



BRIEFING PAPER

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Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?

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Summary

People are politically disengaged if they do not know, value or participate in the democratic process. In the UK, political disengagement is more prevalent among certain groups than others. This paper considers which groups are considered to be politically disengaged, and why.

Political disengagement can take different forms. This paper includes information on political attitudes that indicate political disengagement; levels of participation in political activities; political party membership; electoral registration; voting; and the number of councillors, candidates and MPs drawn from particular groups.

Young people reported lower levels of knowledge about politics than other age groups, but were more likely to think the UK's political system is responsive to their interests. They were less likely than other age groups to participate in political activities, to be on the electoral register, and to vote. The average age of councillors, candidates and MPs is over 50.

Ethnic minorities were more likely to be satisfied with democracy in the UK than white people, but reported lower levels of knowledge about politics and participation in political activities. Ethnic minorities were less likely to be on the electoral register, although this is likely to be explained by factors other than their ethnicity, and to vote. Councillors, candidates and MPs are disproportionately white.

Unskilled workers and the long-term unemployed reported lower levels of political knowledge, satisfaction with democracy, and participation in political activities than people from other occupational backgrounds. They were also less likely to be on the electoral register and to vote. Not much is known about the socio-economic backgrounds of councillors, candidates and MPs, although around three-quarters of MPs are university education, one-third went to fee paying school and a declining number are former manual workers.

Women are less likely to know a fair amount about politics than men, but equally likely to be satisfied with the current system of governing. They are more likely to be included on the electoral register, and as likely to vote. Women are underrepresented among councillors, candidates and MPs.

Disabilities take different forms that may impact differently upon political engagement. Overall, people with disabilities were as likely to have participated in political activities as people without disabilities, but people with physical disabilities were more likely to be included on the electoral register than any other group. Research suggests that people with disabilities are less likely to vote. Councillors were more likely to report having a disability than MPs.

Only a small proportion of overseas voters is estimated to be included on the electoral register (and consequently, able to vote). However, the number has increased considerably since the EU referendum.

Attitudes towards democracy in the UK vary across the country. In Scotland, people were more likely than people in Wales, England and Northern Ireland to have participated in political activities, and to be on the electoral register (although differences exist between regions). Scottish voters were also more likely to have voted in the 2015 General Election.

The Government has used a variety of measures to address different forms of political disengagement in the UK.

1. Political disengagement

1.1 Defining political (dis)engagement

In democracies, voters elect a government to regulate their collective affairs. Voters influence the decisions governments make by voting for particular politicians or parties, but also in other ways, including campaigning, demonstrating, and petitioning. Such activities are known as democratic or political engagement, involvement, or participation.

This paper will use the term 'political engagement' to capture certain behaviours and attitudes towards the political system, defined as democratic engagement by the academics David Sanders et al:

An individual (group) can be considered democratically [politically] engaged to the extent that he/she (it) is positively engaged behaviourally and psychologically with the political system and associated democratic norms.¹

Conversely, individuals and groups are politically disengaged if they are not positively engaged (in terms of attitudes and behaviours) with the political system. Positive engagement does not mean approval: it can take the forms of (non-violent) protest and activism aimed at reform.

Disenfranchised or disengaged?

People who are disenfranchised are not allowed to vote, but can participate in other forms of political engagement. People who are disengaged do not participate in the forms of political engagement that are available to them (whether these include voting or not).

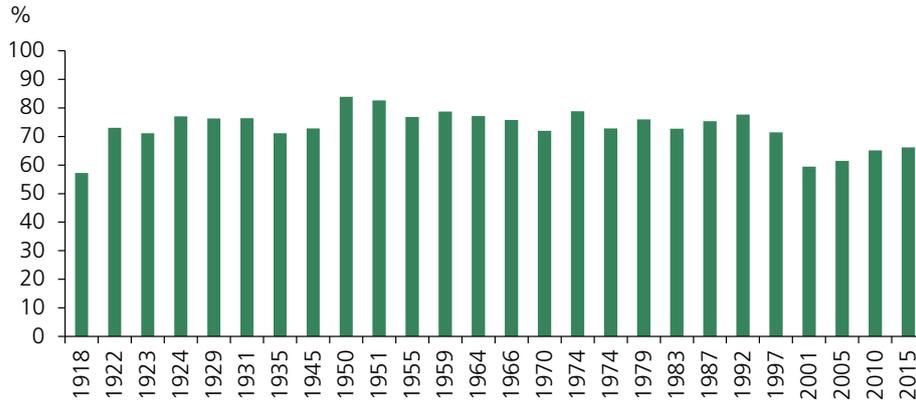
1.2 Why does political disengagement matter?

Political engagement is assumed to help make governments responsive to the needs of citizens and give citizens the opportunity to shape the laws, policies and institutions that govern them.

Across Western democracies, voter turnout and trust in politics has decreased since the 1950s. The table below shows voter turnout in the UK between 1918 and 2015.

¹ David Sanders, Stephen Fisher, Anthony Heath and Maria Sobolewska, 'The democratic engagement of Britain's ethnic minorities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2014, 37:1, 123

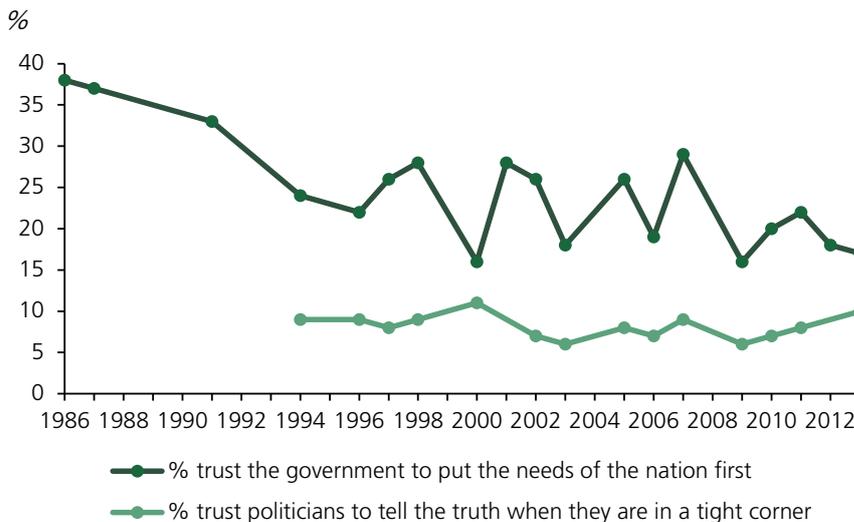
Turnout at UK General Elections, 1918-2015



Sources: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*
 House of Commons Library, CBP7186 General Election 2015
Note: 1918 figures include all of Ireland

The table below shows levels of trust in politics and the Government in the UK, between 1986 and 2013. Data in the chart is not available for every year and marks individual data points. The proportion of people who trusted the Government to put the needs of the nation first decreased from 38% in 1996 to 17% in 2013. Trust in the credibility of politicians has been fluctuating around 9%.

Trust in politics and the Government, 1983-2013



Source: NatCen, [British Social Attitudes Survey](#)

Within this overall trend, there are significant differences between groups: some groups in society are more likely to participate in politics (and thereby potentially influence political decisions) than others. Such unequal influence has been seen as problematic, as explained in a 2014 Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report:

Political inequality is when certain individuals or groups have greater influence over political decision-making and benefit from unequal outcomes through those decisions, despite procedural equality in the democratic process. As such, it undermines a central democratic ideal: that all citizens, regardless of status, should be given equal consideration in and opportunity to influence collective political decision-making.²

² Matthew Lawrence, *Political inequality*, Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), April 2014, 3

1.3 Measuring political disengagement

Political disengagement takes different forms. Groups that are disengaged in some ways may be highly engaged in others. It is therefore important to look at different indicators of political engagement. The next section will discuss the indicators included in this paper.

Information is provided by indicator to compare each 'disengaged group' to other groups. The statistical information included shows the proportion of each group that is disengaged when measured by a particular indicator, or in other words, the likelihood that a person from each of these groups is disengaged.

However, it is important to note that each person has many characteristics and the groups discussed below only capture one of them. For example, a person may be young, a woman and from an ethnic minority background. The information discussed below does not always clarify how and to what extent different characteristics are related to political disengagement.

There is disagreement about how to interpret the fact that political engagement varies among groups in society. Some cast political disengagement as a failure of individual citizens to live up to their democratic obligations;³ others cast it as the result of structural obstacles that prevent certain groups of people from participating in democracy fully and on an equal basis.⁴

This briefing paper presents statistical information taken from various sources. Detailed discussions of the methodology used to collect and analyse this data are included in each of these sources.

