What makes people vote?

In an era of declining election turnouts, Andrew Sparrow, senior political correspondent on the Guardian website, discusses voters’ motivations with Professor Paul Whiteley of the University of Essex.

ANDREW SPARROW: In recent years the number of people participating in general elections has been diminishing. Why do you think that is?

PAUL WHITELEY: There’s a big generational effect at work in voting. There’s always been a slightly lower turnout among the younger age groups – people aged 18 to 25 – because they don’t have the same stake in the system as people who are older. They don’t have mortgages; a lot of them are students. What’s happened over the last 25 to 30 years is that the gap between the turnout amongst the young and the middle-aged and old has become enormous. For instance, in 1983 just over 70 per cent of the 18- to 24-year-olds voted. If you look at 2005, the last election study we did, it was just over 40 per cent.

But it’s not just that. What’s really happening is that the core institutions that support political participation of the kind that is very important for governance, namely elections to parliament, are weakening a lot. Political parties are weakening in the minds of the electorate and in terms of declining membership. They are irrelevant to people’s day-to-day lives in a way that they weren’t 30 years ago. And because they are at the core of those institutions sustaining participation, that’s really a big factor. That means that young people are acquiring the habit of not voting. There’s some research that shows that people have to learn to vote. They have to be taken along, often with mum and dad, and shown what to do. The more you vote, the more likely you are to vote again. If you start by not voting, and you think it’s irrelevant to you, and the parties don’t try to persuade you to vote, then you will continue not to vote. So we think the decline that’s taken place in turnout is permanent and will continue, with some fluctuations over time. It’s a serious problem.

AS: But people don’t have to vote if they don’t want to, and governments still get elected. Why is it a serious problem if people choose not to vote?

PW: Well, that’s a good question. Some forms of participation are actually rising, for example consumer participation, where people buy products for ethical reasons, or boycott products.
But the core forms of participation that support governance are declining. And that is likely to produce less effective government over time. If you compare countries, it turns out there’s quite a strong relationship between the effectiveness of government – the extent to which it delivers, is efficient, honest and so on – and political participation. If there’s lots of participation in countries – for example, the Swedens, the Danes and so on – you get effective governance. If there isn’t much participation, particularly in relation to turnout, you get weak and poor and ineffective government. And the risk in Britain is that declining participation of this kind is going to produce worse and worse government over time.

**AS** In your new book about voting in the 2005 elections, Performance Politics and the British Voter, you say, “If there is an incipient ‘crisis of political engagement’ in contemporary Britain, then its solution lies largely in the hands of the parties and the politicians themselves.” What do you mean?

**PW** What’s very apparent – it’s been apparent for a while, but it’s acutely apparent in recent Labour governments – is that government is too centralised. Actually, colleagues who worked on the old Soviet Union have identified the pathologies that can arise from over-centralisation, from diktats from the centre, from plans that are dominated from Whitehall. It becomes ineffective. There was a time in Britain, 20 to 40 years ago, when local government was quite an effective elected operation in its own right. It had its own legitimacy. Now that’s all gone. Local government is largely a bureaucracy run from Whitehall. Part of the problem is that government is failing to deliver because it is over-centralised and that in turn switches people off.

**AS** Would proportional representation (PR) make people more likely to vote?

**PW** Well, it’s a fact that in countries with PR systems turnout is a bit higher. But it’s easy to exaggerate this. It’s on average about five per cent higher. If you did have PR, you would probably get the turnout up a bit. But it would not be by a huge amount because these other systemic problems are at work in discouraging participation.

**AS** What about lowering the voting age to 16?

**PW** If you lowered the voting age to 16, all you would do is reduce the turnout, because 16-year-olds would probably turn out much less than 18-year-olds. Their turnout is already below 50 per cent and falling.

**AS** As someone who has studied voting, what are the key factors that decide who votes for whom?

**PW** There are three very broad classes of factors. The least important is people’s social class, and their position in the social structure. That has a modest effect on their turnout. People who are more affluent are more likely to vote. But the effect is relatively modest. The theory that class was the key factor dominated the analysis of electoral politics in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, when the first surveys were done. But our analysis shows that this is currently a minor factor and that it was always less important than people thought.

