definitions of the franchise and electoral capability, and how different sections of the population were either denied or granted the right to vote on the grounds of class, gender, and race.¹¹ Of course, historians have long been aware that the history of the suffrage is a

¹⁰ There is a rich literature on this, including a number of local studies in each country. Key general accounts include Raymond Huard, *Le Suffrage universel en France, 1848–1946* (Paris, 1991); Alain Garrigou, *Le Vote et la vertu: Comment les Français sont devenus électeurs* (Paris, 1992); Chris Cook and John Stevenson, *A History of British Elections since 1689* (Abingdon, 2014); and Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: “Habits of Heart and Mind”* (Oxford, 2015).

¹¹ This, too, is richly served, and recent accounts that have focused on conceptions of the franchise include Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Sacre du citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris, 1992); Alan Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage* (Basingstoke, 2003); and Ben Griffin,

decidedly lumpy one, comprising movements of expansion and contraction. Of our two countries, this is especially true of France, where the broad male suffrage established during the Revolution was drastically reduced under the Restoration before expanding again under the July Monarchy, notably at the local level, and altogether more radically in 1848. And further twists and turns were to come. The direct, universal suffrage of the Second Republic was restricted in 1850, only to be reinstated the following year after Louis-Napoleon seized power. It was then debated intensely following the collapse of his Second Empire, and it was not until 1875, as part of the consolidation of the Third Republic, when universal male suffrage was secured in a lasting fashion.¹² More broadly, historians have expressed ambivalence about some of the institutional developments that made possible the advent of more democratic (and later universal) franchises, notably the introduction of secret balloting, which also disciplined and privatized the electorate, marking the end of a festive and interactive culture of voting in public assemblies.¹³

For all its abundant scope, however, the historiography has done little to challenge or rethink what remains an essentially binary conception of inclusion and exclusion, where the key criterion is whether or not a particular section of the population possesses the ability to vote. It is just this crucial element of analysis that nonvoting calls into question, suggesting at the very least that we need to embrace a more critical understanding of who and what the franchise encompasses, and how it operates. Again, this is not just at the level of practice—of the millions who have engaged in what some call “voluntary disenfranchisement”—but also at a conceptual level. To be sure, the issues surrounding nonvoting have never attained the importance of those surrounding the award of the franchise, and its public profile as a problem has waxed and waned, as we shall see. Moreover, the precise meanings attached to nonvoting have shifted over time. Only recently, for instance, has nonvoting been characterized as a democratic entitlement or “freedom.” But whether condemned or excused, the crucial point is that the problem is an enduring one, attracting varied commentary and critique both before and after the advent of truly universal franchises, and throughout escaping any sort of precise, still less uniform, characterization in terms of how

The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture, and the Struggle for Women's Rights (Cambridge, 2014).

¹² This aspect has been emphasized in David A. Bateman's *Disenfranchising Democracy: Constructing the Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France* (Cambridge, 2018), 303–22; but see also Christine Guionnet, *L'Apprentissage de la politique modern: Les élections municipales sous la monarchie de Juillet* (Paris, 1997), and Huard, *Le Suffrage universel*.

¹³ James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993); and Malcolm Crook and Tom Crook, “The Advent of the Secret Ballot in Britain and France, 1789–1914: From Public Assembly to Private Compartment,” *History* 92 (2007): 449–71.

it relates to the demands of citizenship and electoral legitimacy. Tellingly, while compulsion has been entertained in both countries as a solution, especially in France, it has been resisted even by those who have regarded voting as a vital civic duty. As we conclude, for all the historical shifts in how nonvoting has been probed and articulated as a mass electoral phenomenon, its very longevity as a site of competing analyses points toward a zone of conceptual ambiguity that should be seen as a constitutive, rather than an incidental, feature of the development of modern forms of electoral democracy.

We start with the numbers, presenting the first long-term reconstruction of turnout figures for both countries and for a variety of elections, local and European as well as national. As is clear, the French have the better overall record of participation, and yet it is also the country where the problem of *abstentionnisme* has aroused the most concern. We then embark on our comparative analysis of the differential trajectory of the problem in each country, seeking to account for this contrast, but also to recover the multiple and historically specific ways nonvoting has been analyzed and debated in terms of the ethics of citizenship and the functioning of representative regimes.

TURNOUT COMPARED

Electoral turnout can be measured either as a percentage of the eligible voting-age population, as has been common in the United States, or as a percentage of those registered to vote. In Britain and France, as elsewhere in Europe, it is the latter measure that has been used since the nineteenth century, and it is the one that is used here. Needless to say, comparing these two countries in this fashion is far from straightforward. One problem is that the statistics become patchier the deeper one delves into the past, especially at the local level. The task is also complicated by the different systems of election that have developed in each case. Some of the key differences are of recent origin, notably the presidential contests that began in France in the 1960s, when they were placed on a popular electoral basis following Charles de Gaulle's constitutional reforms of 1962. Others date back to the revolutionary decade and reflect some of the civic peculiarities noted above, especially France's early institutionalization of a culture of electoral accountability. There are no parallels in Britain, for instance, with the French use of second-round ballots in pursuit of absolute majorities. The British have largely remained content with relative majorities secured in a single round. The absence of competition for office has also been handled differently. In Britain, unopposed candidates have always been elected without a poll taking place, something formalized by the 1872 Ballot Act; whereas the French, since 1789, have always insisted on staging a vote, even when only one candidate has been nominated.

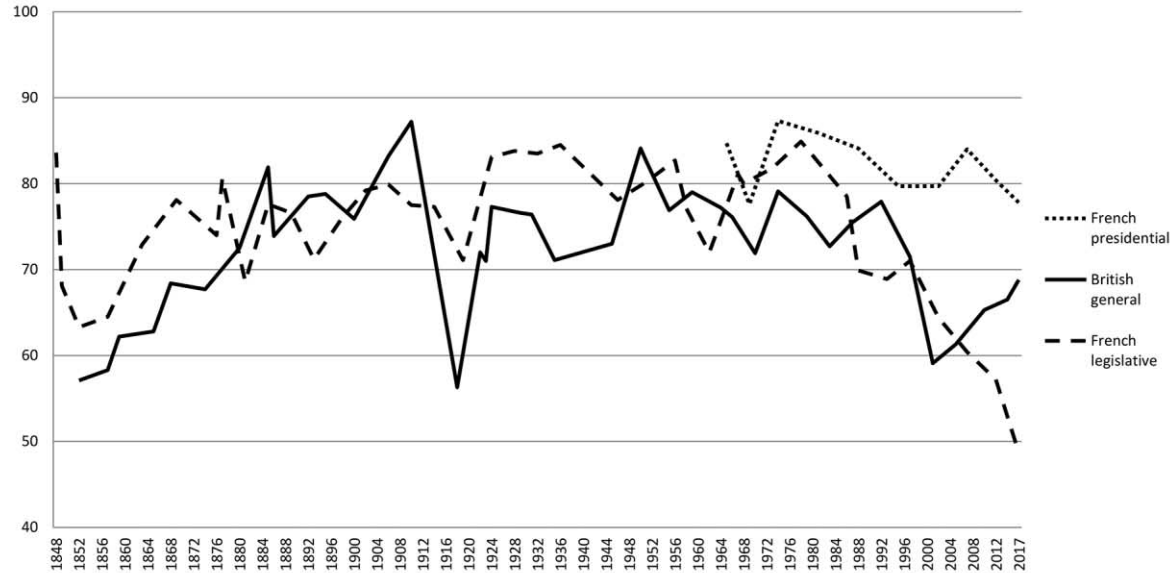
Notwithstanding these differences, however, it is clear that France has consistently achieved higher levels of turnout for all types of election, local, European,

and national. The level at which this general discrepancy is least pronounced is the (national) parliamentary one. As figure 1 suggests, a remarkable rate of 84 percent was secured in France's first mass, direct legislative elections held in 1848, when almost 7 million Frenchmen went to the polls, before decreasing later that year and in 1849, and then again during the first decade of the Second Empire.¹⁴ Thereafter, however, from the 1860s, securing turnouts above 70 percent became the norm in France up to the turn of the twenty-first century. Turnout in British parliamentary elections also began to climb during the mid- to late nineteenth century, when levels of participation above 70 percent became the norm; and these levels, it should be added, coincided with the gradual elimination of uncontested seats, which fluctuated from anything between upward of 30 percent to fewer than 10 percent of the total during the second half of the century before petering out in the interwar period.¹⁵ Indeed, in both cases, during the early to mid-twentieth-century peak, turnout often rose above 80 percent in national parliamentary elections. Such levels, however, have been reached far more frequently in France than in Britain—in the former on ten occasions, in Britain only on five, including twice in 1910. Britain was also home to the most significant dip of the twentieth century, which occurred during the “coupon election” of 1918, when the death and displacement of huge numbers of adult males in the First World War made for significantly depressed turnouts. A similar, if less dramatic, fall occurred in France for the same reason.

What is also clear is that in both countries turnout for parliamentary elections has declined since the early twenty-first century, recalling levels not seen since the mid-nineteenth. This is quite precipitously so in the French case, accelerating a trend that began in 1986 and culminating in the unprecedented low of 48 percent in 2017. In Britain, the trajectory is more uneven and has recently climbed back to 69 percent following the low of 59 percent in 2001, when New Labour was elected to power for a second time. As noted above, however, the national picture in the French case is complicated by the advent of direct presidential elections during the Fifth Republic; and here the French record far surpasses that of the British during the period after 1945. Since direct presidential elections began in 1965, they have consistently attracted turnouts of around 80 percent, soaring as high as 87 percent in 1974 (for the d'Estaing-Mitterrand run-off) and peaking again at 84 percent in 2007, when Nicolas Sarkozy faced Ségolène Royal in the second round.

¹⁴ The initial figure for 1848 should be treated with caution, since there were imprecise returns from some departments and significant underregistration. More individuals voted in the presidential election held in December, before a decline began.

¹⁵ Trevor Lloyd, “Uncontested Seats in British General Elections, 1852–1910,” *Historical Journal* 8 (1965): 260–65.



Notes: The higher turnout of the two rounds has been selected for the French legislative and presidential statistics. Both sets of figures include blank and null votes.

Sources: Alain Lancelot, *L'Abstentionnisme électoral en France* (Paris, 1968); *France Politique: Le site d'information sur la vie politique française*, <https://www.france-politique.fr>; Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, eds., *British Electoral Facts, 1832–2012* (London, 2012).

FIG. 1.—Turnout percentages in Britain and France in national elections, 1848–2017.

The superior French record is still more apparent for other types of elections. This includes those for the European parliament, which began in 1979, where a very direct comparison can be made (fig. 2). Stretching back into the nineteenth century, local elections tell a similar story, even if making comparisons at this level is decidedly more problematic given the two countries' contrasting histories of administrative development. Britain in particular has been home to a shifting patchwork of local authorities, whereas in France the structure has remained relatively stable since the 1790s, comprising a hierarchy of departments, *arrondissements*, *cantons*, and *communes*. Even so, it is clear that France has enjoyed consistently higher levels of turnout in local elections compared to Britain. Something of this is indicated in figure 3, which compares the case of municipal elections in Paris from 1870 to the present with London borough elections from their inception in 1900.