Overview of main sources of statistics on political engagement

Turnout at elections

Data for voter turnout is conventionally measured by comparing the number of valid votes at an election with the numbers eligible or registered to vote. Data on voter turnout is reported in House of Commons Library briefings on election results - <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/>

British Election Study (BES) is one of the longest running election studies world-wide and the longest running social science survey in the UK. Surveys have taken place immediately after every general election since 1964. The 2015 BES random probability survey was conducted via face-to-face interviews and is designed to help researchers understand changing patterns of party support and election outcomes. BES data are available online - <http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/>

British Social Attitudes (BSA) is an annual survey from NatCen for Social Research. Since 1983 it has measured and tracked changes in people's social, political and moral attitudes. BSA data is freely available online - <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/>

Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement an annual public opinion poll measuring political engagement in Great Britain, gauging public opinion on politics and the political system and more broadly the health of our democracy. The study focuses on political engagement and was established to better understand the relatively low voter turnout at the 2001 General Election. Data from the Audits can be found online - <http://www.auditofpoliticalengagement.org/>

³ See for example: William Galston, Civic education and political participation, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 2004, 37:2, 263-6

⁴ See for example: Nadezhda Shvedoza, 'Obstacles to women's participation in Parliament', in Julie Ballington and Azza Karam (eds) *Women in Parliament: beyond numbers* (revised edition), 2005, International IDEA, 33-50

1.4 Indicators of political disengagement

Attitudes

It is often assumed that certain negative attitudes towards the political system drive certain forms of political disengagement: for example, people who do not believe their vote makes a difference may be less likely to vote.

A belief in the duty to vote is held to be an important predictor of whether people vote. The British Social Attitudes survey found that the proportion of people who believe they have a duty to vote has decreased from 76% in 1987 to 57% in 2013.⁵ It may have increased at the 2015 General Election when 66% saw voting as an obligation.

The Electoral Commission found in its analysis of 2015 December electoral registers *“that those who feel they have a duty to vote are far more likely to be registered than those who think it is not worth it (89% against 66%)”*.⁶

Attitudes such as a lack of faith in the responsiveness of the democratic system to one’s interests, or a lack of interest in politics, could also be seen as a form of political disengagement in themselves.

The Hansard Society’s *Audit of Political Engagement* surveys a number of political attitudes each year. This paper discusses three of these:

- *Knowledge of politics,*
- *Satisfaction with the current system of governing,*
- *Feeling that getting involved is effective.*

Political activities

Voting is only one form of political engagement: people can participate in the political process in a range of other ways.

The Hansard Society’s *Audit of Political Engagement* asks respondents if they have participated in one or more of the following activities in the last 12 months, and if they would do so if they felt strongly about an issue:

- Taken part in a public consultation;
- Contributed to a discussion or campaign online or on social media;
- Voted in an election;
- Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march;
- Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party;
- Attended political meetings;
- Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons;
- Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation;
- Created or signed an e-petition;
- Created or signed a paper petition;

⁵ Miranda Philips and Ian Simpson, *British Social Attitudes: Politics*, 32, 2014

⁶ Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

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- Taken an active part in a campaign;
- Contacted the media;
- Contacted a local councillor or MP/MSP/Welsh Assembly Member.

Party membership

While membership of political parties overall has decreased over the last decades, and party membership is very low among all groups, certain groups are more likely to be members of political parties than others.

Reliably surveying party members is difficult as they make up such a small percentage of the population. The following information is taken from the House of Commons Library's [Membership of UK political parties](#), which includes further methodological information.⁷

The paper notes research that found that while 50.1% of electors were male, 67.2% of members of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties were men. Younger people are less likely to identify with a political party than older people: in 2012, 84% of people aged 73-82 said they identified with a political party compared with only 66% of people aged 23-32.

Research by academics Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin shows the Conservative, Labour, Green and Liberal Democrat parties draw most of their support from white people over 35 they categorise as middle class; while UKIP and the BNP have fewer female supporters and draw most of their support from people they categorise as working class (including those who never worked).⁸

Electoral registration

People need to be on the electoral register to be able to vote. Certain groups are less likely to be included on the register.

The Electoral Commission carries out regular reviews of the completeness of the electoral registers in Britain, measuring the proportion of those eligible to vote on the registers. The data they use does not allow an exact determination of the population eligible to vote in each area, so their calculations need to be read as indicative.⁹

In its report *on The Completeness of the 2015 December electoral registers* it found that age and moving home have the strongest negative effects on registration. Young people and those who move home are less likely to be registered.¹⁰

The way people register to vote changed in 2015: people now need to **register individually and can do so online**, using their date of birth and national insurance number as identifiers. Some claim this will have a detrimental effect on the completeness of the registers, particularly where it concerns already under-registered groups; others deny this and claim it will increase the accuracy of the registers.

⁷ Library Briefing Paper 5125 *Membership of UK political parties*, 28 March 2017

⁸ Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right*, Routledge, 2014, 149-151

⁹ Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 12

For more information, see House of Commons Library briefing paper [Individual Electoral Registration](#).

Voting

Voting is seen as a key indicator of political disengagement. Voter turnout in the UK has decreased over the past decades. Although there was a slight increase at the last three general elections, it remains below that of post-war General Elections up to 1992. Turnout at the June 2016 EU Referendum was 72.6%, higher than any UK General Election since 1992. Certain groups are, however, more likely to vote than others.

People may be unwilling to vote as an individual vote is unlikely to make much difference to an election outcome. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the fact that turnout is often higher in marginal constituencies, where single votes are more likely to alter the result (although this difference has declined recently).¹¹

However, there is a risk that if a large proportion of particular groups do not vote this might result in their interests not being addressed by politicians. For example, it is sometimes claimed that political parties prioritise the interest of older people over those of younger people, because the latter are less likely to turn out to vote.¹² Likewise, the IPPR's 2013 report on political inequality notes that political parties target their communications at people who are more likely to vote (and particularly for them), and that non-voters were worse off than voters from the 2010 Spending Review. According to the report, this could lead to a vicious circle where people respond to (apparent) political indifference to their interests by not voting, reducing the incentive for political parties to address their interests.¹³

Characteristics of voters at General Elections are not available from official election statistics. Data is made public for the total number of votes for each candidate for whole constituencies only. Opinion surveys can, however, give an idea of how turnout varies between different groups. For each General Election, organisations such as Ipsos MORI and YouGov carry out aggregate analysis of polls undertaken before polling day. These are based on 6,000-100,000 individual respondents who said they were absolutely certain to vote, adjusted to match the actual results.

Some caution needs to be applied when interpreting voting as an indication of political disengagement: people may decide not to vote, or spoil their ballot, out of strong political motivations.

Councillors, candidates, MPs

Standing for election is a clear sign of engagement with the political system. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that groups may

¹¹ Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *The 2015 general election: aspects of participation and administration*, Electoral Commission, August 2015, 6

¹² See for example 'Political parties are neglecting young people – it's time for unis to step in', [The Guardian](#), 25 February 2015

¹³ Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, *Divided Democracy*, IPPR, November 2013, 4-5

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be more likely to be politically engaged if they see themselves (or people 'like them') represented in elected bodies: studies have found that women are more likely to be politically engaged if they can vote for competitive and visible female candidates.¹⁴ Likewise, ethnic minorities have been found to be more likely to vote if they can vote for co-ethnic candidates.

Higher numbers of councillors, candidates and MPs from a particular group can therefore be read both as a sign and a driver of political engagement among that group.

Political engagement among some groups may be higher at the local level, so local councillors are included in this indicator.

¹⁴ See for example Lonna Rae Atkeson, 'Not all cues are created equal: the conditional impact of female candidates on political engagement', *The Journal of Politics*, 2003, 65:4, 1040-61

2. Young people

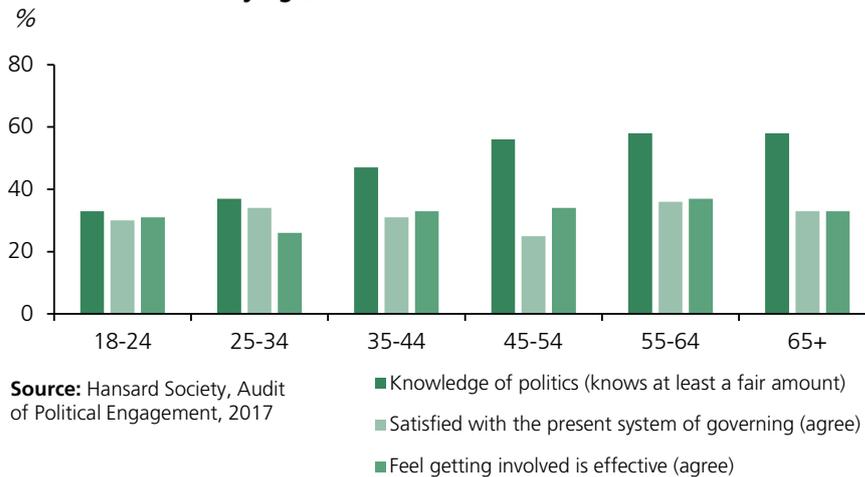
2.1 Attitudes

Academics Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge write that many young people see politicians as “self-serving” and political parties as indifferent to their interests. They note that:

A number of influential reports have concluded that many young people feel they are uniquely isolated or even excluded from a self-serving political system which is reluctant to acknowledge its own limitations.¹⁵

However, the table below shows that while 18-24 year olds are more likely than other age groups (apart from people aged 25-34) to report low level of knowledge about politics, they do not necessarily hold more negative attitudes towards the political system overall.