The second most important factors are what we call ‘position’ issues. These are issues where there are differences between the parties and there’s an argument. The most obvious example is the trade-off between taxation and spending. Another example would be membership of the European Union. Parties are positioned in different places. And those position issues play an important role, although not the most important role, in determining how people vote.

The most important factors are what we call the ‘valence’ factors. These are the issues where everyone, pretty much, agrees what should be done, and the argument is about who should do it. For example, almost everybody wants economic prosperity, and the argument is about who will deliver it. So leadership evaluations – which were traditionally regarded as rather a minor thing by academics – are pretty important. It really makes a difference. You can see the dramatic changes that have occurred in Labour’s fortunes in comparison with the Conservatives since Tony Blair stepped down. And party identification matters too: the ‘brand image’ that parties have, what people think about in connection with a party and whether they think of themselves as supporters. A lot
of people in the country do not think of themselves as supporters of a political party. But quite a lot think of themselves as Conservatives or Labour or whatever. Party identification is important for a party because it provides a bedrock of supporters who will turn out and support it on polling day. So the three components of the ‘valence’ model of electoral behaviour are leadership, valence issues and partisanship and that’s really what drives electoral politics.

**AS** Some people might like a leader, but not the party itself, or vice versa. Which is more important? Does leader trump party? Or does party trump leader?

**PW** Leaders are a bit more important than party, if you break it down statistically. But they are both very important. That does not mean that leadership is ‘it’ and you can forget everything else. Party plays a role. We ask questions such as whether a particular leader is competent, whether we think he or she is responsive, whether we think he or she is trustworthy. All of these things contribute. A party has got to get the leadership thing right, because it’s a big handicap if you have a weak leader. It does not mean you have lost an election automatically if you have a relatively unpopular leader because things can change. But the best way to win an election is to have a good leader, a popular party and be seen as doing the best job on the issues that people worry about, which are a relatively small number, largely domestic, dominated by the economy, but also issues to do with personal safety, crime and stuff like that.

**AS** At this time of economic and political crisis, what is the greatest opportunity for positive social change?

**PW** The greatest opportunity would be to implement meaningful constitutional change – reform of Parliament, electoral reform, devolution of power to local government, making the quango state accountable, etc.

**AS**: And what is the biggest danger?

**PW** The biggest danger is that a weak Labour government will fail to introduce a sound regulatory framework for the City and we will be back in the same mess in ten years’ time.

**AS** What’s the key question to which good social science research can provide answers?

**PW** The key question which good social research can address is: what are the likely political and economic effects of constitutional changes?

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**Professor Whiteley** was Director of the ESRC Programme on Democracy and Participation, 1998 to 2003 and is Co-Director of the ESRC British Election Study

https://www.essex.ac.uk/government/staff/academic/whiteley.p.shtm

http://www.bes2009-10.org
A decade of devolution
ARE THE NEW UK PARLIAMENTS REALLY WORKING?

WHEN THE SCOTTISH Parliament was considering more generous support for students, who was it who complained: “You can’t have Scotland doing something different from the rest of Britain”? Incredibly, it was reportedly Tony Blair, the man who as Prime Minister introduced devolution for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The comment is revealing. Firstly it highlights that the devolution ‘project’ was primarily driven by a political ambition to placate the forces of nationalism, and secondly that no thought was given to the fact that if you devolve power it will result in policy differences. Differences existed before devolution but the trend has accelerated since the establishment of new centres of power in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Divergence has been most significant in Scotland. Highlights include the introduction of free elderly care, the abolition of upfront university fees and the shift to proportional representation in local government elections. Elsewhere, the Welsh have scrapped prescription charges and school league tables and developed a distinctive approach to early years provision, while in Northern Ireland, educational selection is on the way out.

