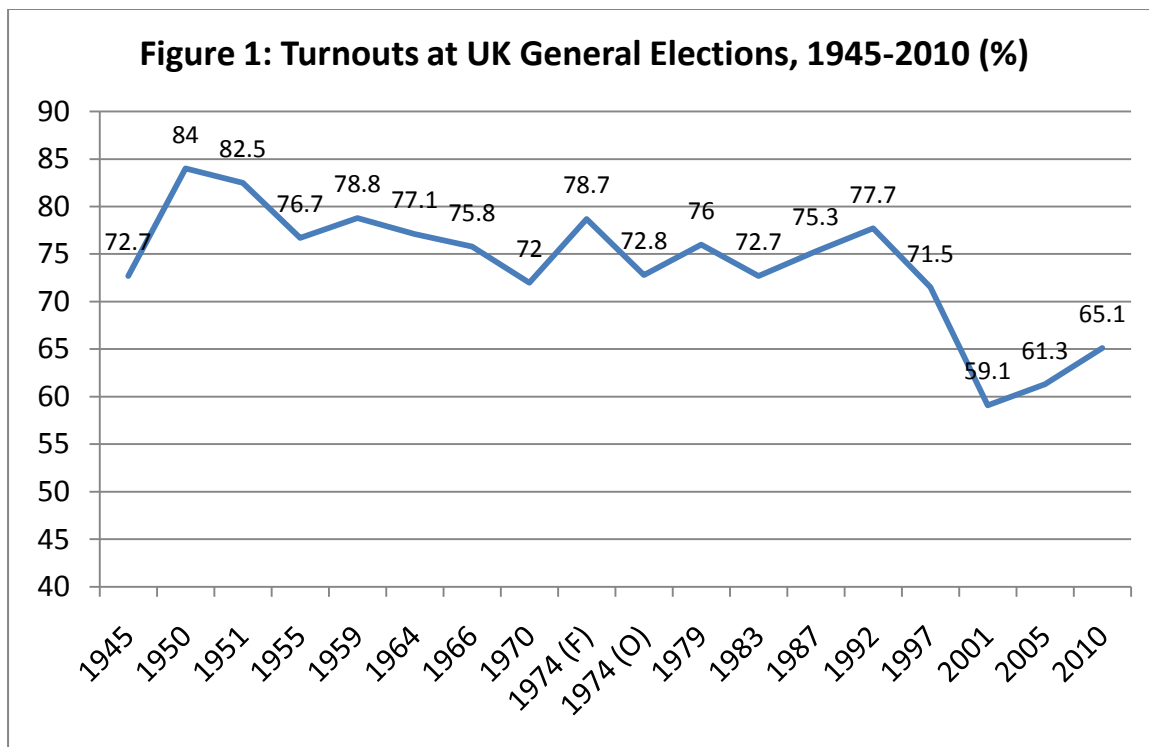


Trends in Political Participation in the UK

Evidence derived from key indicators of political participation in the UK is broadly typical of the data obtained across all fields of our Audit in that they present a mixed picture of the health of UK democracy, with most, if not all, of the trends identified here also being replicated in other established democracies.