The overall trajectory in France is also clearer owing to its relative administrative uniformity. During the short-lived Second Republic, when only a single set of local elections took place in the summer of 1848, municipal elections attracted turnouts of roughly 60 percent, and those for departmental and *arrondissement* councils roughly 40 percent.¹⁶ As the Second Empire developed, turnout began to climb, marking the start of a long period of buoyant participation that not once, it seems, dipped below a national average of 50 percent. In the 1860s it became common for triennial cantonal and quinquennial municipal elections to break the 60 percent barrier, culminating in record average turnouts of 67 percent and 64 percent, respectively, in 1870.¹⁷ Comprehensive local surveys are in short supply for the Third Republic, but what evidence there is indicates that cantonal elections normally secured between 50 and 70 percent participation.¹⁸ More popular were municipal elections. The case of Paris has been noted, but other cities recorded similar levels of participation: the averages in eighteen of the largest French cities in the municipal elections of 1908 and 1912 were 69 percent and 67 percent.¹⁹ Rural *communes* seem to have pursued a similar trajectory: work in progress suggests that turnout in excess of 80 percent became the norm for smaller *communes* under the Third Republic.²⁰ As figure 4 suggests, these levels endured throughout the postwar period—for which

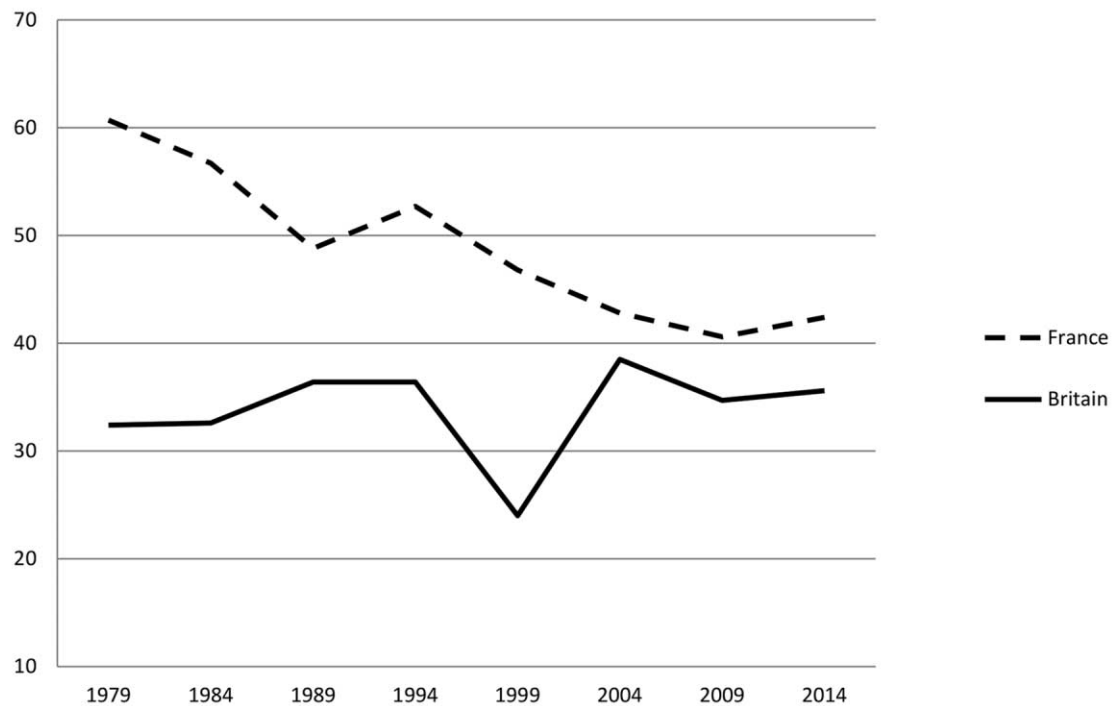
¹⁶ Archives nationales (hereafter AN) F3 I 16, Rapport sur les élections municipales et cantonales de 1848, November 5, 1849; and P. Lévêque, "Les Élections municipales et cantonales en 1848," in *1848: Actes du colloque international du cent-cinquantaire*, ed. J. L. Mayaud (Paris, 1998), 85–95.

¹⁷ Éric Anceau, *L'Empire libéral: Essai d'histoire politique totale*, 2 vols. (Travail inédit de dossier d'habilitation, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2014), 2:678, 784–86.

¹⁸ Harold F. Gosnell, *Why Europe Votes* (Chicago, 1930), 227.

¹⁹ Gosnell, *Why Europe Votes*, 229.

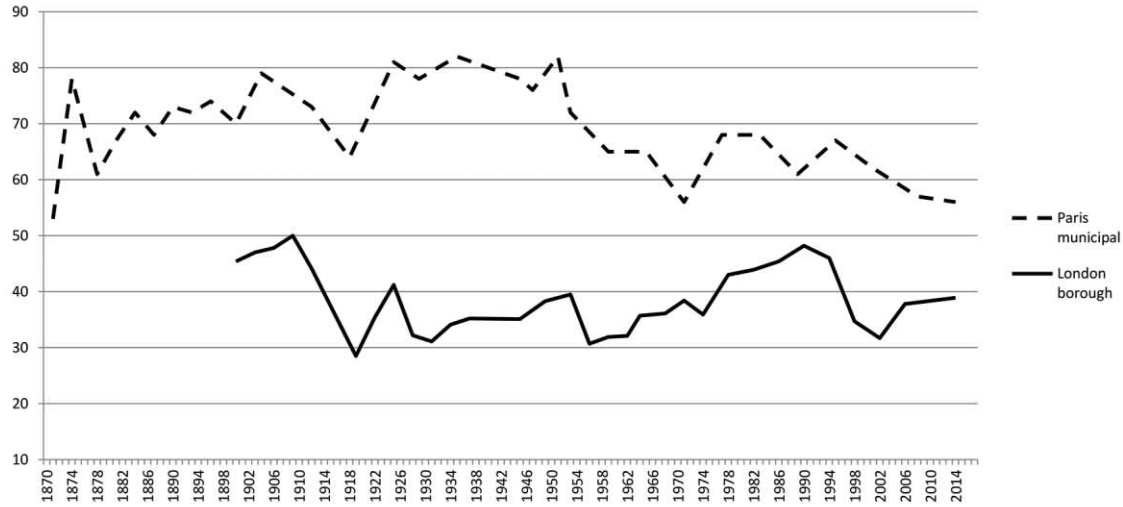
²⁰ Archives départementales des Yvelines, 2M29 and 30, and Archives départementales du Var, 3M529-606, Élections municipales, 1874–1935.



Note: Both sets of figures include blank and null votes.

Source: The International IDEA Voter Turnout Database, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>.

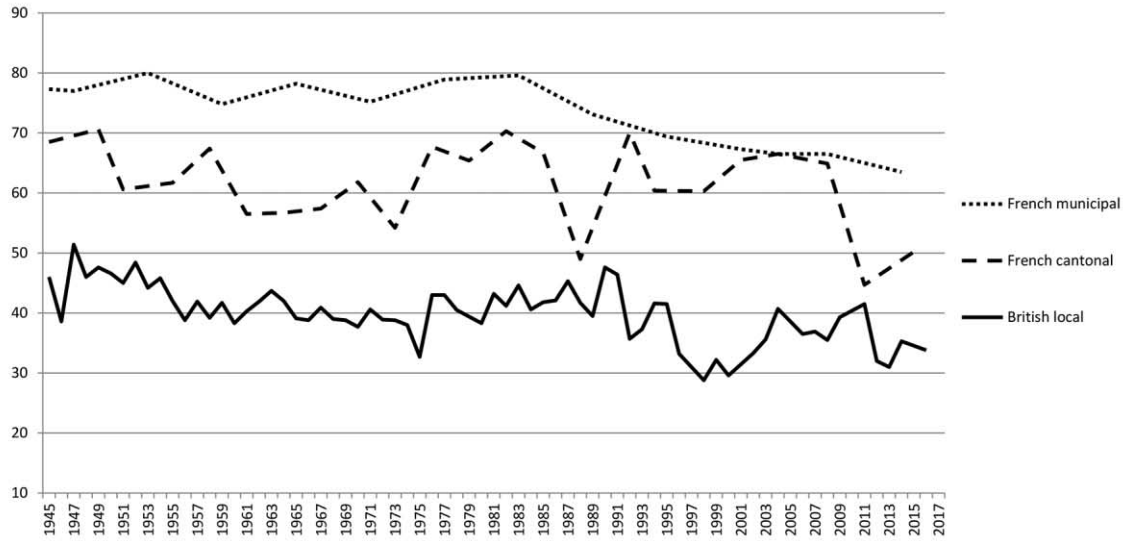
FIG. 2.—Turnout percentages in Britain and France in European elections, 1979–2014.



Notes: The higher turnout of the two rounds has been selected for the Parisian municipal elections. The London borough statistics omit the turnout for the year 2010, when the elections coincided with the general election of that year. It might also be noted that these borough contests should not be confused with general London, or county, contests. Both sets of figures include blank and null votes.

Sources: Yves Combeau, *Paris et les élections municipales sous la Troisième République* (Paris, 1998); AN F1a, Ministère de l'intérieur, élections municipales depuis 1945; Alan Willis and John Woollard, eds., *Twentieth Century Local Election Results*, vol. 1, *The London County Council (1889–1961) and London Metropolitan Boroughs (1900–1928)* (Plymouth, 2000); Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, eds., *Local Elections in Britain: A Statistical Digest*, 2nd ed. (Plymouth, 2003); Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, eds., *British Electoral Facts, 1832–2012* (London, 2012).

Fig. 3.—Turnout percentages in London borough elections (1900–2014) and Parisian municipal elections (1870–2014).



Notes: The higher turnout of the two rounds has been selected for the French municipal and cantonal figures. Since 2015 “cantonal elections” have been known as “departmental elections.” The British figures—which relate to county, metropolitan county, borough, urban, and rural district, and later unitary, councils—do not include the average figures for 1979, 1997, 2005, and 2010, when local elections coincided with general elections. Both sets of figures include blank and null votes.

Sources: AN F1cII, Ministère de l’intérieur, élections locale depuis 1945; *France Politique: Le site d’information sur la vie politique française*, <https://www.france-politique.fr>; Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, eds., *British Electoral Facts, 1832–2012* (London, 2012).

FIG. 4.—Turnout percentages in Britain and France in local elections, 1945–2016.

comprehensive data exist—though cantonal turnouts proved decidedly more volatile than their municipal counterparts. It was only during the 1990s that municipal levels began to drop beneath 70 percent, having previously come close to 80 percent during the 1970s and 1980s.²¹

By stark contrast, average turnouts of close to or much below 50 percent have long constituted the norm in British local elections. This is definitely true of the period after 1945, for which, as in France, there is a full set of statistics. As figure 4 indicates, the period witnessed a gradual, if uneven, decline in turnouts for all types of local elections, from roughly 47 percent during the 1940s to roughly 38 percent in the 2000s. General assessments of earlier periods are more hazardous in the absence of comprehensive surveys, conducted either then or since. It seems, however, that post-1945 elections continued a tradition of only modest participation. The first set of triennial elections for county councils, held in 1889, managed a remarkably high turnout of 74 percent; but thereafter levels declined and appear to have collapsed in the interwar period, when turnouts below 30 percent were not unusual.²² This lackluster picture is repeated in annual borough contests: a survey of forty-four large boroughs during the interwar period suggests an average turnout of 51 percent for the years 1919–28 and 45 percent for 1929–38.²³ Quite what turnouts were achieved in elections to the numerous local boards that emerged during the Victorian period—for example, boards of poor law guardians (1834–1930) and school boards (1870–1901)—is more obscure and still awaits proper scrutiny. Nonetheless, it is clear that there was a high incidence of unopposed candidates, something that was especially prevalent in rural areas. In the mid-1870s, for instance, only about 5 percent of poor law elections were contested in England and Wales; and of these the vast majority were in more urbanized unions.²⁴ County council elections were characterized by a similar lack of competition: although some 54 percent of divisions were contested in 1889, by 1901 this had dropped to a meager 13 percent.²⁵ Gradually, however, this improved. By the 1970s more than 80 percent of local elections were contested, and since the early 2000s very nearly all have been put to a poll.

²¹ A similar trend can be seen in elections to France's relatively new regional authorities: having attracted a turnout of 77 percent in 1986, when they first took place, they managed just 57 percent in 2015 (<http://www.france-politique.fr/participation-abstention.htm>). The closest British analogs here are the elections to the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly that have taken place since 1999. So far, having been held every four (and from 2011, five) years, the average turnout has been 53 percent in Scotland and 45 percent in Wales.