Arguably, health policy has seen the greatest variation, so much so that it is now possible to talk about the existence of four National Health Services. The English NHS has prioritised market-based solutions with extensive central prescription in the form of targets. Scotland, by contrast, has rejected quasi-markets in favour of empowering health professionals, while the Welsh have prioritised a public health and preventative agenda.

But equally, devolution can be a powerful driver of policy harmonisation. Indeed, it was intended to create “laboratories of democracy” so that what works well in one place might be adapted and implemented elsewhere. Thus the Children’s Commissioner, first pioneered by the Welsh, has since been taken up across the country, as has the smoking ban, which was initially introduced in Scotland, while the Northern Irish were the first to provide free bus passes for pensioners.

Experimentation also allows nations to reject ideas tried out elsewhere. For example, the Welsh have moved ahead with an Older People’s Commissioner, which the Northern Irish are set to copy, but which the Scots and English have looked at and ruled out.

It is questionable whether enough has been made of this devolution dividend. The Westminster government has been reluctant to learn from the other nations, and has ignored calls to institutionalise mechanisms for capturing the best ideas produced across the country, a role it is best placed to perform. There are limits to what can be imported from another political jurisdiction, but really this argument conceals a long-standing aversion within Whitehall to learn from others.

This is a pity, as there are plenty of things that Westminster could draw on. Reformers interested in overhauling the way Parliament operates in the aftermath of the MPs’ expenses scandal could learn a lot from the committee system in the Scottish Parliament. The decision taken in Northern Ireland to codify the responsibilities of the police and politicians might provide a model for clearing up the mess in England, especially in London where the lines of accountability between the Home Office, Commissioner, and London Mayor are confused. And the Scottish government’s decision to push on with minimum pricing for alcohol could reduce antisocial behaviour.

If Westminster is guilty of standing aloof, the charge against the devolved administrations is that they sometimes pursue difference for the sake of it, or resist borrowing successful policies from England. This is a bad idea, not least because it is English policy that has proved the most innovative, or certainly the most radical, of the four nations, especially when it comes to public service reform. Moreover, research suggests that English health and education policies have proved more effective at improving outcomes than policies tried in the other nations.

Devolution also raises difficult, and as yet unresolved, questions about the nature of citizenship, since it allows the contract between citizen and state, particularly in the major public services, to vary across the four nations. The real issue, however, is the failure of the devolution architects to explain to citizens that such a change was taking place – or to put in place any mechanisms to deal with the consequences of policy divergence, like a statement setting out the basic social and economic rights of all citizens. This is particularly problematic in England, which lacks its own devolved institutions. Members of the public in England believe that they are paying for people in the rest of the UK to have entitlements such as free elderly care and prescriptions that are denied to them. Reforming the funding settlement is key, but so is the need for policymakers to articulate a vision of citizenship that takes account of this new political landscape.

http://www.ippr.org/aboutippr/staff/?id=73
ALL PARTIES MUST try to win women’s votes if they want to win power in a general election. The majority of voters are women, and politicians are increasingly aware that since women’s priorities are different from men’s, it is important that they address women’s concerns.

So does it matter for the ‘Tories’ electoral prospects that they have only a handful of women MPs? If they actively seek to promote the selection of more women candidates, will it sow the seeds of disharmony within the party? Can Conservatives be feminists?

These questions are at the heart of wide-ranging research by Dr Sarah Childs and Professor Paul Webb into the ‘feminisation’ of the Conservative Party that has been conducted since 2007, two years into David Cameron’s leadership.

The feminisation of British politics over the past decade has been largely party-specific – women have constituted nearly a quarter of the post-1997 Parliamentary Labour Party, compared with a tenth of the Conservatives and a sixth of the Liberal Democrats. The Conservative Party has lagged behind in terms of policies to promote more women.

Yet it was just two minutes into Mr Cameron’s leadership acceptance speech in 2005 that he announced he would act to “change the scandalous under-representation of women in the Conservative Party”. Since then he has introduced reforms to the party’s parliamentary selection procedures in an effort to increase the selection of women, minority ethnic candidates, and disabled candidates. Current projections suggest that the number of Conservative women MPs will more than double at the next election.

