advantage ranging from 2 to 8 per cent. Bittner’s own findings do suggest a substantial role for leader traits. Still, even these findings are consistent with the view that leaders’ characters are only a part, and often a minor part, of the factors shaping individual votes and overall election results.

Where leader traits do make a difference, which attributes matter most? The key characteristics appear to be those directly linked to performance in office. By comparison, purely personal characteristics, such as appearance and likeability, are unimportant. Specifically, the two main desiderata for candidates are competence and integrity. In the United States, ‘there is broad agreement on two core traits [used in evaluating candidates’ personal qualities]: one, ability to do the job well, based on performance in office (incumbency) or a previous record of accomplishment; and two, a reputation for honesty’ (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008, pp. 55–6).

Extending the analysis to Australia, Germany, and Sweden, Ohr and Oscarsson (2011, p. 212) reach similar conclusions, judging that ‘politically relevant and performance-related leader traits are important criteria for voters’ political judgements’. They conclude that ‘leader evaluations and their effect on the vote in the electorate are firmly based on politically “rational” considerations – be it in a presidential or in a parliamentary system’. If personal traits matter, it is because they are judged to be relevant to government performance.

In general, leaders are higher in visibility than in impact. There is also a wider lesson here for students of electoral behaviour. As Key (1966, p. 7) pointed out long ago, ‘voters are not fools’ and little insight is gained from treating them as such. Before dismissing voters as dupes, remember that you, too, are or might become one (Goren, 2012).

Despite rising education, turnout fell in most of the democratic world in the second half of the twentieth century. In 19 liberal democracies, it declined on average by 10 per cent between the 1950s and the 1990s (Wattenberg, 2000). Figure 12.2 shows the trend for one high-turnout country (Sweden), one traditionally middle-turnout country (the United Kingdom), and one low-turnout country (Switzerland). The pattern is clear, with the fall concentrated in the 1990s. In many countries, abstainers remain in the majority at regional and local contests.

It is possible that the main fall in turnout has already taken place, at least for national contests. As Figure 12.2 shows, participation increased modestly in the 2010 elections in Switzerland and the United Kingdom. In the USA, too, turnout among the eligible population has recovered in the closer presidential elections of this century (see Spotlight, Chapter 11). However, prudence suggests that we should avoid dismissing low turnout as yesterday’s problem.

Why the fall? The decline surely forms part of a wider trend in the democratic world; namely, a growing distance between voters on the one hand, and parties and government on the other. It is...