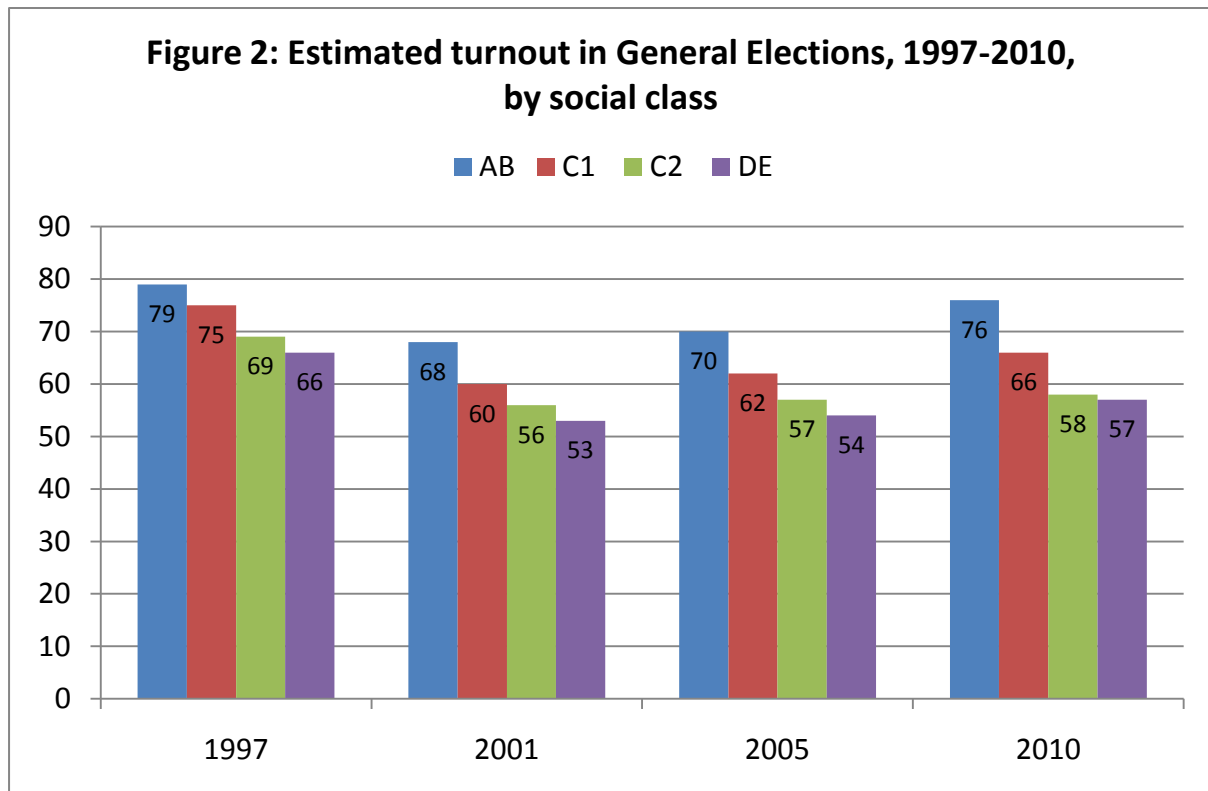
Election turnouts

Elections are by no means the only mechanism of mass democratic participation but they are the most important form of direct political engagement for the great majority of citizens. In a democracy, elections are also the means through which popular representatives are chosen by the population as a whole. It would therefore be difficult to over-estimate the significance of electoral participation, as measured by turnout, to a democracy.



Source: British Electoral Facts

UK general election turnouts typically fluctuated between 70 and 80 per cent from 1945 to 1992, peaking at 84 per cent in 1950. However, as figure 1 shows, turnouts in UK general elections fell dramatically from the late 1990s, with the lowest turnout (59 per cent) recorded in 2001. While levels of electoral participation increased in 2005 and again in 2010, the four lowest levels of turnout in post-war UK general elections have all been recorded since 1997.