Political attitudes by age, 2017



These findings are line with a survey conducted by Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman sampling 1,905 adults on their opinions of the competence and integrity of politicians. They found that young people were less likely than older people to see politicians as “self-serving”.¹⁶

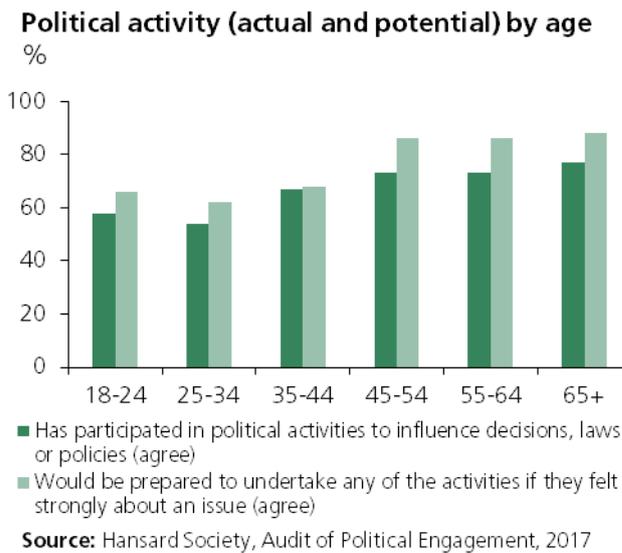
2.2 Political activities

People aged 18-24 were the second least likely group (after 25-34 year olds) to feel getting involved is effective. They are less likely to say they have participated in political activities than other age groups. However, they are more willing to undertake political activities in the future than people aged 25-44.

¹⁵ Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, ‘The party politics of youth citizenship and democratic engagement’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 65:1, 139

¹⁶ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, ‘The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2016, 8-11

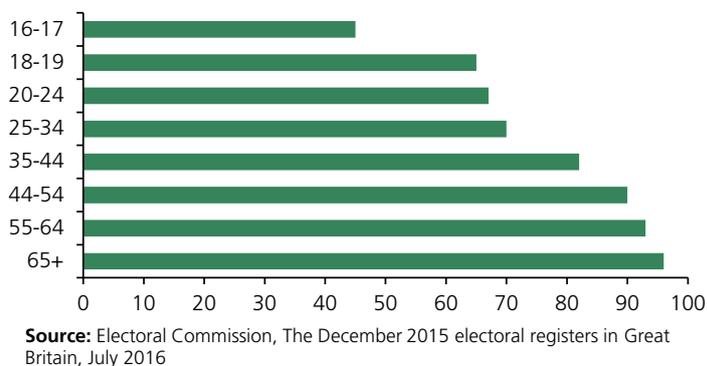
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2.3 Electoral registration

Young people are less likely to be on the electoral register than older people.

Completeness by age - December 2015 local government registers, %



The Electoral Commission also identifies some difference between young people based on their level of qualification. 77% of 18-34 year olds educated to a degree level were estimated to be on the electoral register in December 2015, compared with 57% of those with no qualification.¹⁷

The Electoral Commission notes that in part, lower levels of registration among young people are explained by the fact that young people move house more often, and this has a strong impact on registration. However, the Commission found that housing alone does not explain the phenomenon: "lower levels of engagement with politics and voting are also relevant factors".¹⁸

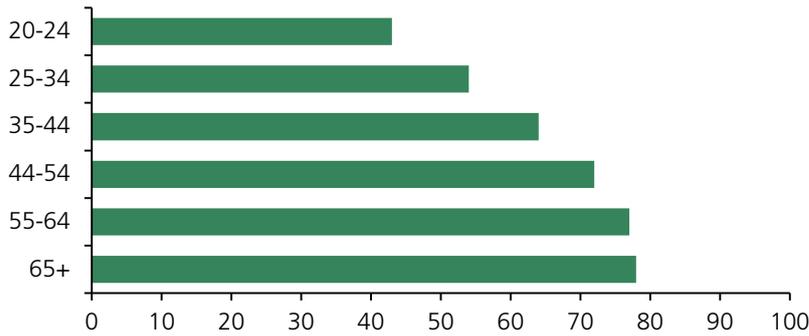
¹⁷ Electoral Commission, *The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain*, July 2016, pp 45-47

¹⁸ Ibid.

2.4 Voting

Young people are also less likely to vote than older people. The IPPR’s 2013 report, *Divided Democracy*, notes that differences in turnout between age groups have increased over time.¹⁹ The chart below shows that turnout at the 2015 General Election was lower among young people with 43% of 20-24 year olds voting, compared with 78% of people aged 65 and above.

Turnout at the 2015 General Election by age group, %



Source: IPSOS Mori, How Britain voted in 2015 (26 August 2015)

2.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

The average age of councillors, MPs and party members is over 50 years.²⁰

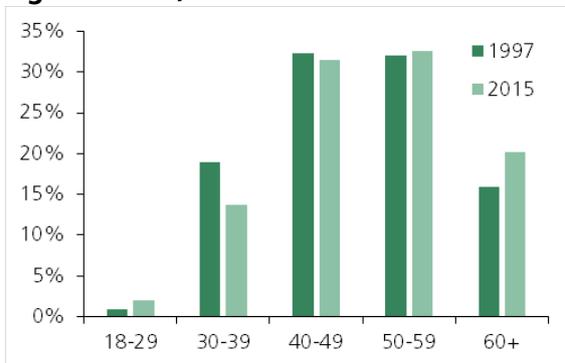
Councillors

The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors noted that the average age of councillors was 60.2 years in 2013, and that “overall, 18.3% were aged under 50, 20.9% were aged 50–59, and 60.8% were aged 60 or over.”²¹

MPs

The table below shows that the number of young people in Parliament has not changed much since 1997.

Ages of MPs, 1997-2015



Notes: Age at time of General Election.

Source: House of Commons Library MP database

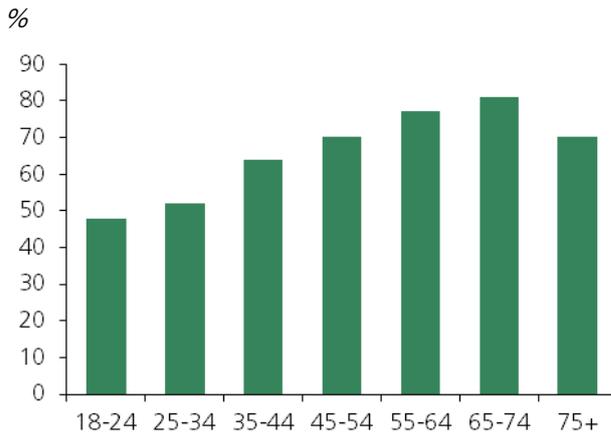
¹⁹ Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, *Divided Democracy*, IPPR, November 2013, 12
²⁰ Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, ‘The party politics of youth citizenship and democratic engagement’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 65:1, 144
²¹ Kelly Kettlewell and Liz Phillips, *Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013*, LGA research report, May 2014

2.6 Brexit: Turnout and Vote

Turnout at the EU Referendum on 23 June 2016 broken down by voters' characteristics is not recorded in official statistics. However, estimates are available from social research agencies, such as Ipsos-Mori and NatCen.

According to Ipsos-Mori, turnout at the EU referendum increased with age, as young people were less likely to vote than older age groups.

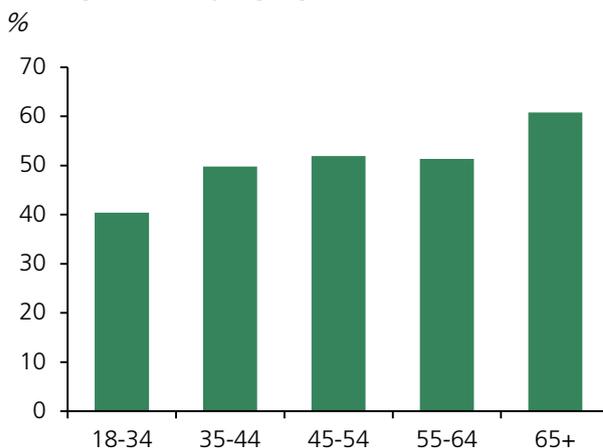
Turnout at the 2016 EU referendum by age group



Source: Ipsos-Mori, [The 2016 EU referendum – who was in and who was out?](#), September 2016

There are also differences amongst age groups in how they voted in the EU Referendum. In its report [Understanding the Leave vote](#), NatCen suggests that young people aged 18-34 were less likely to vote Leave than other age groups. 40% of respondents in this age group reported voting Leave, compared with 61% of those aged 65+.