²² "Return as to the Election of County Councillors in Each Administrative County in England and Wales," *House of Commons Papers* 65 [247] (1889); "The Democratic Content of Local Government," *Fabian Quarterly* 47 (October 1945): 7.

²³ Davies and Morley, "Electoral Turnout in County Borough Elections," 168.

²⁴ *Local Government Board: Eighth Report, 1878–79* [C. 2372] (London, 1879), 47.

²⁵ "County Council Elections, 1898 and 1901," *House of Commons Papers* 80 [300] (1902).

No doubt the above figures point to some significant commonalities. In Britain and France national elections have proved more popular than subnational or European ones; and, generally speaking, turnout in both countries has declined in recent decades. The key comparative difference, however, is clear enough: historically, the French have proved more enthusiastic voters than the British. Given that nonvoting, as we detail below, has also aroused consistently more public comment and anxiety in France, the significance of this is twofold. On the one hand, it suggests that it is not the sheer size of the phenomenon alone that explains the variable attention it has attracted, or why, comparatively speaking, the British have always been more tolerant of nonvoting. On the other, of course, that the French have always been more exercised by the issue helps to explain why, comparatively speaking, they have enjoyed consistently better levels of participation. It is to the history of these aspects of nonvoting that we now turn: its development as an object of commentary, investigation, and censure, and the ethical-electoral ambiguities and intricacies it has generated.

ELECTORAL DATA AND THE SCIENCE OF NONVOTING

We might begin with one of the historical variables noted above: the growth of electoral data and how this has been gathered and used. This certainly furnishes one area where the meaning of nonvoting has changed, with the gradual accretion of information and research on the subject helping to normalize the phenomenon as but one more quantifiable index of civic participation—and yet it is also here where the differences between the two countries are least pronounced. Crudely, we can distinguish between two phases in terms of how voting has been captured statistically. The first is characterized by the generation of basic figures and averages, something made possible in each case by the advent of electoral registration, which began in France in the 1790s and in Britain in 1832. The French made a start at gathering—and occasionally publishing—electoral statistics during the revolutionary decade, and this was followed by more ambitious efforts after 1799, when turnout figures were collected for the first time, including for cantonal and municipal elections.²⁶ Turnout figures became a staple part of the increasingly elaborate surveys conducted under subsequent regimes, which were normally sponsored by the national parliament or the ministry of the interior. In 1846, for instance, the first survey appeared that also incorporated levels of participation relating to previous elections, reaching back to 1815.²⁷ The British were by no means deficient in this respect. After 1832, the House of Commons

²⁶ Figures were published for the 1795 referendum and again for subsequent Napoleonic plebiscites, though in the case of the latter the figures were manipulated for political purposes.

²⁷ AN C*383, Les élections d'août 1846 et les élections précédentes.

was furnished with national “returns” relating to general elections, which as in France grew in their density. By the 1880s, these surveys included constituency-level data on the number of registered electors and the number that voted and for whom, as well as figures relating to polling and election expenses. Likewise, from the 1870s, local authorities generated electoral data that included turnout figures, although there was much less interest in Britain in collating this information centrally.²⁸

The availability of these data certainly enabled the press and concerned politicians to establish some sense of the magnitude of abstention. Yet these numbers were seldom pored over in detail, and it was not until the turn of the century when studies began to appear that made use of electoral data in ways that were anything like methodologically sophisticated. Examples include a handful of papers that appeared in the journal of the Royal Statistical Society and André Siegfried’s pioneering work in electoral geography.²⁹ In the absence of any developed research on the subject, it is no surprise that nonvoters remained something of an enigma on both sides of the English Channel. Various explanations were offered, ranging from electoral fatigue and apathy to ignorance and a lack of civic virtue. In Britain it was even suggested that the underlying cause was contentment. In 1935, the chairman of the London County Council and veteran Labour activist, Lord Snell, suggested that low polls in local elections reflected public satisfaction with the work of municipal authorities. “This widespread apathy is in great part due to the general excellence of local government administration,” he wrote. It “functioned so quietly and smoothly” it was no wonder that “only a comparatively small proportion of the electors trouble to record their votes.”³⁰

The problem was only freed from this sort of loose speculation during the postwar period, when we might identify the start of a second phase, during which nonvoting emerged as an object of social-scientific inquiry. The key agents were political scientists, and most of all a growing number who specialized in the science of elections, or “psephology,” as it became known in the United Kingdom. Their work of course complemented a series of other efforts to enumerate mass democracy that emerged at mid-century, chief among them opinion polling, but they also built on a handful of studies that had appeared in the interwar period,

²⁸ This occurred only occasionally and the complex structure of local government no doubt hindered matters, even following the advent of the Local Government Board in 1871. There is no space here to detail these returns, though some have been quoted above.

²⁹ See, for instance, J. A. Baines, “London’s ‘Storied Urn’: The Statistical Aspect of Recent County Council Elections,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 61 (1898): 544–60; and André Siegfried, *Tableau politique de la France de l’Ouest sous la Troisième République* (Paris, 1913).

³⁰ Lord Snell, “The Town Council,” in *A Century of Municipal Progress*, ed. Harold J. Laski, W. Ivor Jennings, and William A. Robson (London, 1935), 78–79.

including some of the first analyses of abstention. The pioneering work was undertaken in the United States, where in 1924 Charles Merriam and Harold Gosnell published a book-length study of nonvoting in Chicago.³¹ The other notable study appeared in Britain as part of the Mass Observation (M-O) project. Entitled “The Non-Voter,” it was based on an investigation of municipal elections in Bolton (“Worktown”) and combined official data with local survey work.³² Although not published in full until 1961, some of the findings appeared in the *New Statesman* in 1938, where it was noted that abstention was higher among women, the working classes, and those over the age of seventy. It was “extraordinary,” M-O suggested, that “no one has as yet made a scientific study of non-voting or even voting in Britain,” given that electoral apathy lay “at the core of the contemporary democratic problem.”³³

Applying all the tools of modern statistics, the studies that blossomed in Britain and France during the decades that followed mark a watershed in terms of the detail and sophistication with which voting and nonvoting were grasped. Periodicals such as the *British Journal of Sociology* (1950–) and the *Revue française de science politique* (1951–) provided outlets for the latest research; early pioneers included François Goguel, based at the École des Sciences Politiques in Paris, and David Butler at Nuffield College, Oxford.³⁴ Two approaches might be distinguished. On the one hand, work in a psephological vein probed the social and demographic factors associated with voting and nonvoting, ranging from elaborate statistical analyses of single national elections to forensic reconstructions of the “voting habits” of local populations. Examples include the long-running Nuffield series on British general elections, which began with the poll of 1945, and studies of the department of the Nièvre in central France and the British communities of Greenwich and Glossop.³⁵ On the other hand, survey-based work emerged that sought to gauge political engagement in all its manifestations. Voting and nonvoting featured among the elements, but so did public attitudes toward politicians, membership in voluntary associations, and practices such as reading newspapers. Opinion polling had sought to capture something of

³¹ Charles Edward Merriam and Harold Foote Gosnell, *Non-Voting: Causes and Methods of Control* (Chicago, 1924).

³² The initial typescripts are “The Non-Voter,” MOA1/5/4/5/C/1, and “The Non-Voter,” MOA1/5/4/6/D/2, Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex Library, Brighton.

³³ Mass-Observation, “The Non-voter,” *New Statesman and Nation*, December 10, 1938.

³⁴ Especially useful contemporary overviews include David Butler, “Voting Behaviour and Its Study in Britain,” and Jean Stoetzel, “Voting Behaviour in France,” *British Journal of Sociology* 6 (1955): 93–103, 104–22.

³⁵ J. Pataut, “Les abstentions aux élections législatives dans la Nièvre (1902–1951),” in *Nouvelles études de sociologie électorale*, ed. F. Goguel (Paris, 1954), 53–79; Mark Benney, A. P. Gray, and R. H. Pear, *How People Vote: A Study of Electoral Behaviour in Greenwich* (London, 1956); A. H. Birch, *Small-Town Politics: A Study of Political Life in Glossop* (Oxford, 1959).

this in the 1940s and 1950s, and such work became more rigorous during the 1960s, when studies such as Jean Meynaud and Alain Lancelot's *La participation des Français à la politique* (1961) appeared and Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's comparative work, *The Civic Culture* (1963)—which encompassed five nations, including Britain—attracted widespread interest among social scientists. Syntheses of existing research, too, appeared, notably Lancelot's landmark study *L'Abstentionnisme électoral en France* (1968), which uniquely also looked back to the nineteenth century.

Psephological and survey-based work continued to prosper in subsequent decades and was complemented in the 1990s by the growth of comparative analyses.³⁶ The present abundance of studies on the subject noted at the outset of this article thus has deep roots in the postwar period and reflects the rise of political science as an academic discipline. Neither Britain nor France is especially distinct in this respect—scholars in both countries have long been at the forefront of the discipline—and in each the key contribution has been to provide at least some clarity regarding the changing social profile of the average nonvoter. In the immediate postwar period, for instance, research in both countries suggested that it was women, the relatively young (under twenty-five) and old (over seventy), and the inhabitants of large, residentially mobile urban centers that were less likely to vote.³⁷ In recent decades, as short-term fluctuations in turnout have stabilized into long-term patterns of decline (see figs. 1–4), new average profiles have emerged. Whereas the always slender gender gap disappeared during the 1970s and 1980s, the key indicators are now educational attainment, relative youth, and levels of party identification: the younger, less educated, and less partisan a person is, the less likely it is that he or she will vote. Indeed, all of these variables seem to be significant beyond Britain and France.³⁸

Since the 1940s, then, nonvoting on both sides of the channel has been gradually invested with sociological, and more especially psephological, meanings, as a culture of academic analysis has developed around electoral behavior and civic participation. But though, as we suggest below, this kind of research has certainly featured in more recent discussions of nonvoting, it has not necessarily

³⁶ Besides journal articles, key book-length accounts include Françoise Subileau and Marie-France Toinet, *Les Chemins de l'abstention: Une comparaison franco-américaine* (Paris, 1993), and Mark N. Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945* (Cambridge, 2004).

³⁷ A. H. Birch, "The Habit of Voting," *Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies* 18 (1950): 75–82; Stoetzel, "Voting Behaviour in France," 106–7.

³⁸ The literature is abundant, but a useful overview as it relates to France, Britain, and developed countries more generally can be found in Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, 12–20. On the eclipse of gender as a significant variable, see Janine Mossuz-Lavau and Mariette Sineau, *Enquête sur les femmes et la politique en France* (Paris, 1983), 25–28, and Rosie Campbell, *Gender and the Vote in Britain: Beyond the Gender Gap?* (Colchester, 2006), 78–80.

transformed or clarified perceptions of the problem on the part of political elites (who, in any case, have been principally concerned with those who do vote). The key reason for this is that, in relation to the all-important question of why people fail to vote, survey-based and psephological research has proven altogether inconclusive, disclosing only immense complexity. The core problem has been the ambiguous nature of the phenomenon and especially its relation to levels of political engagement. For one thing, it has always been clear that a significant proportion of nonvoters were in fact politically informed but felt alienated from the political system and its parties. This was something first noted by the survey undertaken by M-O in 1938, which drew a distinction between the nonvoters who were “too ignorant or apathetic to go to the polls” and those who were “high-principled” and “disgusted with the modern political battlefield.”³⁹ Postwar studies revealed much the same. Lancelot’s synthesis of 1968, for instance, divided French nonvoters into those who were consciously “hostile to the political system” and those who were simply “indifferent to politics.”⁴⁰ In 2002, Ivor Crewe, a leading British political scientist, even suggested the need for a fourfold typology consisting of “apathetic abstainers,” who were not interested in politics at all; “indifferent abstainers,” who were interested but had concluded that the major parties were essentially the same; “instrumental abstainers,” who thought that their votes counted for little, nationally or locally; and “alienated abstainers,” who had a great deal of knowledge but disliked the electoral choices on offer.⁴¹

To be sure, the research has consistently suggested that the majority of nonvoters are uninterested and disengaged rather than knowledgeably alienated; but the significance of this has been undercut by the discovery that people who do in fact vote are not strikingly any more informed or enthusiastic about politics. In the postwar years, when the “class alignment” of party-political support was at its height in both countries, it was often suggested that voting was undertaken in an unreflective, habitual fashion, and that the vast majority of electors voted on the basis of only limited political knowledge. As one local British study observed in 1959, the voting public was principally composed of what it called “the unpolitical”: “the great majority of citizens, who do not belong to a party, do not attend political meetings and rarely make any public declaration of their political beliefs.”⁴² Equally, studies of abstention failed to unearth any significant differences in the political engagement of voters and nonvoters. Drawing on survey work conducted in the wake of the 1958 referendum and the parliamentary elections of 1962, Lancelot’s study reluctantly concluded that on this

³⁹ “The Non-Voter,” MOA1/5/4/5/C/1, 3.