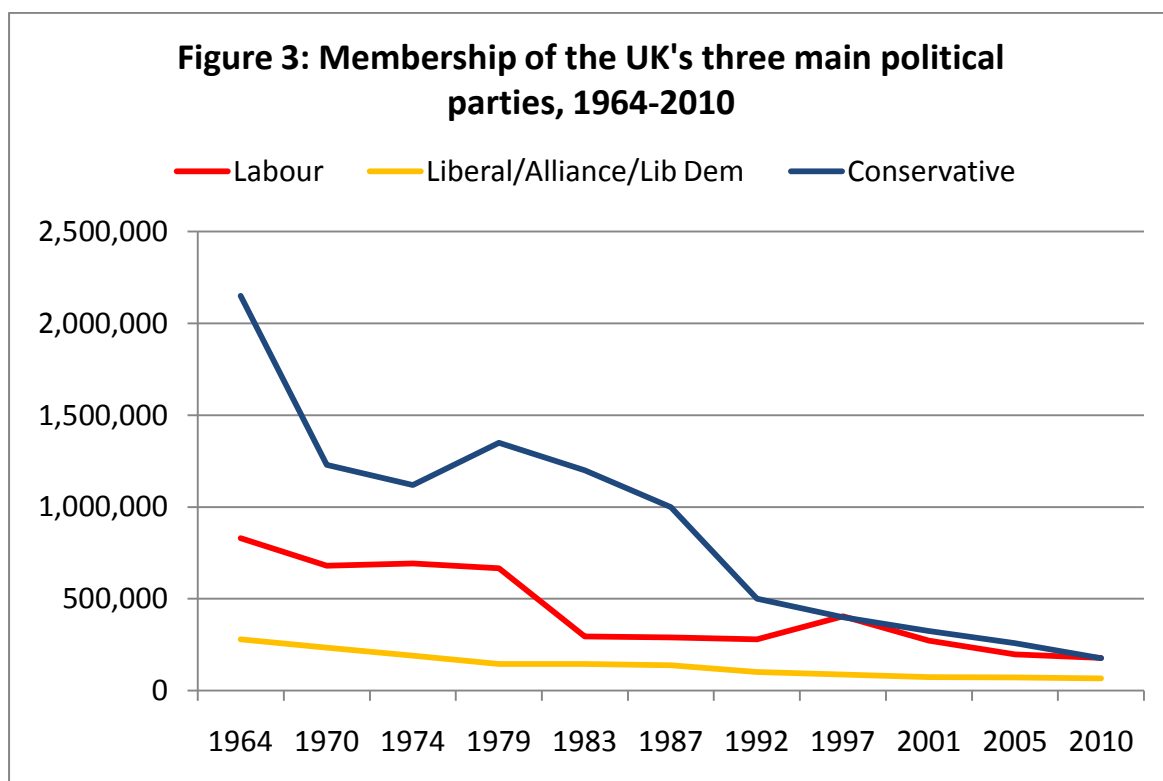
Source: [Ipsos Mori](#) and [The Electoral Commission](#)

While turnouts have declined overall, there is also evidence of a widening gap in levels of electoral participation among different social groups. It has long been established by political scientists that turnout rises with age, income and level of education. Figure 2 illustrates these patterns with reference to social class, showing that turnout among those in the highest social classes (A and B) was 79 per cent in 1997, but only 66 per cent among eligible voters from social classes D and E. However, at each subsequent general election this differential has widened. By 2010, turnout among voters classified as ABs was 76 per cent compared to only 57 per cent among those from social classes D and E.

Party membership

Although they are rarely popular, political parties are an essential element of representative democracy. Political scientists largely agree that if political parties did not exist, they would have to be invented in order for democracy to function effectively. The reason for this is that political parties provide much of the interface between two other core elements of democracy - a free civil society on one hand, and effective and responsive government on the other.

However, there is growing evidence that the UK's political parties are a weak link in the chain connecting civil society to political decision-making. The three main parties certainly cannot claim to constitute mass membership organisations, embedded in and reflective of civil society. As figure 3 shows, the estimated membership of all three main parties has fallen substantially since the mid-1960s. Whereas they could once claim to have over 3 million members between them, the combined membership of the three main parties now amounts to a little over 400,000.