Voting Leave by age group, 2016 EU Referendum



Source: NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

The Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement 2017* also reports that people aged 18-24 were less likely than other age groups (apart from 25-34 year olds) to know a fair amount the European Union. The 2016 data further shows that they were also the second most likely group to be satisfied with the current system of governing the EU.

3. Ethnic minorities

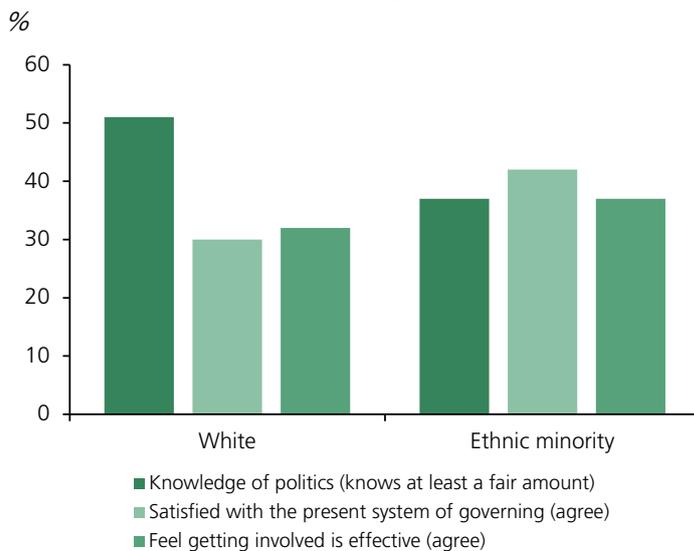
Although research on political disengagement sometimes compares 'ethnic minorities' to Britain's white population, there are significant differences both between and within ethnic minority groups (as well as within the 'white' group). Where data is available on smaller sub-groups (including Travellers and gypsies, and EU citizens), it is included in the sections below.

Research on ethnic minorities usually focuses on people who self-identify as being from an ethnic minority.

3.1 Attitudes

The Hansard Society's 2017 *Audit of Political Engagement* shows that ethnic minorities are less likely to report a fair amount of knowledge about politics. However, they are more likely to be satisfied with the democratic system in the UK and to feel getting involved is effective.

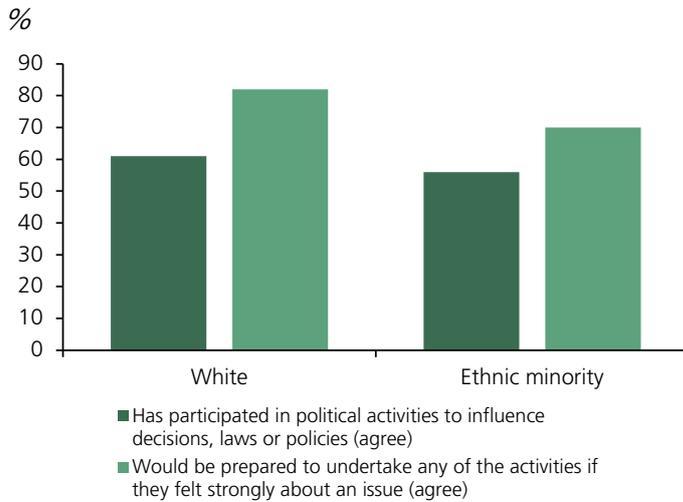
Political attitudes by ethnic group, 2017



Source: Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement*, 2017

3.2 Political activities

The Hansard Society's 2017 *Audit of Political Engagement* found that ethnic minorities were less likely than the white population to engage in political activities, or to do so if they felt strongly about an issue.

Political activity (actual and potential) by ethnic group, 2017

Source: Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement, 2017

White people are more likely to report that they have participated in political activities, or would do so if they cared strongly about the issue, than ethnic minorities.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission also confirms that white people are more likely to report they had been involved in one or more of four political activities in the last 12 months. These activities were: “contacting a councillor, local official, government official or MP; attending a public meeting or rally; taking part in a demonstration; or signing a petition”.²²

Academics Anthony Heath et al also found that white people are in particular more likely than ethnic minorities to engage in informal political activities such as signing a petition and going on a protest.²³

3.3 Electoral registration

Ethnic minorities are less likely to be included on the electoral register than white British people. Academics Anthony Heath et al found that non-registration was higher among ethnic minorities: 25% of first generation and 20% of second generation ethnic minorities who were eligible to register to vote had not done so, compared to 10% of the white British population.²⁴

The chart below shows that there are significant differences in under-registration among ethnic groups. This phenomenon is partly explained because some groups believe (often wrongly) that they are not entitled to be registered, and because they have recently moved address.²⁵

²² Ibid, 54

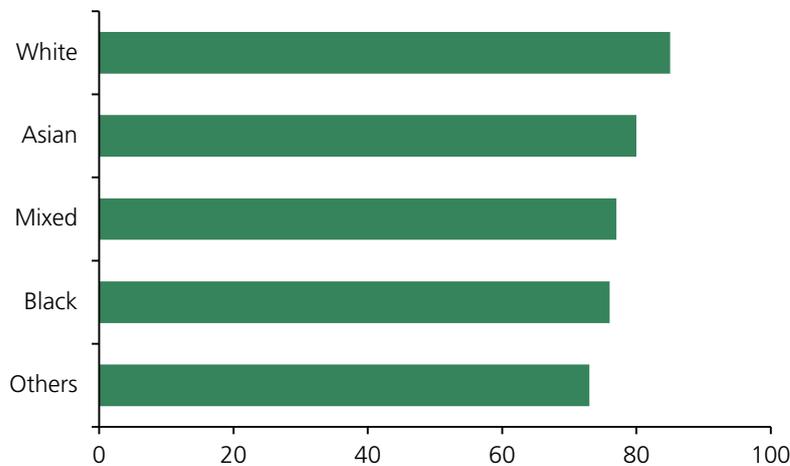
²³ Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska, *The political integration of ethnic minorities in Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2013, 179

²⁴ Ibid, 136-7

²⁵ Omar Khan, ‘Registration and race: achieving equal political participation’, in Runnymede Trust, *Race and Elections*, April 2015, 24-5

Completeness by ethnicity, December 2015 local government registers

%



Source: The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

The Equality and Human Rights Commission stated in its 2015 report *Is Britain Fairer?* that Gypsies and Travellers may face particular obstacles to registration, because they are often not considered to be resident at any address.²⁶

The Electoral Commission's study of the 2015 registers showed that UK citizens (86%) were more likely to be on the register than Commonwealth citizens (61%) and European Union citizens (53%).²⁷

The study also found that completeness by nationality is linked to length of residence in the UK. 2011 Census data showed that in England and Wales 26% of those who had been residents for under one year were registered, compared with 76% of those who had been in the UK between 5 and 10 years.

Academics Anthony Heath et al also found that the factors that influence registration levels are the same for white people and ethnic minorities: age, housing, and the belief in a duty to vote, although fluency in the English language was also an important factor for ethnic minorities.²⁸

3.4 Voting

Ethnic minorities are less likely to vote than white people. In the 2015 General Election, 68% of white people were estimated to have voted, compared with 56% of people from an ethnic minority background.²⁹

²⁶ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015*, October 2015, 47-8

²⁷ Electoral Commission, *The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain*, July 2016

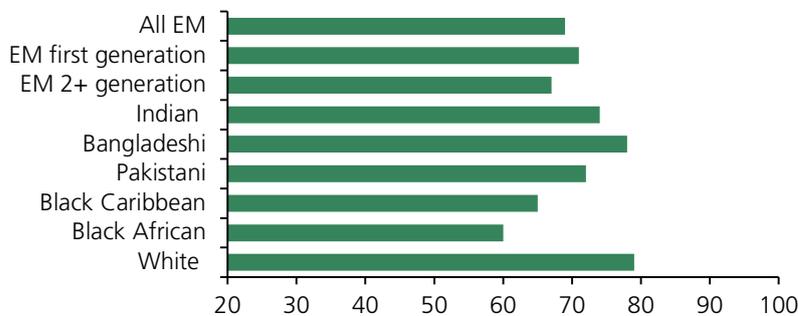
²⁸ Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska, *The political integration of ethnic minorities in Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2013, 141-2

²⁹ IPSOS Mori, *How Britain voted in 2015* (26 August 2015)

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The chart below shows that at the 2010 General Election, there were significant differences in turnout between ethnic groups (EM stands for ethnic minorities).