⁴⁰ Lancelot, *L’Abstentionnisme électoral en France*, 154–63.

⁴¹ Ivor Crewe, “A New Political Hegemony?,” in *Britain at the Polls, 2001*, ed. Antony King (London, 2002), 225–26.

⁴² Birch, *Small-Town Politics*, 95.

score the two groups were essentially the same: “In truth, the interest of voters is not much greater,” and certainly not enough to make it into a significant causal variable.⁴³ British research, too, wrestled with the same problem. As one survey published in 1977 summarized, “disinclination to engage in political discussion or follow politics through media has little bearing on people’s readiness to turn-out at the polls.”⁴⁴ Studies conducted in the past three decades have only added to this sense of complexity. On the one hand, they have revealed increasing numbers of unaligned, “floating voters” (*les indécis*), which has proved difficult to reconcile with declining levels of turnout given that it suggests growing levels of voter discernment and engagement. On the other hand, they have revealed increasing numbers of intermittent voters—something that has been especially marked in France since the 1980s—suggesting the absence of any large group of habitual, dedicated nonvoters in either country.⁴⁵

THE BIRTH OF ABSTENTIONNISME

The political profile of nonvoting, however, is another matter; and if there is little that distinguishes the two countries in terms of the development of nonvoting as an object of enumeration and scholarly inquiry, this is not true of the ways it has been posed as a problem of citizenship and electoral legitimacy. The difference is most pronounced during the period from the mid-nineteenth century up to the First World War, when it first emerged as a significant issue in France but was largely overlooked in Britain—despite the fact, as detailed above, that the latter enjoyed comparable levels of turnout in national elections and poorer ones locally. This is all the more striking since in both countries polling reform and the advent of mass franchises created similar cultures of electoral mobilization, transforming contests from relatively intimate communal affairs to more disciplined exercises in party-political management. The peculiar way this unfolded in each case is well known. In France, direct universal male suffrage was finally secured under the Third Republic, following the radical expansion of 1848, making for an electorate of over 9 million. Britain’s expansion was more cumulative and modest: by the late 1880s, following the reform acts of 1867 and 1884, the franchise encompassed roughly 5 million adult males, or roughly two-thirds of the total. Conversely, whereas Britain switched abruptly from public to fully secure, secret voting in 1872, it was not until 1913 that France passed similar legislation. Even so, the overall effect was the same in terms of creating more anonymous arenas

⁴³ Lancelot, *L’Abstentionnisme électoral en France*, 164.

⁴⁴ Ivor Crewe, Tony Fox, and Jim Alt, “Non-voting in British General Elections, 1966–October 1974,” in *British Political Sociology Yearbook*, vol. 3, *Participation in Politics*, ed. Colin Crouch (London, 1977), 44.

⁴⁵ François Héran, “Voter toujours, parfois . . . ou jamais,” in *Le Nouveau désordre électoral*, ed. Bruno Cautrès and Nonna Mayer (Paris, 2004), 351–68.

of electoral competition in which it was difficult to know or manage the precise number of supporters for any given candidate prior to a declaration. In both countries electors came to cast their votes at polling stations (*bureaux de vote*), doing so in France from 1848 and in Britain from 1872. At the same time, customary means of marshaling, treating, and bribing voters gradually diminished, partly through the expansion of the franchise, which rendered such means more ineffective and expensive, and partly through the enactment of more stringent codes of canvassing (in France in 1849, 1852, and 1914, and in Britain in 1854 and 1883).

Yet in Britain the problem of nonvoting barely registered during the second half of the century and into the Edwardian period. Only occasionally did MPs comment on the matter, and even then it was in the confines of select committees rather than on the floor of the Commons; and it was not until the 1890s that commentary specifically addressing electoral “indifferentism” began to appear in the press.⁴⁶ In 1899, for instance, the *North-Eastern Daily Gazette* bemoaned “The Triumph of the Non-Voter” in a parliamentary by-election, where more registered electors had failed to participate than had cast ballots for either of the two candidates.⁴⁷ Occasionally, electoral abstention featured in more considered discussions of the demands of citizenship. In his popular text *Hindrances to Good Citizenship*, published in 1909, the historian and Liberal politician James Bryce described it as a form of “civic apathy,” on a par with the widespread aversion to standing for local office.⁴⁸ Overall, anxieties in Britain were limited to this kind of scattered commentary. Not even a royal commission convened in 1909 to look into the question of proportional representation dwelt on the problem of participation at any significant length: it was noted only in passing.⁴⁹

In France, by contrast, *abstentionnisme* emerged as a recurrent source of public concern from the time of the Second Republic. The manifestations are many, extending to minor but significant procedural innovations. In 1849, in the wake of concerns about collapsing turnouts in local contests and legislative by-elections, electoral thresholds were introduced. In particular, it was stipulated that any successful candidate needed to attract at least 12.5 percent of registered voters at the first-round ballot, as well as an absolute majority of the votes cast. A year later, the threshold was raised to 25 percent, the level at which it remains today. More broadly, and to a degree entirely unmatched in Britain, the importance of electoral participation was promoted via a range of institutions and media. Countless

⁴⁶ See, for instance, “Select Committee to inquire into the system under which Guardians of Poor and Local Boards in England, Ireland and Scotland are elected,” *House of Commons Papers* 17 [297] (1878), where it features intermittently.

⁴⁷ “The Triumph of the Non-Voter,” *North-Eastern Daily Gazette*, July 13, 1899.

⁴⁸ James Bryce, *The Hindrances to Good Citizenship* (London, 1909), 28–35.

⁴⁹ *Royal Commission on Systems of Election* [Cd. 5352] (London, 1910), 115, 133, 197.

electoral manuals and citizenship primers, for instance, exhorted electors to use their vote. “Every elector has a great duty to fulfil: he must vote,” declared one manual in 1861. “Abstention, when it is caused by indifference or selfishness, is irresponsible; sometimes the product of noble sentiments, it remains a sterile gesture,” it went on. “Experience condemns it: he who abstains effaces himself.”⁵⁰ Politicians of all persuasions condemned nonvoting, equating it with a lack of patriotism, and similar sentiments appeared in the press. “Abstention is a fault for which there is no excuse,” declared the *Le Petit Parisien* in 1877. “Not to vote is not simply to neglect a right, but also to fail to fulfil a duty,” it added, suggesting that rising levels of nonvoting threatened to heap shame on France, much as the *rois fainéants* of old had sullied the monarchy.⁵¹

Following the introduction of compulsory secular education in the early 1880s, schoolrooms, too, helped to spread the message, which for some was about promoting a kind of civic religion of the ballot box. As the pedagogue Paul Bert put it in 1883, it was necessary “to instil in the [male] child a quasi-religious respect for the great act of voting.”⁵² Republicans in particular relished the new opportunities this afforded to inculcate the young. They had a solid basis on which to build and were supported by extensive organizations such as Jean Macé’s *Ligue française de l’enseignement*, founded in 1866. There was no shortage of material for so-called *instruction civique*: some schools even held mock elections in the classroom to train pupils in electoral *savoir faire*.⁵³ Even the Catholic Church played a part in promoting participation.⁵⁴ Although clergy had encouraged their congregations to attend the polls in 1848, later elections were greeted with suspicion. Any ambivalence ended with the *Ralliement* to the French Republic ordained in the papal encyclical of 1892. The “expanded” catechisms subsequently issued by several bishops specifically stressed the duty to vote, albeit to *bien voter*: which is to say, to support conservative candidates who were sympathetic to the Church. Catholics were still being urged to “flee the plague of political indifference” in the early twentieth century.⁵⁵

The relative salience of the issue in France is best explained by the distinctive contribution of the revolutionary decade, which marked the birth of a varied—if also of course variously repressed and reinterpreted—commitment to mass participation, procedural uniformity, equal electoral districts, and majoritarian

⁵⁰ J.-J. Clamageran et al., *Manuel électoral: Guide pratique pour les élections au Corps législatif, aux conseils généraux, aux conseils d’arrondissement et aux conseils municipaux* (Paris, 1861), 1.

⁵¹ “Pas d’abstentions,” *Le Petit Parisien*, October 14, 1877.

⁵² Paul Bert, *De l’Éducation civique* (Paris, 1883), 15.

⁵³ G. Bruno, *Instruction morale et civique pour les petits enfants* (Paris, 1883), 130–31.

⁵⁴ Yves Déloye and Olivier Ihl, *L’Acte de vote* (Paris, 2008), 412–13.

⁵⁵ Cited in Lancelot, *L’Abstentionnisme électoral en France*, 266.

legitimacy.⁵⁶ It also introduced a peculiar investment, which was cherished by republicans especially, in the idea of popular sovereignty and of voting as one of the supreme expressions of citizenship.⁵⁷ It is no coincidence that abstention was first condemned as a democratic affront during the 1790s, which included suggestions that abstainers should be stripped of the franchise and publicly shamed.⁵⁸ In Britain, by contrast, the idea that parliament “virtually” represented an abundance of historically diverse communities, each with their own distinct set of interests, regardless of their demographic size, maintained a tenacious hold on political culture into the early twentieth century. It was reflected in the only gradual development of the idea of an “electoral mandate,” which was not widely accepted until the Edwardian period; and still more in the persistence of plural voting, a medley of property-based franchises, university constituencies, and electoral districts of varying size.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the concept of citizenship was elaborated much later compared to France, emerging as an object of focused discussion in the 1880s; and even then it was developed in a distinctly liberal and voluntarist fashion. As Stuart Jones has emphasized, citizenship was primarily conceived in ethical rather than political or legal terms, and as a subjective quality that was best realized through the associations of civil society (e.g., churches and cooperative societies) rather than state-sponsored institutions of national scope.⁶⁰ Notably, whereas in France compulsory military service was introduced during the revolutionary decade, when it was upheld as a defining duty of patriotic citizenship, it was not until 1916, two years into the First World War, when Britain introduced conscription; and British schools failed to introduce anything like the kind of state-sponsored forms of civic education that became obligatory in French public schools from the 1880s.

These differences clearly helped to elevate the problem of nonvoting in France while sapping it of urgency in Britain. It is notable that the citizenship primers that appeared in Britain from the 1870s were free of the sort of normative injunctions and celebratory prose urging electors to vote that characterized the French texts.⁶¹ The limited and patchwork nature of the British franchise also made for

⁵⁶ See especially Rosanvallon, *Le Modèle politique français*.

⁵⁷ Pierre Rosanvallon, “La république du suffrage universel,” in *Le Siècle de l'avènement républicain*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Paris, 1993), 371–89; and for more general discussion, Sudhir Haazreesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford, 1994), chap. 3.

⁵⁸ Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution*, 77–78.

⁵⁹ Matthew Roberts, “Resisting ‘Arithmocracy’: Parliament, Community, and the Third Reform Act,” *Journal of British Studies* 50 (2011): 381–409, and Griffin, *Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*, chaps. 9–10.