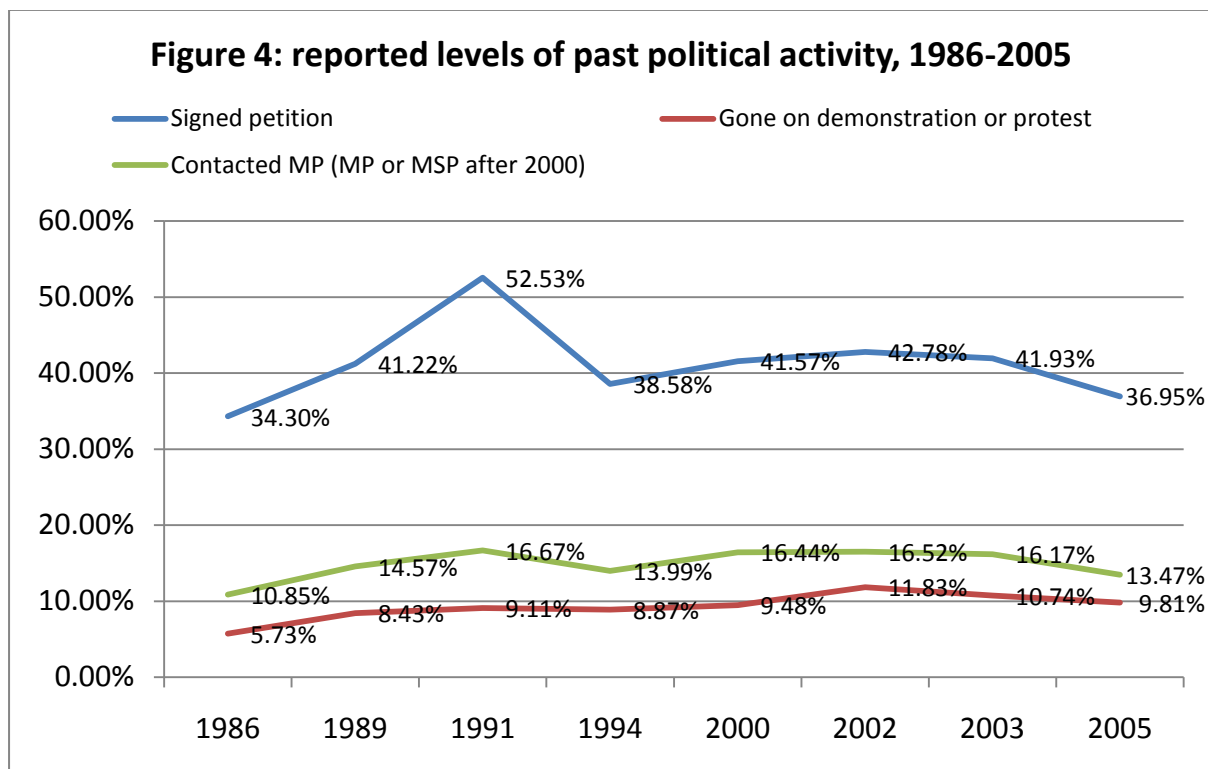


Sources: British Political Facts, 1900-2000; House of Commons Library, 2009; Labour and Liberal Democrat Annual Reports and Accounts, 2001-09, as submitted to the Electoral Commission; Bale, 2011.

Other forms of political participation

Despite the significance of elections to representative democracy, popular participation in a democracy does not, and should not, only be evident at election time. Genuine democracies are characterised by freedoms of speech, association and protest which give rise to a myriad of different forms of political engagement.