Reported voting at the 2010 General Election by ethnicity %



Source: David Sanders et al, 'The democratic engagement of Britain's ethnic minorities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37:1, 2014

However, another study of the 2010 General Election by the same authors that used validated data instead of self-reporting casts some doubts on these figures. The authors found that turnout was low (53%) among first generation ethnic minorities, but higher in the second generation (63%), although it remained below the turnout among the white British population (70%). Turnout rates were similar for ethnic minorities and the white population who were on the electoral register, suggesting lower turnout among ethnic minorities is driven by lower registration rates.³⁰

The Electoral Commission published a report on the participation of ethnic minorities in the 2005 General Election. The Commission found that ethnic minorities who voted mostly stated they did so because they have the right to vote (32%), or because they believe they have a duty to do so (30%). The main reasons given by ethnic minorities who had not voted were that they thought they were ineligible to vote (20%), or that circumstances on the day prevented them from doing so (18%).³¹

3.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

Councillors

The 2013 Census of Local Councillors in England showed that 4% came from an ethnic minority background and 96% were white. The highest representation for ethnic minorities was in London, with 16% of councillors being non-white. In Wales it was reported in 2012 that 99.4% of councillors were white and 0.6% had an ethnic minority background.³² For Scotland the percentage of non-white councillors was similar to that of its population (3.4%).³³

³⁰ Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska, *The political integration of ethnic minorities in Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2013, 136-7

³¹ Electoral Commission, *Black and Minority Ethnic Survey*, May-July 2005

³² [Local Government Candidates Survey 2012](#), Government Social Research, Welsh Government

³³ [Scotland's Councillors 2013](#), Improvement Service

Almost a third of councillors in England are women (31.7%), but ethnic minority women are particularly under-represented. The 2011 Census of Local Councillors found around 2% of women councillors were non-white, this is around half the 4% rate for men.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission noted in 2015 that only two councillors in Britain “are known to have come from a Gypsy and Traveller background, and only one of these in recent years.”³⁴

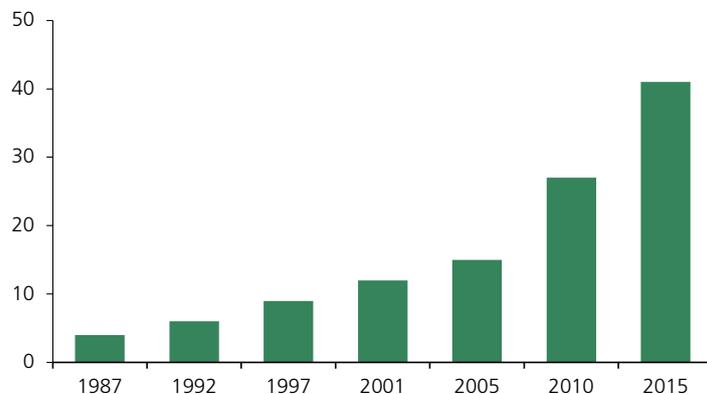
Candidates & MPs

The number of candidates from ethnic minority background has increased from 5 in 1979 to 139 in 2010. At the 2015 General Election, the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats fielded a total of 163 ethnic minority candidates.³⁵

House of Commons Library briefing paper [Social background of MPs 1979-2015](#) notes that following the 2015 Election, 41 (or 6.3% of all) Members of Parliament have been categorised as from non-white backgrounds. Around 12.9% of the UK population were from a non-white background at the time of the 2014-15 Annual Population Survey.

The graph below shows that the number of ethnic minority MPs has increased since 1987.

Number of ethnic minority MPs, 1987-2015



Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*
House of Commons Library, CBP7186 General Election 2015

Only one MP (Bernadette Devlin, representing Mid Ulster from 1969-1974) is known to have come from a Traveller background.³⁶

3.6 Housing and occupational background

The next section shows that socio-economic factors such as housing and occupation which are associated with political engagement vary by ethnicity. According to Anthony Heath et al.’s classification, ethnic minorities overall are less likely than the white British population to be middle class, and more likely to be routine class or unwaged. The table

³⁴ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015*, October 2015, 51

³⁵ Cowley P. & Kavanagh D., *The British General Election of 2015*, 7 April 2015

³⁶ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015*, October 2015, 51

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below shows that significant differences exist between ethnic minority groups.

Integration in terms of housing and employment, by ethnicity (%)

Ethnic background	Home owner	Middle class	Routine class or unwaged	Graduate	Un-qualified	Reports discrimination	N
White British	72	52	35	16	30	0	2754
Indian	69	56	32	41	18	28	577
Pakistani	73	33	48	24	28	25	658
Bangladeshi	40	29	54	18	28	27	265
Black Caribbean	49	42	41	15	20	44	583
Black African	20	39	47	33	17	35	509
Mixed white/black	28	26	64	11	31	41	93
All ethnic minorities	55	43	42	27	22	33	2732

Note: Middle class includes those in professional and managerial, clerical and small employer categories; routine/unwaged includes those in routine occupations plus those dependent on unemployment or other benefits; discrimination includes discrimination on grounds of race, language, or religion. They are measures on the logit scale. the Ns are for the item on home ownership. Ns for social class are substantially lower because of missing data.

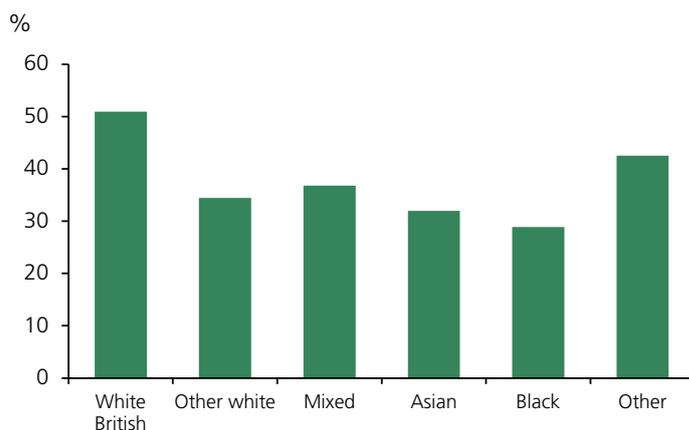
Source: Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska, *The political integration of ethnic minorities in Britain*, 2013, p33

3.7 Brexit: Turnout and Vote

Ethnic minorities were less likely to vote in the 2016 EU referendum than white people. According to Ipsos-Mori, 46% of BME voted at the referendum, compared with 68% of white people.

People with an ethnic minority background were also less likely to vote Leave than white people. The chart below shows there are considerable differences between ethnic minorities:

Leave vote by ethnicity, 2016 EU Referendum



Source: NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

Black people were the least likely non-white group to vote Leave at the EU referendum with 29% of respondents reporting so, whereas people coming from mixed ethnic background were the most likely to vote Leave (37%). Nevertheless, these figures are well below the average of 51.8% of UK voters choosing to exit the European Union.

The Hansard Society further shows that ethnic minorities are less likely to know a fair amount about the European Union than white people. And in 2016 BME groups were more likely to be satisfied with the current system of governing the EU.³⁷

³⁷ Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 2017, June 2016

4. Unskilled workers and the long-term unemployed

There are different ways of classifying socio-economic groups in society, for example by income, profession, housing, or level of education. Most studies of political disengagement use the 'social grade' classification system that distinguishes between people on the basis of their occupation. The grades are defined in the table below.

Description of Social Grades

		Proportion of the population (%)
A	High managerial, administrative or professional	4
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional	23
C1	Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional	29
C2	Skilled manual workers	21
D	Semi and unskilled manual workers	15
E	State pensioners, casual or lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only	8

Source: Ipsos Mori, Social Grade, a classification tool, 2009

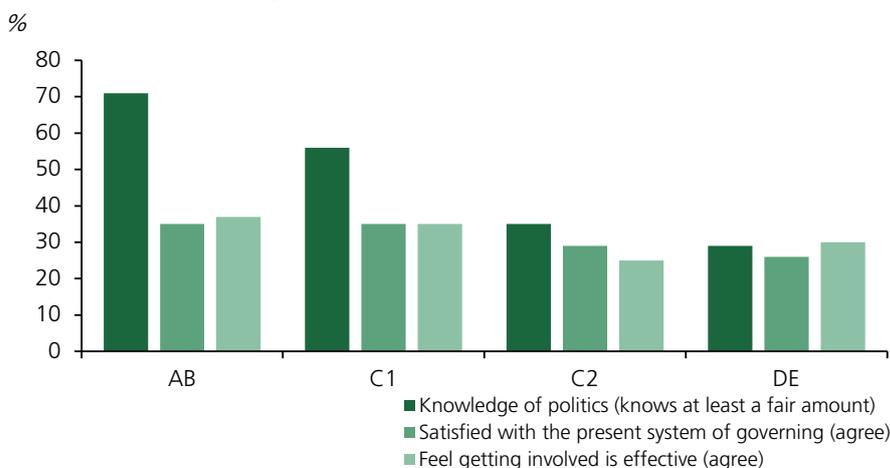
Notes: Based on 2008 data

Grades are sometimes grouped together: for example AB refers to social grades A and B.