The higher than normal retirements following the parliamentary expenses scandal offer unexpected opportunities for the Conservative Party to select women in the newly vacant held seats, precisely the ones in which women need to be selected in order to be returned as MPs.

Analysis of party member focus groups suggests that while Conservative Party members are generally willing to concede the principle of a more socially representative parliamentary party, they do not regard it as a high priority, and do not welcome all of the candidate-selection reforms that have been introduced in recent years. This is partly because of an instinctive aversion to anything that smacks of ‘political correctness’ or positive discrimination, and they are insistent on the need for recruiting candidates strictly on merit.

Party members specifically dislike the priority list and quotas for women on shortlists, though they are open to the promotion of women candidates through training and awareness-raising initiatives. This is broadly consistent with their feeling that the low number of women MPs in the party owes mainly to the low supply of women putting themselves forward to become candidates. But there is also some perception of discrimination by selectors, particularly by older women on the selection boards.

Closer examination reveals a number of interesting nuances of opinion between the sexes, generations and regions. This is consistent with the working hypothesis that attempts to change the social and substantive representation of women in the party may generate tensions among different Conservatives.

At the same time, the finding that many members accept the need for the party to be socially representative suggests the potential, at least, for the party to transform this sentiment into wider support for measures that enhance women’s selection as parliamentary candidates.
Northern Ireland has undergone huge political changes but despite its transformation, citizens are less interested in politics than a decade ago.

Dr Katrina Lloyd from Queen’s University Belfast studied attitudes to the role of government, comparing survey data from 1996 with data from the 2007 International Social Survey Programme. The research found that political interest in Northern Ireland was lower than in the Republic of Ireland or Britain.

Levels of interest in politics varied according to region, gender and age. More older than younger people and more men than women showed an interest in politics. Young women in Northern Ireland were the least interested and the study suggests that this may be because politics in Northern Ireland is dominated by men.

Trust in politicians was fairly low, with Protestants tending to trust politicians less than Catholics. In comparisons between Northern Ireland, Britain and the Republic of Ireland, the level of trust in election promises was similar across the countries. Northern Irish and British respondents were more trusting of people in general than the Republic of Ireland respondents.

Attitudes to the law have improved markedly in Northern Ireland, with more people agreeing that the law should be obeyed in 2007 than in 1996. Particularly striking is the change in attitudes among Catholics, where many more agreed on this issue than a decade ago. The research suggests this may be linked to changes in policing – in 2001 the Police Service for Northern Ireland replaced the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which was distrusted by many Catholics.

The Northern Irish respondents were less in favour of anti-government protest meetings, marches and demonstrations than people from Britain and Ireland. The political process may be moving forward, but the scars of a violent past will take time to heal.

http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/IRISHSTUDIESGATEWAY/STAFF/IRISHSTUDIES SCHOLARS/DRLLOYD/
identity and being a full part of British society. The third column shows that 80 to 90 per cent of ethnic minorities perceive no such conflict. The third column also shows that one-third of the white British do not accept that one can belong to Britain while having a minority religious or cultural identity, so this principle is not universally accepted.

Although Table 2 shows a generally high sense of belonging, there are clearly some people who do not feel they belong. It is interesting to note the factors that seem to be associated with a sense of belonging. The research investigates a large number of these factors, and the strongest relationship is that people of all ethnicities are much more likely to report feeling that they belong if they feel treated fairly and with respect.

The Citizenship Survey asked whether they felt they would be treated better or worse than people of other races by 15 public services, covering health, education, criminal justice, local government and housing. The first column of Table 3 shows the fraction of respondents who report that they think they would treated worse by at least one of these services.

The group that feels most discriminated against is black Caribbeans but, perhaps surprisingly, the next group is the white British, large numbers of whom feel they would be treated worse in the allocation of public housing. This is what people think, not necessarily the truth. But it does suggest some sense of neglect among segments of the white population. Table 3 shows that people of all ethnicities who think they are treated worse are less likely to feel they belong to their local area or to Britain.