⁶⁰ H. S. Jones, “The Civic Moment in British Social Thought: Civil Society and the Ethics of Citizenship, c. 1880–1914,” in *Welfare and Social Policy in Britain since 1870: Essays in Honour of Jose Harris*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford, 2019), 29–43.

⁶¹ See H. O. Arnold Foster, *The Citizen Reader* (London, 1886); Oscar Browning, *The Citizen: His Rights and Responsibilities* (London, 1893).

burdens that can only have served as a distraction, in particular the electoral registration system. Unlike the system formalized in France in 1849, when municipal authorities were put in charge of administering a uniform franchise qualification, the system in Britain was characterized by a confusion of multiple qualifications and bureaucratic procedures, which were readily exploited by local party organizations seeking to include their supporters on the electoral register while excluding opponents. The result was that the process of registration was politicized to a degree unknown in France and was the subject of recurrent, if largely fruitless, attempts at reform prior to 1918.⁶²

This is not to suggest, however, that attitudes in France toward abstention, and the meanings attached to it, were straightforward. Quite the contrary, they were shaped by historically specific circumstances, as well as party-based conceptions of the franchise more broadly. For one thing, unlike in Britain, abstention was promoted as a legitimate and worthy means of protest. This was especially pronounced under the peculiar conditions of the Second Empire, after Louis-Napoleon had reestablished universal male suffrage in the wake of his coup d'état against the Second Republic in 1851. Regular elections took place, but on a semicompetitive basis amid orchestrated campaigns of press censorship and electoral manipulation, including the promotion of official candidates and the obstruction of opponents.⁶³ In these circumstances, many republicans and some royalists withheld their votes, and they only began to participate more fully in the 1860s, as the regime began to liberalize. There remained significant voices on the left, however, that continued to urge abstention, notably the radical-socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who had earlier—and successfully—stood for election to the National Constituent Assembly in 1848. Not enough had changed, he argued in 1863, suggesting that abstention remained the only way of maintaining one's political integrity.⁶⁴ These arguments, which invested nonvoting with a distinctly anti-authoritarian meaning, reappeared during the latter decades of the century, but in a more radical form, when anarchists began opposing elections of any description. The writer and anarchist Octave Mirbeau, for instance, elevated nonvoting into an expression of principled, anti-establishment opposition, arguing that voting only helped to legitimize a corrupt and self-interested political elite. In 1888 he issued his pro-abstention broadside, *La Grève des électeurs*, which mocked the stupidity of voters, "drunk on universal suffrage," for thinking that elections changed anything. Later editions famously advised electors to "go fishing"

⁶² Kathryn Rix, *Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England, 1880–1910* (London, 2016), chap. 4. See also the comparative discussion in John Edward Courtenay Bodley, *France: Volume II* (London, 1899), 62–67.

⁶³ Patrick Lagoueyte, "Élections," in *Dictionnaire du Deuxième Empire*, ed. Jean Tulard (Paris, 1995), 227–32.

⁶⁴ P.-J. Proudhon, *Les démocrates assermentés et les réfractaires* (Paris, 1863).

instead (a phrase indeed that stuck: it is commonly used in France today as a euphemism for nonvoting).⁶⁵

At the same time, among the competing groups that accepted, however reluctantly, the legitimacy of mass elections, the challenge of abstention was articulated in a variety of ways, ultimately reflecting their very different conceptions of the function and meaning of voting. This is most of all apparent in another striking French peculiarity: the protracted debate that developed under the Third Republic regarding the merits of compulsory voting (*vote obligatoire*), which built on a brief burst of interest that had emerged following the 1848 revolution.⁶⁶ In total, some twenty-nine legislative proposals were generated between 1870 and 1914; and although only one bill devoted to compulsion was considered by the Chamber of Deputies (in 1895, and rejected), they prompted sustained debate in the press and among the elites about the rights and responsibilities of the millions of males who possessed the franchise.

Above all, it was conservatives who argued in favor of compulsory voting. They did so partly for political reasons, convinced that those most likely to abstain were more moderate voters sympathetic to their cause, albeit in the absence of any hard evidence to buttress this long-held belief.⁶⁷ As Anthoula Malkopoulou has demonstrated, their enthusiasm for the measure was clearly part of a broader conservative concern to “domesticate” universal male suffrage and diminish the power of radicals and socialists.⁶⁸ Yet there were also important principles at stake; and, though diverse, their arguments were all underpinned by a characteristically conservative conception of the vote as a social function of one’s communal obligations, rather than as an individual or natural right. The royalist duc de Broglie gave early expression to this sentiment in 1870, when he argued that “the right to vote is not a personal right . . . which the individual is free to exercise or not; rather, it is a social right, instituted in the interests of the community.”⁶⁹ Other conservatives developed this premise by recalling that voters were also responsible for representing those who were not judged worthy of the franchise and by drawing parallels with other acts of civic duty. As the jurist Felix Moreau argued in 1893, voting was not so different to the obligation to pay

⁶⁵ Octave Mirbeau, *La Grève des électeurs, suivi de Prélude*, new ed. (Paris, 2002).

⁶⁶ A proposal for compulsory voting was made in 1849 and another the following year. A confidential survey on the subject was also conducted by the ministry of the interior among departmental prefects in May 1850. AN F1cIII, *Esprit public et élections*, departmental series, for their replies.

⁶⁷ As early as 1850, this point was constantly reiterated in prefectural reports arguing that obligatory voting would benefit the party of order.

⁶⁸ Anthoula Malkopoulou, *The History of Compulsory Voting in Europe: Democracy’s Duty?* (London, 2015), 75–82.

⁶⁹ Victor de Broglie, *Vues sur le gouvernement* (Paris, 1870), 38.

taxes, perform jury service, or serve in the military when conscripted do so. All were legally enforced in the broader interests of society.⁷⁰

These arguments were not without some institutional expression. In 1875, voting in elections to the Third Republic's upper house, the Senate, itself a conservative imposition, was made compulsory. Part of the rationale was that members of the Senate's relatively small electoral college—which comprised almost 43,000 members in 1876 and then over 76,000 after 1884—were exercising a trust on behalf of the nation. Equally, arguments in favor of compulsion were by no means monopolized by conservatives: five of the bills submitted for debate in the Chamber of Deputies prior to 1914 emerged from the center and radical left. Yet here the arguments emphasized a different premise. Besides insisting that voting was both a right and a duty, they also stressed the threat that abstention posed to the integrity of the representative function of elections. In 1880, the former republican minister of public instruction, Joseph Bardoux, argued in favor of compulsory voting on the grounds that parliamentary democracy generated rights and duties in equal measure. He compared voting to jury service: just as jurors were required to deliver a verdict in court, so too were voters at the ballot box. Popular representation depended on it: "France must know that she has the Government she wants."⁷¹ The radical deputy Alfred Letellier, who submitted bills in 1889 and 1893, pressed this point still harder. Compulsion, he suggested, was the only means of ensuring that parliament could truly act as the "mirror of the nation," as opposed to "an incomplete and deformed reproduction in which the country cannot recognize itself."⁷²

Abstention was thus conceived both as a violation of the vote as a function or trust exercised on behalf of others, and as a violation of the participatory requirements of a representative system. Abstention featured differently again, however, in the anticompulsion arguments of republicans. As Yves Déloye has suggested, moderate or otherwise, the vast majority of republicans much preferred to think of voting as an unfettered, self-motivated act of citizenship.⁷³ Compulsion was distasteful not only because it would cast aspersions on the people's desire for sovereignty; it also threatened to render the suffrage something of a burden rather than a right that should be cherished as a unique form of political equality. The key distinction, which was much insisted upon by republicans, was that voting was a moral rather than a legal duty, reflecting their belief that the granting of the suffrage assumed that electors had the capacity to vote out

⁷⁰ Félix Moreau, "Le vote obligatoire: Principe et sanctions," *Revue politique et parlementaire* 7 (1896): 36–69.

⁷¹ Joseph Bardoux, *Journal Officiel*, annexe 2950 (July 13, 1880), 10940–41.

⁷² Alfred Letellier, *Journal Officiel*, annexe 3520 (February 7, 1889), 345–46.

⁷³ Yves Déloye, "Chronique d'une allergie républicaine au vote obligatoire (XIXe–XXe siècles)," in *Le Vote obligatoire: Débats, enjeux et défis*, ed. Anissa Amjahad, Jean-Michel de Waele, and Michel Hastings (Paris, 2001), 69–88.

of a sense of civic obligation. It is notable that even those republicans sympathetic to the idea of compulsion argued that the measure might prove self-defeating. In 1872, the centrist deputy Emile Beaussire argued that although it might enhance the “quantity” of electors turning out, it would not necessarily do the same for the “quality” of sentiments that informed the act of voting.⁷⁴ In this sense, as Déloye elaborates, abstention was regarded as a failure of civic culture and solidarity as much as a threat to the representational integrity of parliament. Civic education and the sanction of public opinion were thus preferred over what was judged a clumsy and offensive resort to the law: as the republican Georges Cauchy put it in 1900, the “best way of improving participation rates in elections would be to instil in everyone a stronger sense of their civic duties; the vote would accordingly become a moral obligation and not a painful imposition.”⁷⁵

Administrative considerations, it should be emphasized, were also part of the debate and weighed especially heavily with deputies and senators, almost certainly discouraging those who were otherwise favorably disposed. Despite the proposals allowing for the submission of spoiled and blank ballots, thereby providing for those who might object to the candidates on offer, and despite the success of compulsion in nearby Belgium following its introduction in 1893—where, as advocates noted, turnout was immediately raised above 90 percent—misgivings persisted that the law would be much too difficult to administer in practice.⁷⁶ Whatever the precise penalty prescribed, which ranged from one-off fines to the suspension of voting rights, it was argued that the sheer size of the electorate meant that even with a high turnout the number of those liable for punishment would likely reach a million. Yet, if the practical objections were difficult to dispute, this is not true of the political arguments. Tellingly, of three doctoral theses on the subject that appeared in 1898, 1901, and 1908, two found in favor and one against.⁷⁷ To be sure, the overwhelming feeling was that abstention was an affront to patriotic citizenship: only anarchists defended it on principle. Even so, the danger it was thought to pose was understood in very different ways, reflecting broader disputes about the meaning and exercise of the franchise; and, just as crucially, as the republican arguments attest, it was also contended that compulsion would in fact undermine the very same electoral sovereignty it was supposed to protect.

⁷⁴ Emile Beaussire, “La Réforme Électorale et l’Abstention,” *Revue des Deux Mondes* 97 (1872): 668–69.

⁷⁵ Georges Cauchy, *L’organisation du suffrage politique* (Paris, 1900), 22.

⁷⁶ Herbert Tingsten, *Political Behaviour: Studies in Election Statistics* (London, 1937), 189–90.

⁷⁷ Anthoula Malkopoulou, “Democracy’s Duty: The History of Political Debates on Compulsory Voting” (PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2011), 106–11.

INTERWAR PARALLELS

Of our two countries, France would remain the most exercised by nonvoting during the twentieth century and beyond, reflecting the durability of its republican political culture, which had finally gained a firm foothold from the mid-1870s. The interwar period, however, is significant for two reasons. First, the differences between the two states became less salient; second, the meanings of nonvoting changed, as inherited attitudes (in France at least) mixed with a growing sense that, in some circumstances, abstention might be excused and even welcomed. In terms of the former, the key development was simply the emergence in Britain of nonvoting as a problem worthy of the sort of exposure that had long distinguished it in France. Although it would not be until the 1948 Representation of the People Act when the peculiarities noted above were finally eradicated (including plural voting and university seats), it is no coincidence that it was during the interwar period when Britain developed an electoral framework similar to that of France, combining a mass franchise—which was rendered truly universal in 1928—with an essentially uniform, “arithmetic” geography of electoral representation. Crucial changes were also made to the registration system, which in 1918 was reformed along the same uniform lines as in France, finally putting paid to partisan disputes regarding the composition of local electoral lists.