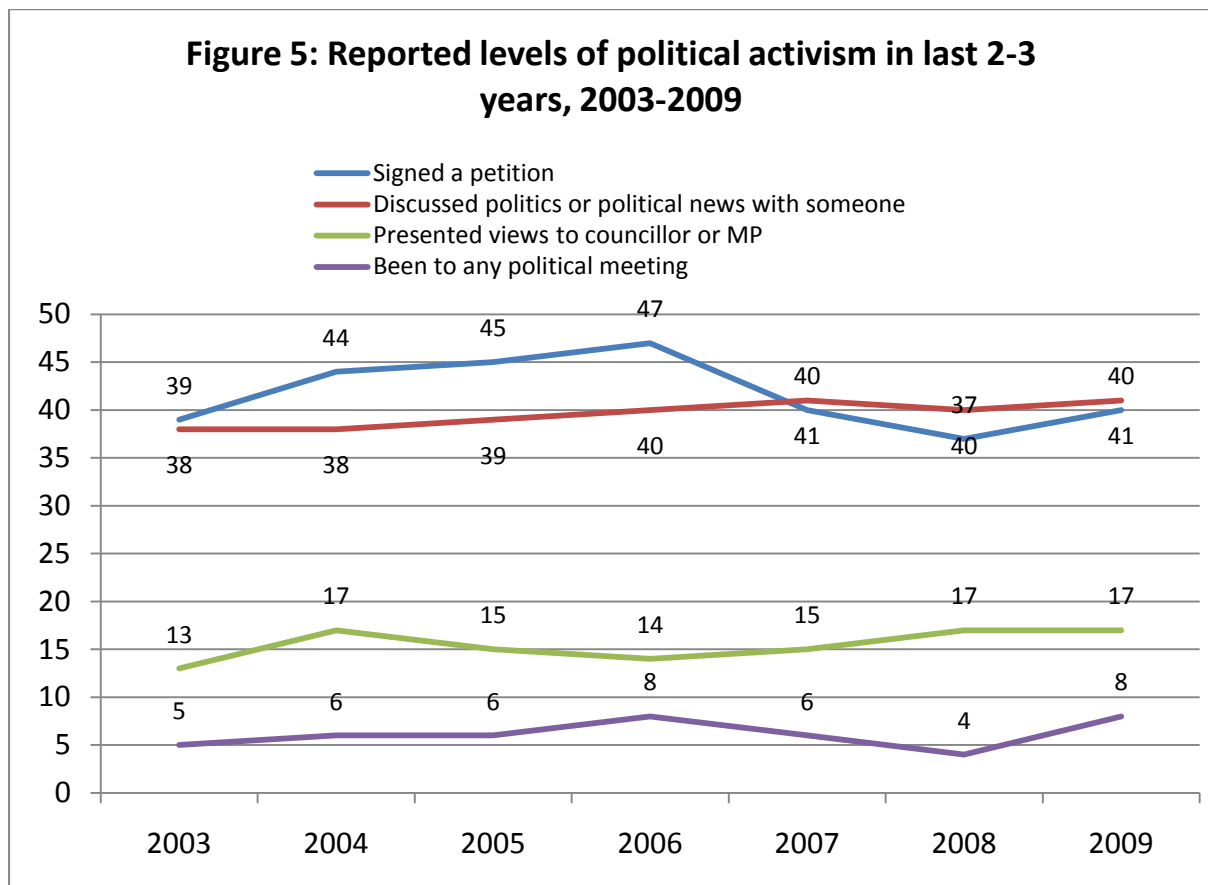
At first sight, evidence relating to these wider patterns of political engagement in the UK suggests a more optimistic picture. While turnout in elections and involvement with political parties have clearly fallen, there is evidence to suggest that other forms of political participation remain broadly stable, however. Figure 4 presents evidence relating to reported forms of past political activity from 1986-2005, as captured by the British Social Attitudes survey. These data suggest that UK citizens in 2005 were, if anything, more likely to have ever engaged in actions such as signing a petition, taking part in a demonstration or contacting their MP than they had been in 1986.



Source: [British Social Attitudes](#)