4.1 Attitudes

The table below shows a clear relationship between social grade and positive political attitudes.

Political attitudes by social class, 2017



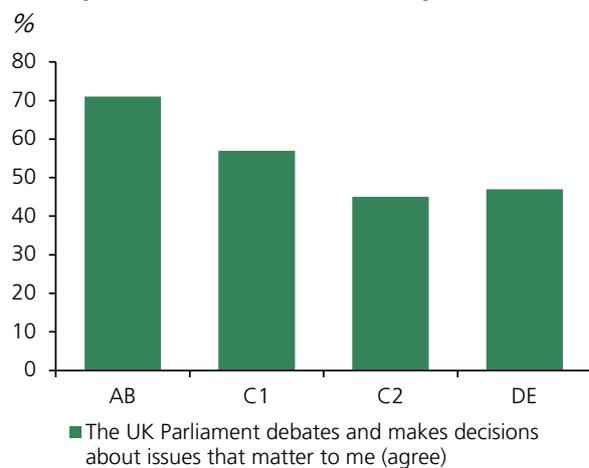
Source: Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 2017

The IPPR's 2013 *Divided Democracy* report notes that democracy should ideally represent all groups in society, and their interests, equally. However, their research shows that people from the C2DE social grades

are more likely than people from social grades ABC1 to feel that the democratic system in Britain does not address their interests well.

The Hansard Society, in its 2017 *Audit of Political Engagement*, found similar results: 48% of people in the C2 social grade agreed with the statement “The UK Parliament debates and makes decisions about issues that matter to me” compared to 71% of those in the social grades AB. The Audit also found that renters are less likely to consider that the UK Parliament addresses issues that matter to them than homeowners.

Perception of Parliament’s responsiveness by social class



Source: Hansard Society, [Audit of Political Engagement 2017](#)

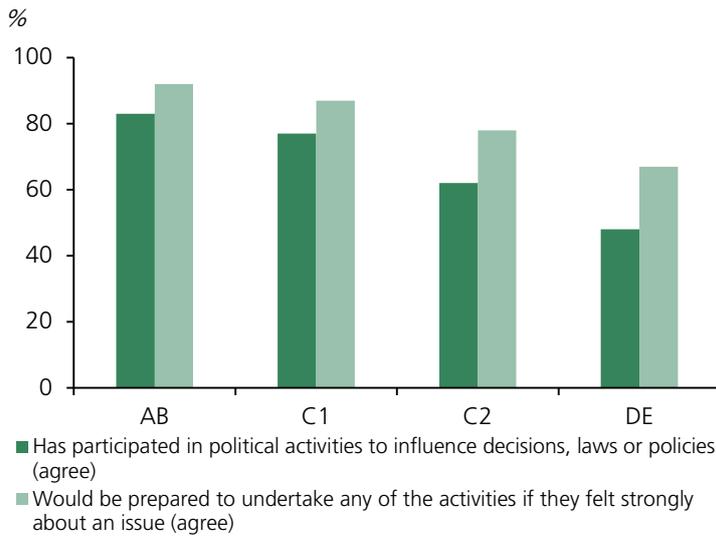
Academics Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman found that people from the ABC1 grades were more likely than people from the C2DE grades to think that politicians lack technical skills and the leadership to tell the public the truth about decisions, and see them as given to chasing short-term headlines. However, people from C2DE grades were more likely to think politicians engaged in “self-serving behaviour and working in the interests of the rich and powerful”.³⁸

4.2 Political activities

As the chart below shows, people from social grades DE are least likely to have participated in political activities, or to do so if they feel strongly about an issue. Whether a relationship exists between this lack of participation by people from DE social grades and their perception that British democracy is indifferent to their interests is unclear; and if such a relationship exists it is not clear in what direction it operates. People may not participate because they feel alienated from the system, or the system may not respond to their interests because they do not make them known through participation.

³⁸ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, ‘The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2016, 14

Political activity by social class, 2017



Source: Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement, 2017

4.3 Electoral registration

People from the DE social grades were less likely to be included on the 2015 electoral registers than people from other grades. Completeness among people in AB was 88%, compared to 80% among people in DE social grade.

Completeness by social grade, December 2015 local government registers

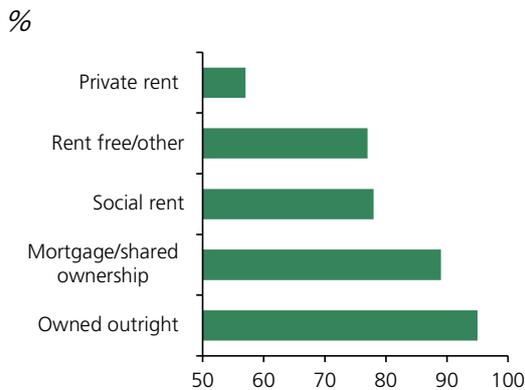
Social Grade	Completeness (%)
AB	88
C1	83
C2	86
DE	80

Source: The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

The Electoral Commission did not find any evidence to suggest that registration is influenced by the highest level of education people achieve.³⁹ However, people’s housing situation was found to have a significant effect, as shown in the chart below.

³⁹ Ibid, 40

Completeness by tenure, December 2015, local government registers



Source: The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

A possible explanation for the potentially surprising difference between private renters and other and social renters is that private renters tend to be younger and to move house more often. The Electoral Commission suggests that both these factors underpin low levels of registration.⁴⁰

There is also a correlation between deprivation and registration: people living in areas with higher levels of deprivation are less likely to be registered. The Office for National Statistics examined the completeness of the 2011 local government registers by deprivation, using the Index of Multiple Deprivation produced by the Department for Local Government and Communities to rank local authority areas by level of deprivation and define quartiles.⁴¹ The Index is based on indicators including income, education and crime levels.⁴²

4.4 Voting

People in the DE social grades are least likely to vote: 57% were estimated to have voted at the 2015 General Election, compared to 75% in the AB social grades; 69% of those in the C1 social grade; and 62% of those in the C2 social grade.⁴³

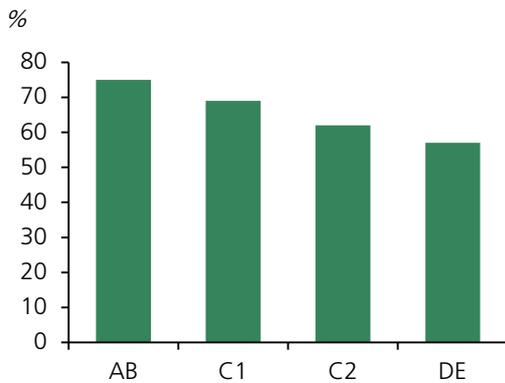
⁴⁰ The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

⁴¹ Quartiles divide the total data set into four groups; the first quartile represents the highest ranking 25% of the total data

⁴² For more information, see ['English indices of deprivation 2015'](#), GOV.UK, 30 September 2015

⁴³ IPSOS Mori, How Britain voted in 2015 (26 August 2015)

Turnout at 2015 General Election by social grade



Source: Ipsos Mori, [How Britain Voted in 2015](#), August 2015

In line with the findings for electoral registration, turnout was also lowest among private renters: 51% of them were estimated to have voted at the 2015 general election, compared to 77% of those who own their home; 65% of those with a mortgage; and 56% of those who are social renters.⁴⁴

4.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

There is little information available on the social background of councillors, candidates and MPs.

Councillors

The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors noted that 58.8% of councillors were educated to degree level (or equivalent), while 13% were educated to GCE A level (or equivalent) and 11.2% to GSCE level (or equivalent). 5.2% of councillors had no qualifications.

MPs

The table below gives an indication of the social grade MPs were from before entering Parliament following the 2015 General Election based on their occupational background. The Library briefing [Social background of MPs 1979-2015](#) gives more information and shows that the proportion of MPs who were previously manual workers (grades C2 and D) has decreased since 1979 (but so has the proportion of the population in these types of jobs).