A number of similarities emerged. In both countries, deep-seated fears regarding the stability of parliamentary democracy helped to sharpen a sense of the dangers of political apathy in general, and nonvoting—*apathie électorale*—in particular. In France, long-standing concerns that abstention allowed militant minorities to seize hold of a disproportionate amount of power intensified considerably following the emergence of the Soviet Union and growing support at home for the newly established Parti communiste français. In 1922, the conservative deputy and leading advocate of compulsory voting Joseph Barthélemy spoke for many on the right when he warned that well-organized socialists were mobilizing their own supporters while whipping up discontent with “bourgeois democracy” and driving moderate voters away from the polls. The result was a perilous, potentially revolutionary distortion of the process of representation that would turn parliament into a “broken mirror.”⁷⁸ The same concerns were aired in Britain, where the Labour Party was now a significant electoral force. The nonvoter emerged for the first time as a common point of reference; and here too the specter was raised of radical minorities taking charge. The examples are many but some are especially pungent. “Who are the non-voters—the thirty, forty, sometimes fifty per cent of the electors in a division, who will not take the trouble to do their duty as good citizens on polling day?” asked the *Daily Mirror* in 1924,

⁷⁸ Joseph Barthélemy, “Pour le vote obligatoire,” *Journal Officiel*, annexe 4738 (July 7, 1922), 2317.

shortly before the general election of that year. It speculated that the principal reason was “sheer laziness, sheer indifference”; and yet the consequences might be grave, it dramatized, invoking the example of Russia, which “had no Bolshevik majority” and where a “small minority rules by brutal force.” “No man has the right to be bored,” it added.⁷⁹ Similar anxieties about the subversive potential of apathy continued to be voiced in the 1930s, following Stalin’s consolidation of power and the advent of the Nazi regime in 1933. In his *Future for Democracy*, published on the eve of the Second World War, the historian and one-time Liberal MP Ramsay Muir suggested that nonvoting was but a symptom of a broader apathy which, if unchecked, would lead only to “totalitarian dictatorships” that thrived on a passive, unquestioning culture of citizenship.⁸⁰

More broadly, Britain developed elements of the culture of civic instruction that had long distinguished France. The novelty and size of a truly democratic franchise, which by 1928 encompassed almost 29 million men and women, meant that conceptions of citizenship inevitably had to make more room for the significance of voting. In contrast to their late Victorian and Edwardian predecessors, interwar citizenship manuals were much less imbued with voluntary (and imperial) sentiments and more concerned with foregrounding the rudimentary mechanics of parliamentary and local government, voting among them.⁸¹ Likewise, although no formal training in “civics” was introduced in schools, attempts were made to promote the secular importance of citizenship and democratic participation. One of the core goals of the Association for Education in Citizenship, founded in 1934, was to combat political cynicism and indifference and maintain popular faith in the “democratic remedy.”⁸² Perhaps the most striking parallel is the emergence in Britain of compulsory voting as an item of parliamentary and public discussion. In total, five bills sponsored by MPs legislating for some kind of compulsion were placed before the House of Commons (in 1921, 1922, 1934, 1937, and 1939), while ministers faced questions on the subject. There was discussion as well in the House of Lords, where peers called for a select committee inquiry into compulsory voting in 1926 and proposed a motion in 1938 “deploring the increasing apathy of the electorate.”⁸³ The matter was even briefly considered by the Cabinet in 1937.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ “Those who are not interested in politics: the shameful confession of the non-voter,” *Daily Mirror*, October 25, 1924.

⁸⁰ Ramsay Muir, *Future for Democracy* (London, 1939), 133–51.

⁸¹ See F. R. Worts, *Citizenship: Its Meaning, Privileges, and Duties* (London, 1919), and C. F. M. Masterman, *How England Is Governed* (London, 1924).

⁸² Ernest Simon and Eva M. Hubback, *Training for Citizenship* (Oxford, 1935), 8–16.

⁸³ “The Exercise of the Franchise Bill,” *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., 108:809–38 (House of Lords, May 4, 1938).

⁸⁴ The Home Secretary, Samuel Hoare, was in favor. “Cabinet Minutes, 3 November 1937,” CAB 23/90A/2, National Archives (hereafter NA), London.

These similarities, however, though clearly significant, do not mean that the profile of abstention was anything like comparable, for it remained decidedly more visible in France, despite that country's enjoying far superior levels of turnout compared to Britain's (figs. 1 and 3). Comment and debate in the French parliament and press far outweighed that in Britain and reached deeper into civil society: whereas, for instance, the Church of England's principal papers, *The Record* and *The Church Times*, had little to say on the matter, this was not true of *La Croix*, the principal organ of the French Catholic Church, which routinely commented on the perils of *abstentionnisme*. The same discrepancy applies to the issue of compulsion. Indeed, in France compulsion now became the subject of extraparliamentary agitation in the form of the Ligue du vote obligatoire, founded in 1914, which for the next two decades lobbied candidates and voters across France as it sought to convert a "moral duty into a legal one."⁸⁵ The anxieties noted above played a crucial part in sustaining interest, as did the adoption of compulsory voting elsewhere in Europe—in the Netherlands (1917), Greece (1926), and Austria (1929)—which provided further points of reference beyond the much-cited Belgian case. Some ten proposals were submitted to parliament during the interwar period, most of them, as before, by conservative deputies. The high point of parliamentary activism came in 1932, when a proposal was finally accepted by the Chamber of Deputies; but it was accepted as part of a package of reforms that was subsequently rejected by the Senate. In Britain, by contrast, debate was more sporadic and much less intense. No bill ever received the patronage of the government; all faded without a second reading in the Commons. Furthermore, the principal focus in Britain was on national elections. Whereas in France compulsory voting was proposed for all types of election, in keeping with its established culture of procedural uniformity, in Britain the main target was parliamentary contests: only the 1934 bill applied to both general and local elections.

But although it was much less urgent in Britain, the question of compulsion was posed and probed in much the same way. As in France, it was those on the conservative right who were most eager to adopt compulsion, gripped as they were by the conviction that it was moderate voters who were most likely to abstain. There were some supporters on the left, among them Henry Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation and a handful of Fabians; but the main advocates came from the ranks of the Conservative Party.⁸⁶ All five of the bills noted above were sponsored by Conservative MPs, amid sometimes thinly veiled reference to the apparently superior ability of socialists and trade unionists to rally

⁸⁵ Malkopoulou, *History of Compulsory Voting*, 95–96.

⁸⁶ H. M. Hyndman, "Are We Constitutionally Governed? An Antiquated Assembly," *Nineteenth Century and After* (June 1921): 979–92; William A. Robson, *Compulsory Voting: What It Is and How It Works* (London, 1924).

supporters of their cause at the ballot box. Similar practical objections were raised. As bulky Home Office files suggest, it seems ministers were principally alarmed by the possible administrative consequences of inflicting the penalties that were prescribed, whether in the form of fines or, as in the 1934 bill, disqualification from the franchise. Given its Commonwealth status, advocates made much of the case of Australia, where compulsory voting had been introduced at the federal level in 1924, and to considerable effect, immediately raising average participation rates above 90 percent. Yet, as ministerial briefings prepared by officials stressed, even in the absence of compulsion, levels of turnout in general elections were not all that far behind those achieved in Australia. Moreover, since the British electorate was significantly larger, enforcing compulsion threatened to impose an almost impossible task upon local authorities. As one memorandum noted in 1926, even a modest 10 percent level of abstention in a large city such as Birmingham would mean reckoning with upward of 40,000 registered electors who would need to be questioned and then, in most cases, served with some sort of penalty notice by the town clerk.⁸⁷ A later Home Office report made the same point, adding that it was no surprise that the law was applied inconsistently in Belgium and the Netherlands.⁸⁸

Crucially, the question of compulsion raised the same kind of conceptual difficulties regarding the legitimacy of nonvoting, albeit with new emphases and inflections. In France, though debate continued to pivot around conceptions of the vote as a moral obligation, a legal duty, and an individual right, there was markedly less reference among conservative advocates of compulsion to the idea of the franchise as a trust exercised on behalf of others. At the same time, opponents made greater reference to the need for proportional representation, arguing that what was really needed was an electoral system that allowed voters to choose individual candidates who truly reflected their wishes. As the socialist daily *Le Populaire* put it in 1922: “[Compulsion] is an anti-democratic measure that will destroy freedom.” In the absence of proportional representation, “the obligation to vote is one liberty less.” “Alter the electoral system so that every vote counts!”⁸⁹ Such arguments rested on the assumption that the electorate was interested and engaged; but another novel argument rested on quite the opposite assumption, that a great many electors were ill-informed and disengaged. The point was that if some of these decided to exclude themselves from voting then this was no bad thing—an argument that found favor principally among conservatives, who remained instinctively suspicious of mass suffrage. As the conservative jurist Emile Giraud explained in 1931, if some citizens were indifferent

⁸⁷ “Viscount Burnham: Compulsory Voting for Parliamentary Elections [d. February 12, 1926],” HO 45/24045, NA, London.

⁸⁸ “Representation of the People (Disenfranchisement of Negligent Electors) Bill [d. April, 1934],” HO 45/24045, NA, London.

⁸⁹ Cutting from *Le Populaire*, July 5, 1922, in AN F1cIII 195.

or ignorant, then it was entirely right that they failed to vote. “Abstainers as a whole represent, from the political point of view, a null value,” he suggested. Their “nonparticipation in politics” was “not a loss for the country but a healthy elimination, which has the virtue of being spontaneous.”⁹⁰ In effect, it made for an entirely legitimate, noncoerced form of disenfranchisement, which ensured that only those with articulate political views had their voices heard via the polling booth.

These same arguments featured in Britain, where it was also common to describe voting as both a “right” and a “duty.” Advocates of compulsion often put their case in bald terms, stressing that voting was above all a duty. In 1926, the Tory peer Viscount Burnham opened a debate on the matter in the Lords by declaring that everyone could agree that voting was “a duty which every citizen is bound according to his citizenship to exercise.” Such, he argued, was the basis for the extension of the franchise in 1918: “So why should it be more of an indignity to compel a man to vote than to compel him to perform any other of his civic duties? Half the acts of our lives are done under compulsion.”⁹¹ It was argued, too, that voting was part of a repertoire of socially responsible actions that it is was entirely appropriate to enforce in law. As the popular Welsh daily, the *Western Mail*, explained in 1939, compulsory voting simply enshrined in law the idea that voting was a collective, democratic act of self-determination, reminding its readers that “to vote is more than a personal privilege of citizenship; it is a social obligation, like keeping one’s house sanitary and taking a citizen’s part in the maintenance of law and order.”⁹²

The counterarguments, however, were just as compelling, reflecting what had become—exactly as it was in France—an intricate problem regarding the responsibilities of citizens and the functioning of representative institutions. As one Tory MP lamented in 1928, he was sad to see some of his colleagues argue in favor of compulsion, given that the Conservative Party was normally against anything that threatened “personal liberty.” And such was the case here, for it was not always the case that voters were presented with candidates that captured their views: “you should not compel a man to vote if, in his opinion, neither the Conservative nor the Labour nor the Liberal candidate agrees with the opinions that he himself holds.”⁹³ Above all, as in France, the point was made that compulsion would degrade the process of representation, unduly mixing the expression of educated opinions with those that were indifferent and ill-informed—the

⁹⁰ Emile Giraud, “Le vote obligatoire du point de vue des principes et du bon fonctionnement des institutions représentatives,” *Revue du droit public et de la science politique en France et à l’étranger* 48 (1931): 473–95.

⁹¹ “Compulsory Voting,” *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., 63:602–4 (House of Lords, March 17, 1926).

⁹² “Compulsory Voting,” *Western Mail*, May 29, 1939.

⁹³ “Electoral Reform,” *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., 215:1288–89 (House of Commons, March 28, 1928).