So what do the results suggest about identity in modern Britain? They lend support to the traditional British multicultural project of making immigrants and their cultures feel welcome and respected, and fighting discrimination, without worrying too much about where minorities choose to live.

But while the multicultural project may make minorities feel a part of the wider society, it pays little or no attention to white natives. Segments of the white population have come to feel that they are discriminated against and do not feel a part of British society. It is not too much of a leap to imagine that this is the segment of the population from which the British National Party draws its support.

So, the biggest danger of multiculturalism may not be that it fails to create a sense of belonging among minorities, but that it has paid too little attention to how to sustain support among the white population.
Governments around the world introduced counter-terrorist legislation and a raft of other policies in the aftermath of President Bush’s declaration of the war on terror. While human rights activists, lawyers and researchers challenged the human rights implications, less attention has been paid to the impact for aid policy. Research by Professor Jude Howell of the London School of Economics (LSE) and Dr Jeremy Lind, associate of the Centre for Civil Society, LSE and Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, set out to explore the effects of the measures, practices and institutional restructuring introduced in the wake of September 11, 2001.

Though the Obama administration has renounced the language of the ‘war on terror’ and taken steps to revoke aspects such as waterboarding and the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, the bulk of the legislation and practices associated with a new ‘war on terror’ security framework continue.

This security framework has affected aid policy and practice, and civil societies, in several ways. Global and national leaders have underlined the links between poverty, alienation and terrorism, paving the way for closer integration between defence, diplomacy and development. While the validity of these links remains unproven, development institutions have emphasised the importance of aid to global and national security. In this spirit, governments have adopted a ‘whole-of-government’ approach to terrorism that draws development, foreign policy and defence departments together to achieve greater co-operation and co-ordination.

The flows of aid to countries at the forefront of the ‘war on terror’ such as Iraq and Afghanistan have increased. International donors have established initiatives aimed at countering extremism, such as projects targeting young Muslims in Kenya or attempts to reform the curricula of religious schools.

Armed forces have played an increasing role in development, drawing on the rationale that ‘winning hearts and minds’ through quick-impact projects is a vital prong in counter-insurgency. This has intensified a debate about the risks this poses to the lives of humanitarian workers.

The ‘war on terror’ also impinged on civil societies and how donor agencies engage with different civil society ‘actors’. By the millennium, donor agencies and governments were already reassessing their strategies towards civil society, in particular non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

New counter-terrorist legislation cast suspicion on certain communities and their organisations.

Muslim charities, madrassas, Islamic bookshops and community centres were all rendered suspect, or were made to look as if they were associated with terrorism. Indeed, all the charities prohibited under the US terrorist list were Muslim charities.

New anti-money laundering legislation included clauses relating to charities, making international money transactions more burdensome. Governments across the world tightened up national legislation relating to NGOs, increasing government scrutiny of their operations, requiring greater accountability and transparency, and demanding commitments to ensure they have no association with terrorist organisations. US aid agencies introduced systems for vetting partners, and required all recipients of US aid money to sign Anti-Terrorist Certificates.

While donors and governments have tended to reduce civil society to NGOs and voluntary organisations, the ‘war on terror’ security framework has prompted them to engage with a broader set of civil society actors. In particular they have sought dialogue with Muslim leaders and communities, introduced programmes targeting young Muslims, and created new resources and opportunities for Muslim groups and communities.

These are a few of the considerable effects of the security framework on aid policy and civil society. Although the Obama administration has rescinded some of the most abhorrent aspects of the ‘war on terror’, much of the legislation, policies and institutional structures remain entrenched.

For further details of this research see Jude Howell and Jeremy Lind, Counter-Terrorism, Civil Society and Aid: Before and After the War on Terror, Palgrave Press, 2009.
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Getting to know us

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THE END OF THE BRITISH CONSTITUTION AS WE KNOW IT

Tony Blair left behind an extraordinary legacy of constitutional change. From the Human Rights Act and the creation of a London Mayorality, to an independent Bank of England and Freedom of Information, he transformed Britain’s ancien régime. No grand design lay behind the ad hoc reforms. Nonetheless, some important themes emerge.