⁴⁴ Ibid

MPs' occupations, 2015 General Election

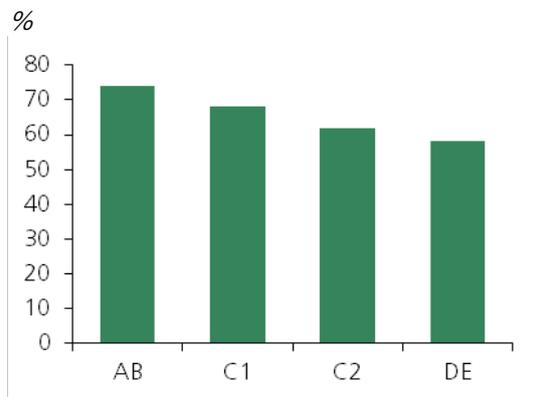
	Number	As %
Professions	194	31.0%
Barrister	38	6.1%
Solicitor	51	8.1%
Doctor	10	1.6%
Civil service/local govt	16	2.6%
Teachers: University/college	16	2.6%
Teacher: school	16	2.6%
Business	192	30.7%
Miscellaneous	221	35.3%
White Collar	71	11.3%
Politician/Political organiser	107	17.1%
Publisher/Journalist	34	5.4%
Farmer	7	1.1%
Manual Workers	19	3.0%
Miner	7	1.1%
Total	626	100%

Source: House of Commons Library, [Social background of MPs 1979-2015](#)

4.6 Brexit: Turnout and vote

Similarly, people in lower social grades were less likely to vote in the EU referendum.

Turnout at the EU referendum by social grade

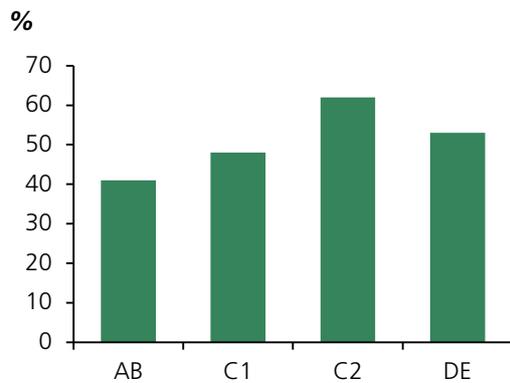


Source: Ipsos-Mori, [The 2016 EU referendum – who was in and who was out?](#), September 2016

People in C2 social grade were the most likely to vote Leave (62%), whereas people in AB were the least likely to vote UK to exit the European Union. Ipsos-Mori further comments on the relationship between age and social grade in regards to turnout at the EU referendum. It suggests that “the majority of 18-34 year olds in every social class voted Remain, while a majority of those aged 55+ in every social class voted Leave.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ipsos-Mori, [The 2016 EU Referendum – who was in and who was out?](#), September 2016

Leave vote by social grade, 2016 EU Referendum



Source: Ipsos-Mori, [The 2016 EU referendum – who was in and who was out?](#), September 2016

These findings are line with NatCen research which shows that people who identify as working class were more likely to vote Leave (59%) than people who see themselves as middle class (40%).⁴⁶

Furthermore, NatCen reports that there is a clear relationship between income and the Leave vote with people earning less than £1,200 p.m. being more likely to vote Leave than higher earners.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

⁴⁷ Ibid.

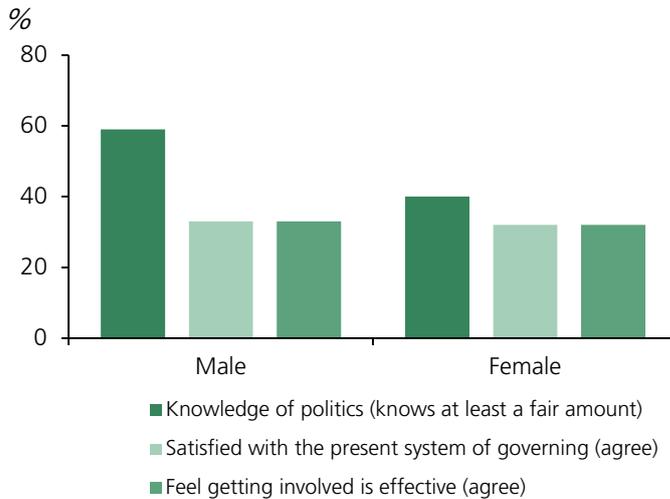
5. Women and men

House of Commons Library briefing paper [Women in Parliament and Government](#) includes information on the political representation of women in the UK and internationally.

5.1 Attitudes

Women are less likely to know a fair amount about politics than men. However, men and women are almost equally likely to be satisfied with the political system and feel getting involved is effective.

Political attitudes by gender, 2017



Source: Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 2017

Research carried out by YouGov and the IPPR found that when asked “how well do you think democracy in Britain as a whole addresses the interests of people like you”, men and women gave similar answers. However, men were more likely than women to answer “not well at all” (19% of men compared to 12% of women), while women were more likely to answer “don’t know” (6% of men compared to 13% of women).⁴⁸

Academics Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman found that women held more favourable opinions of politicians: women were less likely than men to think of politicians as lacking technical skills and the leadership to tell the public the truth about decisions, and given to chasing short-term headlines.⁴⁹

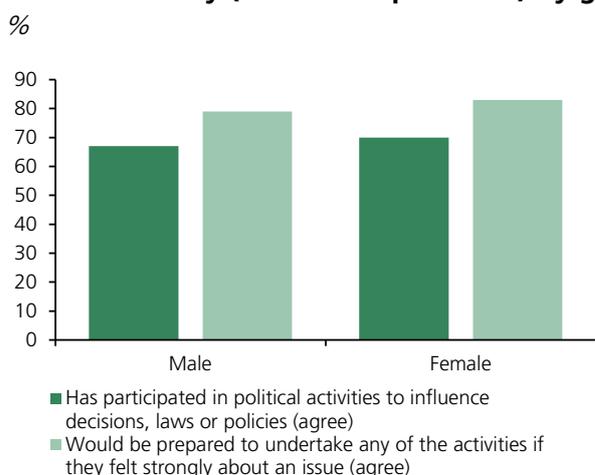
5.2 Political activities

The table below shows that there are small differences between men and women in their engagement in political activities and willingness to do so in the future.

⁴⁸ YouGov/IPPR, [Fieldwork 9th-11th September 2014](#), survey results. Weighted

⁴⁹ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, ‘The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2016, 14

Political activity (actual and potential) by gender, 2017



Source: Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 2017

The Equality and Human Rights Commission also reported small differences between men and women in the likelihood to participate in political activities: in 2013/2014, 32.5% of men in England reported they had been involved in one or more of four political activities in the last 12 months, compared to 27.9% of women.⁵⁰ The activities were: “contacting a councillor, local official, government official or MP (other than on personal issues); attending a public meeting or rally; taking part in a demonstration; or signing a petition”.⁵¹

5.3 Electoral registration

The Electoral Commission reported that women were slightly more likely to be on the December 2015 electoral registers than men (85% of women compared to 83% of men).⁵² This was also the case in April 2011 (87% of women compared to 85.1% of men).⁵³

5.4 Voting

There is no significant difference in turnout between men and women: men were slightly more likely to vote than women (but only by 1 to 3 percentage points) in the past 4 elections.⁵⁴

5.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

Councillors

House of Commons Library briefing paper [Women in Parliament and Government](#) notes that in 2013, 32% of local authority councillors in England were women. The proportion of female councillors was

⁵⁰ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Is Britain Fairer? Evidence papers series, Domain J, Participation, influence and voice*, Autumn 2015, 56

⁵¹ Ibid, 54. For a discussion of the ‘activism gap’ between men and women, see Electoral Commission, [Gender and political participation](#), Research report, April 2014

⁵² The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

⁵³ Electoral Commission, *Electoral registration in 2011*, July 2014, 44

⁵⁴ IPSOS Mori, *How Britain voted in 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015*

greatest in the North East (41%). Women comprised 24% of councillors in Scotland and 26% of councillors in Wales following local elections in each country in 2012.⁵⁵ In Northern Ireland in 2015, women held 25% of council seats.⁵⁶

Candidates

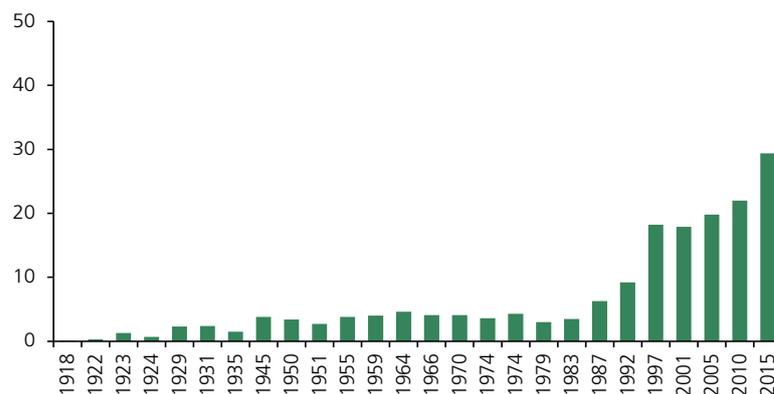
Women as a proportion of all candidates at General Elections did not rise above 10% until 1979, when 11% of candidates were female. In 2005 women accounted for 20% of all candidates for the first time.

