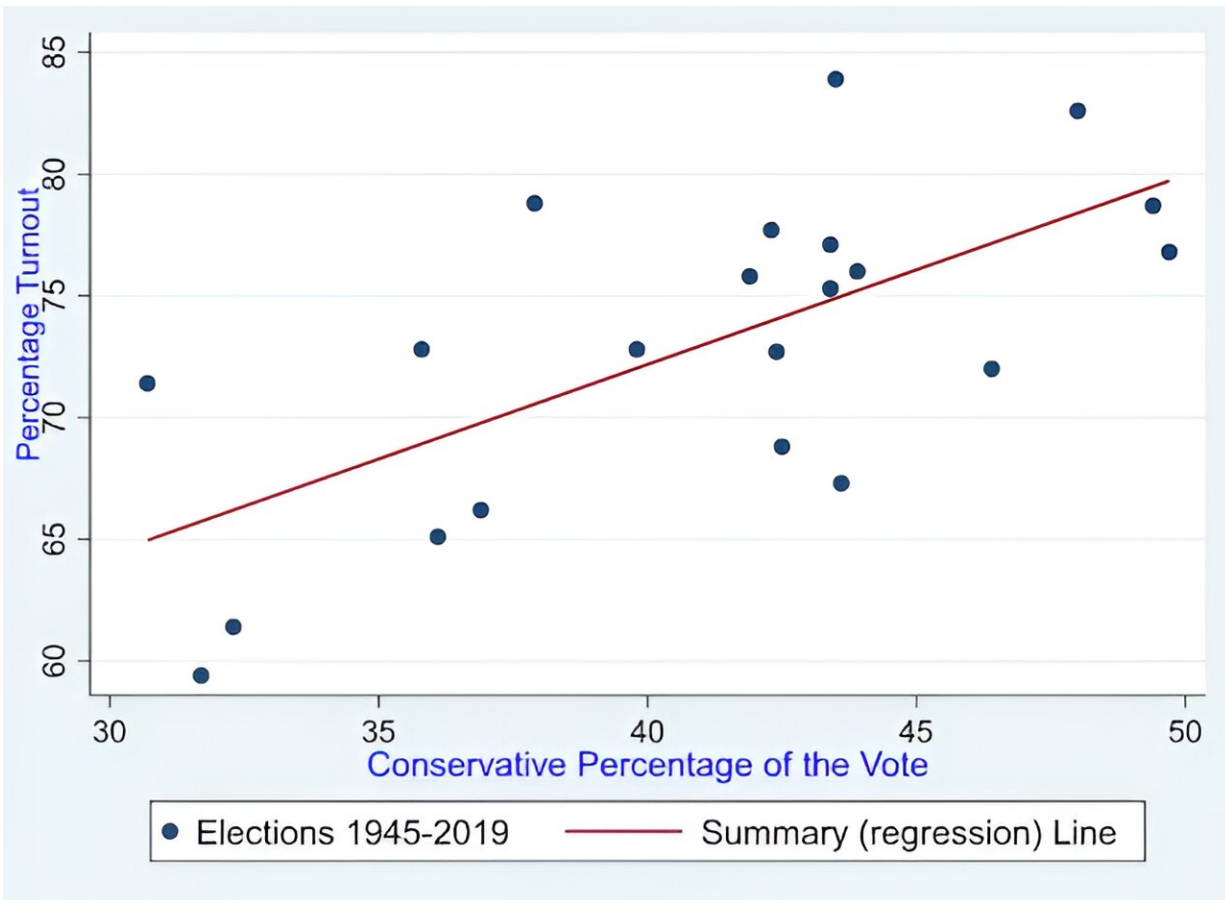


People experiencing news fatigue are less likely to be voters, finds survey

October 19 2023, by Paul Whiteley



The Conservatives are hit by low turnout. Credit: P Whiteley, [CC BY-SA](#)

In a comprehensive analysis of news consumption across the globe, a recent report by Reuters concluded that "interest in news continues to

decline, fueling disengagement and selective news avoidance." In the 46 countries surveyed in the report, public interest in news has dropped significantly in the UK, France, the US and Spain [over the eight-year period from 2015 to 2023](#).

The study was commissioned by the [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#) at the University of Oxford, which has been publishing reports on citizen [media](#) use in various countries since 2012. The fieldwork for the online surveys was done by YouGov in early 2023. They show that Britain has a particular problem.

The percentage of [survey](#) respondents who said that they were "extremely" or "very" interested in [news](#) in Britain fell from 70% in 2015 to 43% in 2023. A similar problem has occurred in the US, although it is not as bad as Britain. In the US 67% of respondents were "extremely" or "very" interested in the news in 2015, but this had fallen to 49% by 2023. Both represent huge changes in media consumption of news over this eight-year period.

As a result, large numbers of people are simply disassociating themselves from news about politics and current affairs. They have become disconnected citizens. The report points out that: "these declines in news interest are reflected in lower consumption of both traditional and online media sources in most cases." Clearly, this is not just driven by people moving online from traditional media outlets, although this is of course happening.

In the Reuters Institute's 2022 report, [survey respondents](#) gave a number of reasons why they have become disconnected from the news. Some 29% said they were "worn out by the quantity of news" and another 29% they felt "news is untrustworthy and biased."

Another 36% said the news brings down their mood. These feelings have

given rise to a growing group of people who actively avoid the news. In Britain 24% of respondents did this in 2017 but by 2022 it was 46%. The number of people who don't want to know has doubled in five years.

Double disillusionment?

The Reuters report did not investigate the political effects of this development, which was beyond the scope of their remit. But there is a lively literature in [political science](#) about the effects of the media on political participation. In an influential book, political scientists Shanto Iyengar and Stephen Ansolabehere showed that attack adverts, which are such a feature of US political campaigns, [demobilize people from participating](#).

We can gain insights on this point by looking at data from the [2020 European Social Survey for Britain](#). These are very high-quality surveys and provide [accurate information](#) on what Europeans in general think about politics and the media. One of the questions in the survey asked: "on a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs?".

The chart shows the relationship between time spent by respondents acquiring information about politics and current affairs and their reported turnout in the previous general [election](#).

There is a [strong relationship](#) between voting turnout and media usage. Only 49% of people who spent no time at all on news gathering turned out to vote while 33% of them did not vote. In fairness, 19% of this group were not eligible to vote, since the survey picked up people who are not on the electoral register. Even so, if we look at the group who spent one to two hours looking for news about politics, 91% of them voted and only 6% failed to do so. It is clear that media usage and participating in elections are closely related.

Further analysis shows that a similar pattern is evident in relation to other forms of democratic participation. It is people who are engaging with the news that are turning up to exercise their right to protest, for example.

Media malaise damages [political participation](#) in general and given the massive changes highlighted in the Reuter's [report](#) it could indicate that a lower turnout should be expected in the next general election. If we examine all 21 general elections in Britain since 1945, there is a strong correlation between turnout and the Conservative vote. The more people vote, the better the Conservative party does in the election.

There is also a positive relationship between turnout and Labor voting, but it is significantly weaker. Both parties would be damaged by lower turnout in the next election as a result of media malaise, but the Conservatives would be damaged more than Labor.

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