“uninstructed vote.” “It is a great fallacy to suppose that the mere fact that the votes cast at an Election are not very numerous is an indication that there is something wrong, and that you could have got a better and more intelligent vote if you had forced people to come there,” argued one peer in 1926. In fact, compulsion would only increase the power of those who had no considered or informed views, which was “not the kind of voting that I want as a guide in estimating policy.”⁹⁴ It was rare to suggest that abstention cast doubt on the principle of enfranchising the masses, or that voters enjoyed a “right” not to vote; but the point was made that abstention was not necessarily a negative phenomenon. As the *Eastern Daily Press* put it, rather brutally, in 1939, “In our judgement the man who is too ignorant and careless to trouble about voting serves his community best by not unloading his ignorance and carelessness into the ballot box.”⁹⁵ The real remedy, it suggested, was not compulsion but education, and greater efforts on the part of parties and the press to maintain an informed electorate.

POST-1945 TRAJECTORIES

The broad comparative pattern established in the interwar period—whereby the problem of nonvoting was posed in analogous ways, but attracted far more attention in France—would persist throughout the postwar period and up to recent decades. In the decades after the war both countries sought to encourage improved levels of turnout by reforming access to the franchise. Almost immediately postal voting was extended to civilians, first in France in 1946 and then in Britain in 1948. Previously a privilege reserved for use by military personnel—France had introduced measures of this sort as early as 1848–49, Britain in 1918—postal voting was now made available to those who were unable to vote on account of either their physical frailties or professional commitments, such as sailors and railwaymen. The same legislation also enabled proxy voting for select persons, reviving the practice in both countries and placing it on a more organized footing (though it should be noted that in 1975 France abandoned postal voting, owing to concerns about the manipulation of paper ballots by third parties). Likewise, lowering the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen, which occurred in Britain in 1969 and in France in 1974, was partly conceived as a means of enabling a sense of citizenship and electoral *savoir faire* to develop earlier in life.

On the other hand, however, the question of compulsory voting disappeared from the political agenda entirely in Britain in 1945, but it remained the subject of intense debate in France, which was now home to a fully democratic suffrage following the enfranchisement of women in 1944. During the tumultuous years

⁹⁴ “Compulsory Voting,” *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., 63:607–8.

⁹⁵ “Compulsory Voting,” *Eastern Daily Press*, June 10, 1939.

of the Fourth Republic, some nine proposals were submitted to parliament. It even came close to featuring in the Constitution of 1946, when a parliamentary amendment in favor of compulsory voting was defeated by just five votes. The principal sponsor was the conservative deputy and veteran campaigner for compulsion Louis Marin, who reiterated familiar arguments regarding the integrity of democratic representation: "In order to know the will of the people you must compel them to fulfil their binding duty to vote. . . . The opinion expressed by only a fraction of the French people will not enable you to determine what the people want."⁹⁶ A further three proposals were submitted in the early decades of the Fifth Republic, the last in 1971. Meanwhile, in Britain, though the problem of nonvoting was now expressly highlighted in citizenship manuals, there were no significant changes to the culture of civic instruction inherited from the interwar period.⁹⁷ Despite efforts to the contrary, it maintained its tradition of pedagogic laissez-faire in relation to citizenship teaching, failing to develop anything like the secular code of instruction that was maintained in French schools.⁹⁸ More broadly, the problem of electoral abstention continued to receive more coverage in the press and parliament in France compared to Britain. To be sure, it continued to attract comment in Britain, most of all in relation to local elections, but it was informed by a degree of toleration that was anathema to the French. As one exasperated British commentator observed in 1962: "Low polls at local elections have a peculiar fascination for some people and have become one of the well-established clichés in that hardy perennial of political lamentations: apathy in local government."⁹⁹

Clearly in Britain the problem of nonvoting was sapped of the urgency and alarm that had animated discussions in the interwar period; yet the same is true of France as well, as the diminishing number of proposals for compulsory voting suggests—which indeed is remarkable, given the attention devoted to the subject over the previous century. Part of the explanation is that parliamentary democracy no longer seemed quite so endangered. The relative political stability and economic prosperity enjoyed in Britain after 1945, and in France under the Fifth Republic after 1958, helped to inspire confidence, amplifying the moral sense of legitimacy that was now attached to democracy in the wake of the Allied victory in the Second World War.¹⁰⁰ Confidence, too, must surely have been

⁹⁶ *Journal Officiel* (September 4, 1946), 3496.

⁹⁷ For example, Mary Cathcart Borer, *Citizenship: Its Rights and Responsibilities* (London, 1962).

⁹⁸ Derek Heater, "The History of Citizenship Education in England," *Curriculum Journal* 12 (2001): 107–13.

⁹⁹ L. J. Sharpe, *A Metropolis Votes: The London County Council Election of 1961* (London, 1962), 20.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Conway, "Democracy in Postwar Western Europe: The Triumph of a Political Model," *European History Quarterly* 32 (2002): 71–75.

bolstered by unprecedented levels of party-political membership, which in both countries peaked during the 1950s and 1960s, and most of all by the behavior of voters, who attended the polls in roughly the same high numbers as they had during the first half of the century. Turnout in parliamentary elections never dipped below 70 percent in France until 1988, and in Britain until 2001; while in France levels of participation were still higher for the presidential contests that began in 1965 (fig. 1), regularly exceeding 80 percent.

Although in both countries debate regarding abstention diminished considerably, what debate there was suggests a more ready resort to a language of rights, building on the interwar arguments noted above that advanced a more tolerant view of nonvoting. In France, earlier republican arguments that voting was at once a right and a moral (rather than a legal) obligation became more entrenched during the early decades of the Fifth Republic, precisely when calls for compulsory voting began to dwindle. Cross-party discussions, for instance, on a new constitution in 1958 formally resolved to enhance turnout through persuasion rather than legislative means. As a memorandum drawn up at the time concluded, “means should be sought to encourage voters to use their right and to accomplish the moral duty it entails, rather than compel them, under threat of punishment, to fulfil a [legal] obligation.”¹⁰¹ Likewise, in Britain, the idea that voting was a right was more frequently insisted upon. Something of the consensus that seems to have developed is captured in a letter issued in 1957 by the Conservative Central Office on behalf of the then Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, replying to a supporter who had urged the adoption of Australian-style compulsion. “The view is generally accepted in this country that in a free country the citizen should not be compelled, on pain of punishment, to exercise his democratic rights if he does not wish to do so,” it began. It could be that a voter was apathetic and had no political opinions at all, or that his or her opinions were not adequately represented in the available candidates: in both circumstances, it was necessary to permit abstention. In the former, it explained, “a Government may be formed which is in no way a true reflection of the people’s opinion”; in the latter, someone might be “forced to vote for one of two or more candidates whose views are repugnant to him.” The response ended by noting the high turnouts at recent general elections.¹⁰²

The civic and political problems posed by nonvoting thus retreated as a matter of concern among British and then French governing elites, remaining off the agenda for decades, and it was not until the 1990s when concerns began to develop the kind of critical mass witnessed in previous eras. It is these concerns that form the immediate context of our present discontents. Crucially, however,

¹⁰¹ AN F1cII 186, Note sur le vote obligatoire, June 24, 1958.

¹⁰² “Compulsory Voting: William Dobson,” CCO 4/7/76, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

the terms of debate have once more changed—if not fundamentally, then with novel emphases and elements, marking a further evolution in the meanings of nonvoting. The most striking difference concerns the threat nonvoting is thought to pose to the broader functioning of democratic institutions. In particular, earlier arguments that nonvoting somehow benefited subversive radical minorities have entirely disappeared. Instead, as long-term trends of declining turnout have emerged, nonvoting has been widely understood as another manifestation of a deeper, if gradual, process of democratic deterioration that affects all parties, ultimately draining representative institutions of their legitimacy. Often drawing on the psephological findings of political scientists and the survey work of polling organizations to bolster their arguments, journalists and politicians in both countries have associated falling turnout with growing levels of distrust in governmental elites and a marked decline in party-political membership. There is certainly no denying the latter: between 1980 and 2000, party membership as a proportion of the electorate more than halved in both countries, falling from 5 percent to 1.5 percent in France and from 4 percent to just below 2 percent in Britain, and it has barely recovered since.¹⁰³

One manifestation of these concerns has been the enactment of a series of policy initiatives, some building on earlier efforts, others more novel. Britain, for instance, has renewed efforts to enhance the convenience of voting, something so far resisted in France. In 2000, postal voting was made available “on demand,” regardless of an elector’s circumstances, and has proved immensely popular, accounting for roughly 17 percent of the votes cast in general elections since 2005, compared to an average of only 2 percent during the preceding postwar period.¹⁰⁴ Both countries, however, have sought to reverse declining turnout by targeting the young. In 1997, France took the bold step of passing a law that provided for the automatic electoral registration of eighteen-year-olds. No similar reforms have been enacted in Britain, despite evidence of the growth of non-registration, which since the 1980s has been estimated to affect somewhere in the region of 7 to 9 percent of the eligible population—much the same levels, in fact, as in France.¹⁰⁵ Yet Britain has undertaken some radical innovations of its own. In 1999, under the New Labour administration, Britain finally overcame its long-standing scruples on the matter and made citizenship a compulsory element of the curriculum in secondary schools.¹⁰⁶ There has also been growing interest in enfranchising

¹⁰³ Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, “Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980–2000,” *Party Politics* 7 (2001): 15–19.

¹⁰⁴ “Postal Voting,” *House of Commons: Briefing Paper No. 7419* (London, 2015).

¹⁰⁵ The Electoral Commission, *The Completeness and Accuracy of Electoral Registers in Great Britain* (London, 2010), 22–27.

¹⁰⁶ Laura Johnson and Paul Morris, “Critical Citizenship Education in England and France: A Comparative Analysis,” *Comparative Education* 48 (2012): 283–301.

sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, and this has borne some fruit in Scotland, where, since 2015, they have been able to vote in elections to the devolved parliament.

The other key manifestation is the re-emergence of compulsory voting as an item of discussion, again in ways both familiar and novel. In Britain, two bills sponsored by backbench Labour MPs have so far been put before parliament (in 2001 and 2015), and an abundance of research has appeared on the subject, including an international survey of compulsory voting laws by the independent Electoral Commission. As before, however, interest in France has been more pronounced. Since 2000, no less than thirteen legislative proposals have been submitted to the National Assembly, accompanied by an official survey of laws elsewhere commissioned by the Senate in 2003. Comment in the press has also been more prodigious in France and compulsory voting recently featured among the items in President Macron's *grand débat* on constitutional reform. Equally, though administrative problems have loomed large in the arguments of opponents, advocates have continued to invoke the examples of Australia and Belgium, where turnout has remained very high.