Guy Lodge of The Institute for Public Policy Research has examined these emerging themes. Firstly, the traditional British constitution has been replaced by one with a stronger separation of powers and a more robust system of checks and balances. Power has been constrained in a number of important ways. The Human Rights Act has strengthened the hand of the judiciary, devolution has limited the reach of Westminster, while the rise of arm’s-length constitutional bodies and regulators over the last decade have added further constraints to the executive.

This is not to say that the ‘elective dictatorship’ is entirely dead and buried. As if to compensate for the power it ceded to the devolved bodies, Whitehall’s stranglehold over local government and public services within England has intensified over the last ten years. And although MPs might be more rebellious, Britain retains a model of powerful single-party government.

The reforms also unleashed their own dynamic force that has created new sources of instability – for instance, between the nations of the UK over funding disparities and the unanswered West Lothian Question, but also between elected and non-elected figures, such as ministers and judges.

Civic behaviour: is it better to nudge or think?

Governments cannot act alone. They need the support of citizens who perform actions in their everyday lives to deliver the policy outcomes that everyone wants.

Reducing carbon emissions to limit climate change, for example, is not just for governments to implement, but needs citizens to change their behaviour.

Likewise, combating social disorder is not just about the police responding to emergencies. It is for citizens to take an active role by monitoring what happens on their doorstep and providing information. But how deep should citizen involvement go?

Most people in liberal societies want the state to be ‘light touch’ and for the demands on the citizen to be reasonable. Yet they also suspect it is going to need involvement and debate for citizen action to be meaningful.

The ESRC Rediscovering the Civic and Achieving Better Outcomes in Public Policy programme at the Universities of Manchester and Southampton uses experiments to find out what kind of citizen involvement works.

It set off with two sets of understandings about how to change civic behaviour. One draws from the popular book by Thaler and Sunstein, Nudge. This argues that citizens can be offered a choice that encourages them to act, in a way that benefits the end of the British constitution as we know it.

How radical constitutional reform saw the reinvention of Britain.
A further theme is that our political culture – comprised of the public, media and politicians themselves – has yet to come to terms with the scale of the changes that have been enacted. Often they behave as though nothing has changed, as though the old Westminster model is alive and well. Rather than admit that power has moved elsewhere, ministers continue to claim they can fix any problem the public throws at them. One consequence of this is that governments are encouraged to over-promise and under-deliver, which tends to foster the apathy which pervades politics.

This leads to another theme. More than a decade of constitutional innovation has coincided with a rise in political disaffection, not the fall that was promised. Some suggest that the new politics failed to materialise because the reform agenda did not go far enough. Guy Lodge concludes: “International evidence does not support the claim that an elected second chamber or proportional representation would have much impact on participation.”

A more effective response to disengagement is likely to be found much closer to citizens’ daily lives, at the local level, where it is easier for the public to participate. How should this be done? The first thing would be to address a genuine programme of decentralisation to local government. This could be combined with the redistribution of power from the political class to the people themselves through the use of new forms of participatory democracy. Such a move might help rebuild the trust in politics that has been shattered by the expenses debacle.

http://www.ippr.org.uk
Guy Lodge and Roger Gough ‘The Constitution’ in Options for a New Britain, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

HOW DID RURAL BECOME POLITICAL?

The surge in ‘rural activism’ to protect the countryside shows no sign of abating. While the impact of rural campaigns on actual policy may have been limited, the mobilising efforts have changed the political culture in rural communities themselves.

These new organisations display a greater willingness to protest and greater acceptance of confrontational tactics than established countryside interest groups, according to research led by Professor Michael Woods at Aberystwyth University. Emotion, rather than ideology or material interests, has played an big part in participants’ motivation. Activists with a deep emotional attachment to a community, or ‘the countryside’ in general, are provoked by threats to these places and frustrated with traditional political channels. Their resolution for action can often be strengthened by rousing public meetings and a strong sense of community.