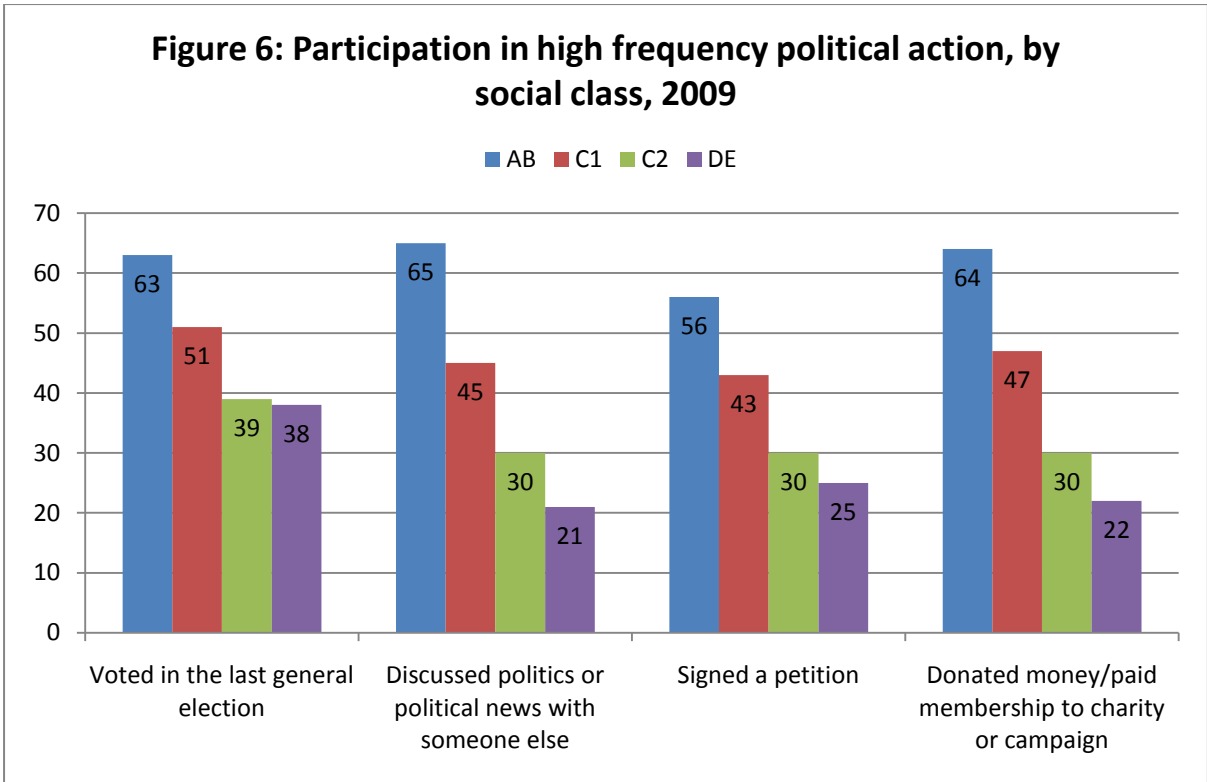
Equivalent trends for the period since the mid-2000s can be gleaned from the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement, carried out annually from 2003-09. As figure 5 shows, responses to annual survey questions about forms of political activity over the previous two to three years suggest overall stability in the proportion of the population who

engage politically by signing petitions, discussing politics with someone else, contacting an elected representative or attending a political meeting.



Source: Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement

However, these two sets of survey data also reveal that less than 50 per cent of the population engage in any of these forms of political activity. Not only do fewer people participate in these wider forms of activism than vote in elections, but the contrasts in participation levels between different social groups are even greater. Figure 6 suggests that members of social classes A and B are twice as likely to have signed a petition, and three times as likely to have discussed politics with someone else, than members of social classes D and E.