Above all, the long-standing conceptual and ethical problems posed by non-voting have been subtly recast. For one thing, while proponents have continued to insist that voting should be thought of as a legally binding civic duty, much like paying taxes, these arguments have been joined by appeals to its practical necessity as a means of arresting the process of democratic disengagement highlighted by commentators and political scientists. In 2005, for instance, the then Leader of the House of Commons, Geoff Hoon, made an unprecedented ministerial intervention in favor of compulsion, arguing that it might be the only way of halting the prospect of a slow erosion of the authority of representative government. "My fear is that as the older, more regular voters die, we will be left with a significant number of people for whom voting is neither a habit, nor a duty," he lamented. "Deliberate non-voting seems to be spreading up through our voting population, threatening the long-term legitimacy of our political system."¹⁰⁷ At the same time, opponents have made much less of the argument that nonvoting might be welcomed on the grounds that it usefully excludes the ignorant and disengaged. Instead, couching their arguments in a novel language that mixes "freedom" and "rights," "democracy" and "choice," they have rearticulated and prioritized earlier arguments that voting is something that should be enacted voluntarily, and in particular only when a voter is presented with a candidate who corresponds to his or her wishes. Only then, it is suggested, should voters feel anything like a pang of obligation. As one Tory MP put the matter in 2001, "the freedoms of choice in a democracy must include the freedom not to choose," adding that politicians must not be so arrogant as to assume "whatever we offer to the

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in "Vote . . . or Else," *Daily Mirror*, July 5, 2005.

electorate at any time is obviously good enough for them to make a choice.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly couched arguments have come to prosper in France, too. As the leading socialist lawyer Didier Maus argued in 2015, the “political freedom [of the voter] lies in the ability to vote for the party or person of his choice, but also to refuse to participate in this choice.”¹⁰⁹

LE VOTE BLANC

Recent debate in France, however, also boasts a further peculiarity, one indeed that exemplifies France’s more profound investment in the act of voting: agitation surrounding the status of casting blank pieces of paper (*le vote blanc*). The nearest analog in Britain has been occasional calls for the inclusion of a “None of the above” category on ballot papers. This was first mooted by two pro-compulsion Labour MPs in 2000, but it has so far attracted little attention.¹¹⁰ In France, by contrast, calls of this sort, and more especially for official recognition of blank voting, have become something of a popular movement. Beginning in 1994, with the establishment of L’Association pour la reconnaissance du vote blanc, the campaign has recently been joined by another group founded in 2010, Citoyens du vote blanc, which has fielded parliamentary candidates. It has been the subject, too, of lengthy political treatises and, like compulsion, was one of the topics discussed as part of Macron’s *grand débat*.¹¹¹

It is not an entirely new suggestion: as noted above, under the Third Republic advocates of compulsion accepted that blank and spoiled papers could be submitted by those obliged to vote. It also builds on a long-standing French tradition of misusing papers that stretches back to the nineteenth century, something that has no parallel in Britain, where the number of invalid ballots has always been minuscule (a rough average of 0.1 percent since the 1880s).¹¹² Not surprisingly, the performance of the practice has shifted over time, in keeping with the precise mechanics of voting. Up until 1924, when official papers were made mandatory, it was possible to use—and abuse—handwritten and printed ballots; after 1913, with the introduction of properly secret balloting, one could spoil a paper or adopt a blank in the seclusion of a curtained *isoloir*. But however realized, casting

¹⁰⁸ “Compulsory Voting,” *Hansard Sessional Papers*, 6th ser., 375:862–63 (House of Commons, November 27, 2001).

¹⁰⁹ Didier Maus, “Le Vote obligatoire: Une fausse bonne idée,” *Fondation Jean-Jaurès*: 257 (Paris, 2015), 4.

¹¹⁰ Mark Tami and Tom Watson, *Votes for All: Compulsory Participation in Elections*, Fabian Society Policy Report 50 (London, 2000), 14.

¹¹¹ See especially Olivier Durand, *Le Vote blanc: Pour un suffrage vraiment universel* (Paris, 1999).

¹¹² Malcolm Crook, “Protest Voting: The Revolutionary Origins of Annotated Ballot Papers Cast in French Plebiscites, 1851–1870,” *French History* 29 (2015): 349–69.

spoiled and blank papers has evidently long been considered a more active means of registering dissent compared to simply staying at home. Radical and anarchist sentiments have no doubt played a part in this (as early as the 1860s, Proudhon gave his blessing to *le vote blanc*); but it seems that the principal inspiration has always been a less ideological, more visceral dislike of a particular regime or choice of candidates.¹¹³ During the period 1881–1914, for instance, when the percentage of spoiled papers cast in legislative elections was on average 3.3 percent, the figure of 5.3 percent was recorded in 1898 at the height of the Dreyfus affair.¹¹⁴

Recent agitation surrounding *le vote blanc* nonetheless registers a significant development in the history of electoral protest in France. That it has proved so salient reflects a remarkable rise in the use of spoiled and blank papers in recent decades. This has most of all been the case in the second round of presidential contests, where levels of 6 percent and 5.8 percent were recorded in those of 1995 and 2012, culminating in an unprecedented 11.5 percent in the 2017 run-off between Macron and Marine Le Pen—or what amounted to more than four million papers, of which roughly three-quarters were blanks. The very demand for official recognition of blank voting, too, is radical, aiming to overcome the centuries-long practice of counting such votes as part of the turnout, but, crucially, not as part of the legitimate tally of votes (*suffrages exprimés*) used to determine majorities. Treating the blank vote in this way, so it is argued, to quote the campaign site of Citoyens du vote blanc, would enhance the integrity of the Republic by equipping electors with a “non-partisan democratic tool” with which they can “invalidate the political offer.”¹¹⁵ Whatever its merits, should official recognition come to pass, it would certainly create a unique mode of electoral action, opening up a real alternative to nonvoting in its traditional sedentary form (staying at home) while retaining its negative force—or, as it might be put, a genuinely inclusive and effective form of electoral nonparticipation.¹¹⁶

THE CHALLENGE OF NONVOTING

Joking aside, nonvoting has never formed a “mass movement” or “party,” even though it has long been a sizeable, mass electoral phenomenon. This is one reason, no doubt, why it has been so neglected by historians. Bereft of voice or leadership, it is easy to understand why abstention is sometimes classified by political scientists

¹¹³ P.-J. Proudhon, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (Paris, 1865), 8, 441.

¹¹⁴ Lancelot, *L'Abstentionnisme électoral en France*, 50.

¹¹⁵ See <https://www.parti-du-vote-blanc.fr/>.

¹¹⁶ On its significance, see Adélaïde Zulfikarpasic, “Le vote blanc: Abstention civique ou expression politique?,” *Revue française de science politique* 51 (2001): 247–68.

as a quietist form of “antipolitics.” Yet, as we have sought to argue here through a long-term study of Britain and France, nonvoting deserves a central place among the political and cultural elements that have defined—and undermined—the development of electoral democracy. In recent years, it is the growing size of the phenomenon that has most struck elites and commentators, who have seized on it as a sign of increasing levels of democratic dysfunction and detachment. We are indeed in the throes of an unprecedented, if uneven, long-term decline. Even if similar depths have been plumbed before on occasions, certainly prior to the twentieth century, it would be churlish to suggest that present anxieties are misplaced. For historians, however, it is not the numbers that should impress, striking though they are. Rather, as our study of Britain and France has argued, it is the variable impression that nonvoting has made over time and place, and the conceptual difficulties it has posed, pre- and postuniversal suffrage.

It is this latter aspect—the longevity of nonvoting as an object of competing analyses—that most challenges existing histories of democratization and the vote. Simply put, as the case of France and Britain demonstrates, nonvoting suggests that the history of modern, mass democracy has been bedeviled by a persistent inability to resolve the relationship between representative ideals of electoral consent and legitimacy, and the rights and duties of those formally equipped with the franchise (who are of course expected to supply that consent and legitimacy). This is not a marginal issue. Rather, these conceptual difficulties cut to the heart of the normative demands of electoral regimes, and indeed might be formulated in a crude but essentially correct fashion: is it the case that those with the formal entitlement to vote should use it? To be sure, the answer has long been a more or less resounding “yes”; but when pushed on the matter in the context of widespread nonvoting, what this means, and how the problem might be resolved, outward consensus turns to collective ambivalence and competing arguments.

In Britain and France, as we have seen, it is the use of compulsory voting that has served to provoke the most sustained reflection on the intricate issues at stake. In retrospect—if somewhat artificially, since it is their combination that has made the question so complex—we might isolate two key lines of dispute. One of these concerns the ethics of voting and whether the vote should be regarded as a right and/or a duty that is best enacted freely, or, alternatively, a duty that should be compelled on account of its privileged civic status. The other concerns the representational integrity of elections, and to what extent it is necessary or useful, in terms of gauging public opinion and gaining popular consent, to compel people to vote who would otherwise not do so on account of apathy or hostility. But the crucial point is that these questions have received varied and contradictory answers ever since they were posed in an explicit fashion, as in France from the mid-nineteenth century and in Britain from the interwar period. And they are still being asked today.

Britain and France, it should be emphasized, are by no means alone in harboring this deep-seated and seemingly irresolvable zone of conflicted democratic reasoning. Many other Western states have debated compulsion but—like Britain and France—never adopted it, among them the United States and Canada. Equally, even in those countries where it has been adopted and is still in use today, such as Belgium and Australia, it has been subject to recurrent objections on the grounds that voting is something that should be enacted freely, both as a matter of principle and because it means only genuinely formed opinions are counted (i.e., it makes for better representation).¹¹⁷ Yet, what is also clear, at least on the evidence of Britain and France, is that the problem has been probed and posed, debated and expressed, in very different ways over time and place, according to the combination of more durable cultural elements and more contingent political factors. In other words, the complex, deep-seated issues contained within nonvoting by no means announce themselves—quite the contrary, they are culturally and politically mediated, and as such assume varying degrees and forms of articulation.

Crudely, we might distinguish between two aspects here. One is the relative profile of nonvoting and the degree to which it has aroused reflection and debate. To be sure, as we have argued, the relative profile of the problem in each case has been shaped by a set of common, if shifting, political factors: in particular, fears for the stability of parliamentary democracy during the interwar period; the relative absence of these fears in postwar Britain and the early Fifth Republic, which served to sap the problem of urgency; and, from the 1990s, widespread concerns about popular disenchantment with democratic institutions, reviving anxieties once more. But none of these explain why, of the two countries, it is France where nonvoting has provoked the greatest and most sustained levels of debate and comment. The best explanation for this, we have suggested, is civic culture: France's more profound, republican investment in the significance of voting as a means of expressing citizenship and its more numerically proportionate, majoritarian conception of electoral representation and popular sovereignty, both of which can be traced back to the revolutionary period. By contrast, Britain's civic culture has always been more liberal and pluralistic, and only gradually did it embrace principles of electoral-representational uniformity. The manifestations extend beyond the fact that France confronted the problem in all its density in the second half of the nineteenth century, some fifty years and more before Britain did the same in the interwar period. Whereas France, for instance, almost adopted compulsory voting in the immediate wake of the Second World War,

¹¹⁷ Lisa Hill, "'A great leveller': Compulsory voting," in *Elections: Full, Free, and Fair*, ed. Marian Sawer (Sydney, 2001), 130–31; J. Briggs and K. Celis, "For and Against: Compulsory Voting in Britain and Belgium," *Social & Public Policy Review* 4 (2010): 20–25.

British proposals have never come anywhere near as close to fruition; or, again, whereas France introduced compulsory (secular) citizenship lessons in schools in the 1880s, Britain only followed suit more than one hundred years later.

This historic and enduring cultural element is related to the other aspect that might be highlighted, which is that the problem of nonvoting has been subject to more vigorous debate and varied expression in France. Again, this is not to overlook some crucial points of commonality in this respect, which began to emerge in the interwar period; and certainly in both countries, as we have suggested, it has become more common for elites to excuse nonvoting, culminating in recent arguments couched in a language of “freedom of choice.” Yet the bigger historic picture is one of relative French breadth and fullness in terms of the exploration of competing perspectives. This was especially marked, perhaps, during the second half of the nineteenth century, when direct universal male suffrage was practiced for the first time. Conservatives and republicans, though they both condemned abstention, did so for decidedly different reasons, drawing on their own peculiar conceptions of the vote, while sections of the radical left promoted abstention as a legitimate form of protest. But the recent past tells a similar story, as evident in the campaign for the official recognition of *le vote blanc*, which might be read as an ingenious attempt to affirm the civic and ethical importance of voting while divorcing it from the function of providing consent to representational institutions and parties.

Ultimately, historians are not best placed to appraise the intricate civic and ethical questions raised by electoral abstention; but what they can help to recover is how millions upon millions of nonvoters have occupied an altogether ambiguous, liminal place within the history of democratic development, at once sitting inside a broad trajectory of inclusion and enfranchisement, and outside of it, to the extent that they have excluded themselves and disregarded this most prized of political rights. It is precisely on account of this marginal status that they deserve a more central place in histories of democratization.