The rural campaigns have also recruited new participants with little previous experience of activism. While only ten per cent of Countryside Alliance members had participated in political demonstrations or rallies before 1997, 75 per cent took part in the Liberty and Livelihood March in 2002 to demonstrate over the government’s treatment of rural Britain. A similar picture emerges in local campaigns, for instance against supermarkets and wind farms.

This engagement has led to the formation of new action groups and networks that are more flexible and informal than established organisations like the National Farmers’ Union and the Campaign to Protect Rural England. These new groups include networks such as Farmers for Action and the Countryside Alliance, ad hoc protest groups and radical splinter groups such as the Countryside Action Network. In the end, the need to engage with the state makes it necessary to become a more formal organisation again – as has happened with both the Countryside Alliance and Farmers for Action.

http://www.ies.aber.ac.uk/research/projects/grassroots-rural-protest-and-political-activity-britain
FROM THE IRANIAN Revolution in 1979 to the events in New York on 9/11 and in London on 7/7, the spotlight on Muslim communities is more intense than ever. In the West, there has been an intensification of debate about extremism in Islam and the desire of Muslims to engage with liberal democracy. But Muslim women have been largely ignored. Any discussion of Muslim women is almost always related to sexuality and gender relations (dress codes, forced marriage, honour crimes, female genital mutilation), so they end up being seen as submissive, subjugated, ignorant – unable or unwilling to speak for themselves and therefore not enjoying the rights that others take for granted.

Now and then, the public will focus on an image at odds with submission and subjugation. Examples include the Chechen, suicide-bombing ‘black widows’ of the early 2000s or the young, jihadist woman poet from Southall in London, dubbed the ‘lyrical terrorist’.

But even in such cases, media, politicians and the general public will display a fascination for these women. Few, if any, will see them as ideologically and politically motivated subjects in their own right. That Muslim women across the world have histories and experience of political participation in anti-colonial movements, struggles against dictatorships, nation-building projects and more recently in the conventional and informal processes of western liberal democracy goes largely unreported.

According to researchers Dr Khursheed Wadia and Professor Danièle Joly at Warwick University, in countries such as Britain and France, women have participated (since the beginning of family migration from the developing world) in local migrant associations and mosques to improve the situation of their families and communities. But their experiences of living or being raised in the West have meant that Muslim women have had to tread an uneasy path between Western ideas and ideals of modernity and Islamic values and traditions in ways that many non-Muslims find difficult to grasp. Moreover, in the post-9/11 era they have come to epitomise Islamic identity and present a visible cultural marker against ‘Western civilisation’.

And as Muslim communities have come under heavier surveillance and policing after 9/11, women have had to play different family roles. Increasingly, wives, mothers and sisters of men charged with or imprisoned for terrorism have had to take on traditionally male family responsibilities. They have also set up or supported ‘fair trial’ and release campaigns on behalf of men in their communities. Many women have themselves been subjected to surveillance, arrest and imprisonment. The Warwick University study finds that Muslim women have become politicised, as shown by their increased presence in public political actions such as stop-the-[Iraq] war demonstrations, campaign meetings and the lobbying of politicians.

Early findings of a survey of political participation among Muslim women in Britain and France, which forms part of the Warwick University study, also corroborate the view that where they have the right to vote, Muslim women are more likely to vote than the average. In fact, as Muslim women become more visible in public spaces and actions, Western governments may see them as useful political bridge-builders between their communities and society. This is borne out by the Labour government’s launch of the ‘Preventing Violent Extremism: Winning Hearts and Minds’ action in June 2007, which has encouraged Muslim women to play a greater leadership role in civic life in order to “isolate, prevent and defeat violent extremism”.

Alongside studying Muslim women’s political behaviour and participation, the Warwick study aims to inform policymakers and a wider Western public of the problems, aspirations and achievements of women from Muslim communities in Britain and France. It supports the view that they make an important contribution to the political and social life of the countries in which they are present.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/crer/mwp
Conflict over resources
WILL ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE MAKE WAR MORE LIKELY?