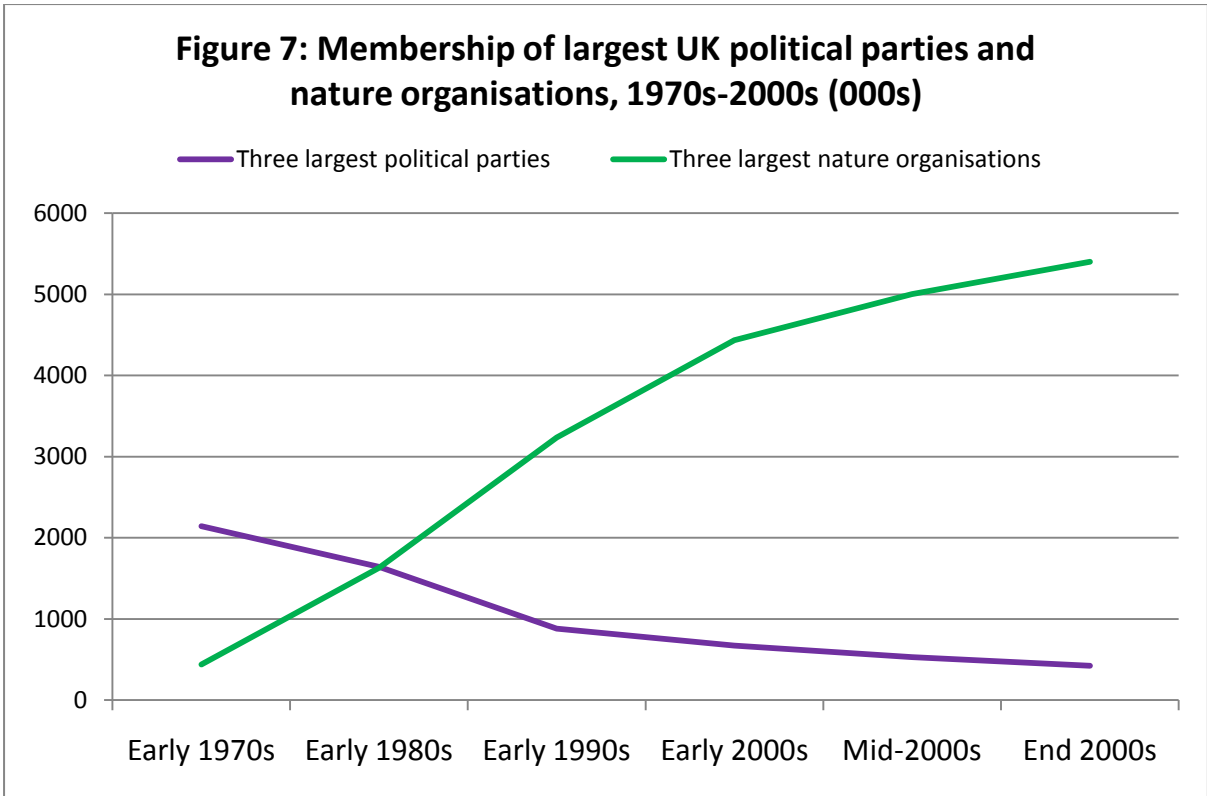


Source: Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement

Membership of other campaigning organisations

Healthy democracies, in which there is genuine freedom of association, are also typified by the existence of a wide range of campaigning organisations beyond the political parties. Like many other democracies, the UK appears to exhibit a growth of such interest groups. In contrast to the dramatic decline in membership of political parties since the 1960s, there has been a sharp rise in the number of people belong to a wide range of UK campaigning organisations. The best documented cases are the UK heritage, environmental and nature protection organisations. The largest three such organisations - the National Trust, the RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts - have all witnessed a tenfold increase in membership levels since the early 1970s. The National Trust currently has more than 3.5 million members, the RSPB over 1 million and the Wildlife Trusts around 800,000.

While the combined membership figures for these three organisations in 1971 was a fraction of that claimed by three main political parties in 1971, figure 7 shows that their growth as membership organisations in the 1980s and 1990s was as rapid as the decline in the membership of political parties. Clearly, there will be a degree of overlap in the membership of these organisations, yet it is safe to assume that members of UK nature protection organisations now out-number members of political parties by a factor of ten to one.



Sources: As figure 3, plus Rootes (2007) and organisations' websites (accessed February 2011)

Conclusion

The decline in turnout and party membership highlighted above suggest some serious grounds for concern - pointing to clear evidence of disengagement from the formal processes of representative democracy. At the same time, we have noted that there is no evidence of any obvious decline in other forms of political and social participation, while membership of some campaigning organisations has grown dramatically since the 1970s. These trends could be interpreted as an underlying shift in democratic politics, suggesting a potential for forms of 'direct democracy' to increasingly complement, or even displace, more traditional forms of political engagement associated with representative democracy.

However, the available evidence also suggests that any such shift will have profound implications for who participates and who has the scope to influence decisions. The one consistent tendency which we have identified is that virtually all forms of political and social activism show clear evidence of a growing class divide.