Few now deny that environmental change will have a harmful effect on the natural world. Moreover, an unhappy consensus has emerged that this is our fault and it is up to us to do something about it. For understandable reasons this has been the focus of much of the debate over environmental change.

But environmental change will not only affect the natural world, it will affect how we live our lives, how societies are brought together and how they relate to each other. It will have consequences for the social world as well as the natural.

In 2003 the then Secretary of State for Defence, John Reid, articulated one concern over the potential social consequences of environmental change. For Reid, climate change “will make scarce resources, clean water, viable agricultural land even scarcer”. This in turn will “make the emergence of violent conflict more rather than less likely”. Reid was not the first person to articulate such concerns, though he was the first frontline British politician to express them publicly. The academic Michael Klare had already labelled such wars ‘resource wars’ in his book of the same title.

Nor has the British government been alone in expressing these concerns – most significantly, perhaps, the United States began to express similar concerns despite the Bush administration’s focus on the ‘global war on terror’. Indeed, for some, such as the British government’s former chief scientific adviser Sir David King, the Iraq war was best explained in terms of access to resources.

**Rather than acting as an engine for economic growth and development, resource abundance may act as a curse**

There is nothing new in the idea of a link between resources and violent conflict. The European empires of the 16th through to 19th centuries were driven by the promise of riches elsewhere. Nor were resource issues absent from the ideological conflict of the Cold War – in the 1970s, for example, US President Jimmy Carter argued that an attack on the oilfields of the Persian Gulf would be seen as “an assault on the vital interests of the United States”. But what is interesting is that by the early years of this millennium a consensus had emerged that it was not the lack of resources that led to conflict, as Reid suggested, but the abundance.

Over the past decade, two explanations have come to dominate conflicts (especially those internal to a state, which account for the overwhelming majority of recent wars): greed to exploit resources, and grievances over deprivation, inequality and social exclusion. Central to this has been the work of the British academic Paul Collier, with his colleague Anke Hoeffler, and the Post-Conflict Unit in the World Bank. In a pioneering study of 54 large-scale civil wars, Collier found that a high ratio of primary commodity exports to GDP increased significantly the risk of conflict. In 1998 Collier and Hoeffler argued that, counter to the apparent experiences of Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda and other high-profile conflicts of that decade, “highly fractionalised societies have no greater risk of experiencing a civil war than homogenous ones”. Instead, “rebels will conduct a civil war if the perceived benefits outweigh the costs of rebellion”. Moreover, conflicts were prolonged by ready access to resources, especially easily lootable commodities such as diamonds.

Although Collier’s work has been questioned, it remains an influential explanation. Rather than acting as an engine for economic growth and development, resource abundance may act as a curse. The cost of these wars has been in terms of economic and social development, the disruption to tens of millions of lives, and the deaths, directly or indirectly, of millions. For most of humanity, perhaps these are the real resource wars.

My concern with resource wars, however, is somewhat different. Michael Klare was not alone in trying to put a label on modern conflict. Michael Ignatieff has written of ‘virtual war’; the military historian Martin van Creveld has written of post-Clausewitzian war, in a nod to the great 19th century Prussian military strategists; Mary Kaldor wrote influentially of ‘new wars’, fought within states and over identity; the American strategist Edward Luttwak wrote of ‘post-heroic warfare’. For a decade or so, it seemed there was a struggle not simply to understand modern conflict but to put a label on it. In so doing, we reduced war in all of its complexity to something which could be expressed in a sentence or less. Even the work of Paul Collier does this, reducing the explanation of war to an economic model, thereby sideling political and social elements.

This is not to say that there are no patterns or trends in war. Rather I would argue that the causes or character of war cannot be reduced to one single element, but are likely to be a complex combination of factors which vary from case to case. Like John Reid, I am concerned that environmental change will create new stresses for how we live our lives and how societies relate to each other, but I am equally convinced that when conflicts emerge, resource scarcity will be neither a necessary nor a sufficient explanation for them.

http://www.aber.ac.uk/interpol/en/staff/mclines.htm