In the 2015 General Election 1,033 female candidates stood across all parties, 26% of all 3,971 candidates. This is both the highest number and percentage on record, surpassing the previous record of 21% set in 2010.⁵⁷

MPs

Since 1918, 456 women have been elected as Members of the House of Commons, surpassing the number of men elected to the current Parliament for the first time in 2017. The chart below shows that the percentage of female MPs has increased since 1918.

Women MPs elected at General Elections (proportion of total), 1918 to 2015, %



Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*
House of Commons Library, CBP7186 General Election 2015

191 women MPs were elected at the 2015 General Election, 29% of all MPs and a record high.⁵⁸

Just over one-third (35%) of members in the Scottish Parliament are women, compared with two-fifths of members of National Assembly for Wales and 30% of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Following the 2014 European Parliament elections, women comprised just over two-fifths of UK MEPs.

5.6 Brexit: Turnout and vote

Men were slightly more likely to vote in the 2016 EU Referendum than women (67% against 64%).

⁵⁵ LGiU Scotland, *Where are all the women*, July 2016

⁵⁶ Northern South Inter-Parliamentary Association, *Women in Public life*, 27 November 2015

⁵⁷ House of Commons, [Women in Parliament and Government](#), 27 February 2017

⁵⁸ House of Commons, [Women in Parliament and Government](#), 27 February 2017

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Moreover, men were more likely to vote Leave in the referendum than women. Ipsos-Mori also suggests that gender differences are most pronounced among people in AB social grades and people aged 35-54, where women were 11 percentage points more likely to vote Remain than men.

6. People with disabilities

Disabilities are usually taken to include long-term illnesses; hearing, sight and mobility impairments; and mental health issues. Research on political engagement among people with disabilities is limited. The report by the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation noted that people with disabilities face both physical and other barriers to political participation.⁵⁹

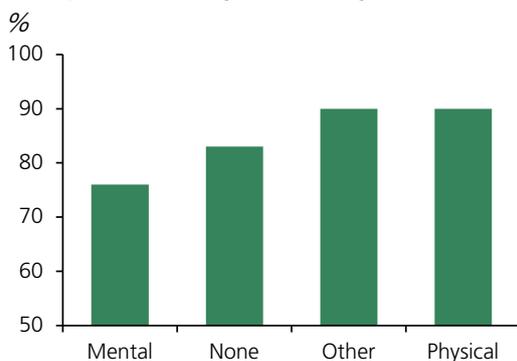
6.1 Political activities

The Equality and Human Rights Commission found that in 2013/2014, there was no significant difference between the proportions of people with (31.7%) and without (29.7%) disabilities who had engaged in one or more of four political activities in the last 12 months.⁶⁰ The activities were: "contacting a councillor, local official, government official or MP (other than on personal issues); attending a public meeting or rally; taking part in a demonstration; or signing a petition".⁶¹

6.2 Electoral registration

The Electoral Commission asked people to self-report their disabilities as mental, physical or other (no further definition provided). People with physical disabilities were more likely to be on the electoral register than any other group. The Electoral Commission suggests this might be because they are less likely to move home than the general population and mobility is an important driver of low levels of registration.⁶²

Completeness by disability, 2015 December electoral registers



Source: The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

A small scale study of patients in psychiatric wards in Westminster found that only 43% of patients had registered to vote for the 2010 General Election, compared to 97% of the local eligible population. Of

⁵⁹ Speaker's conference (on Parliamentary Representation), *Final report*, 2009-10, HC239-I, 11 January 2011, paras 167-244

⁶⁰ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Is Britain Fairer? Evidence papers series, Domain J, Participation, influence and voice*, Autumn 2015, 55

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 54

⁶² The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

those registered to vote, only 33% had voted (compared to 65% of the local population). 38% of patients reported that they had voted in the 2005 General Election (compared to 61.3% of the local population).⁶³

6.3 Voting

The charity Mencap claims that only one third of people with learning disabilities in the UK vote.⁶⁴

While no other data is available on turnout among people with disabilities in the UK, there are some studies on this phenomenon in the US. It is conceivable that some of the obstacles to voting people with disabilities in the UK and the US face are similar, so that studies in the US may have some value in understanding the situation in the UK.

A 2002 study of voting among disabled people in the US showed that 52.6% of respondents with disabilities reported they had voted in the 1998 election, compared to 59.4% of respondents without disabilities – a gap of 6.8%. Controlling for other variables associated with turnout (including age, education and income), this gap increased to 19.6%.⁶⁵ Another US study explains this gap by highlighting that people with disabilities face specific obstacles to voting: both physical (e.g. entry to polling stations, distance), and in their dealings with election officials.⁶⁶

6.4 Councillors, candidates and MPs

Councillors

The report by the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, published in 2011, noted that "there is a fairly high proportion of disabled local councillors—in 2007 disabled councillors made up 13.3% of the total", but also that "many of them appear to have age-related conditions which may well have developed years after first election".⁶⁷ The 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors reported that 13.2% of councillors confirmed they had "a long-term health problem or disability which limits their daily activities or the work they can do and that has lasted or is expected to last at least 12 months."⁶⁸

MPs

The Disability News Service reported following the election in May 2015 that there were two MPs who self-reported as having a disability.⁶⁹

⁶³ James McIntyre, Masum Khwaja, Venkata Yelamanchili, Sobia Naz & Maria Clarke, 'Uptake and knowledge of voting rights by adult in-patients during the 2010 UK general election', *The Psychiatrist*, 2012, 36, 126-130

⁶⁴ [Mencap website](#), accessed on 1 February 2016

⁶⁵ Lisa Schur, Todd Shields, Douglas Kruse and Kay Shriner, 'Enabling democracy: disability and voter turnout', *Political Research Quarterly*, 55:1, 167-190

⁶⁶ Andrew Ward, Paul Baker and Nathan Moon, 'Ensuring the enfranchisement of people with disabilities', *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 2009, 20:2, 79-92

⁶⁷ Speaker's conference (on Parliamentary Representation), *Final report*, 2009-10, HC239-I, 11 January 2011, para 173

⁶⁸ Kelly Kettlewell and Liz Phillips, *Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013*, LGA research report, May 2014

⁶⁹ 'New Parliament sees number of disabled MPs plunge', [Disability News Service](#), 15 May 2015

7. Overseas voters

British citizens living overseas can register as overseas voters for up to 15 years after they move abroad. Library Briefing Paper 5923 [Overseas voters](#) provides more information.

The Government does not keep track of citizens living abroad, so this group is difficult to survey. No information is available on their attitudes and levels of participation in political activities.

7.1 Electoral registration

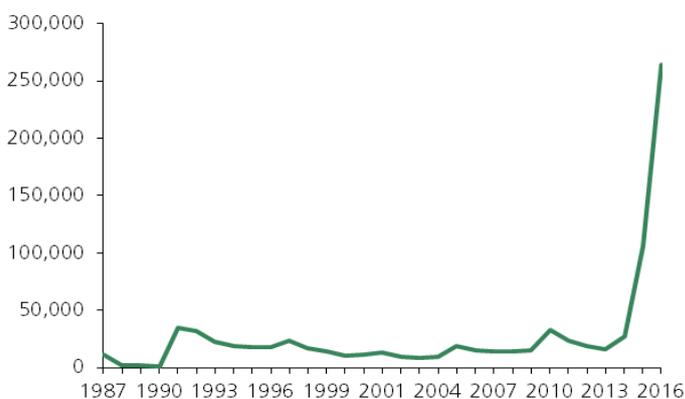
It is difficult to calculate the total number of people who would be eligible to register as overseas voters. The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in its 2014 report on *Voter engagement in the UK* estimated that less than 1% of British citizens living abroad were registered to vote.⁷⁰

The chart below shows the number of overseas electors on the register for each year since 1987; this was the first year for which data was recorded, following the *Representation of the People Act 1985* which first allowed British citizens resident abroad to register.

Until 2015 the number of registered overseas electors never rose above 35,000. There were small peaks in the years when there is a General Election (apart from 1991) before falling again over the next few years. In 2015 a record number of overseas voted registered as a result of the Electoral Commission campaign encouraging UK-nationals living outside the UK to register to vote. For the 2015 General Election 106,000 overseas voters were registered.

The 2016 EU referendum further encouraged voters overseas to register. In June 2016 there were 263,902 registered overseas votes, an increase of 158,057 compared with the 2015 General Election.

Overseas electors on the UK electoral register, 1987-2016



Source: ONS, Electoral Statistics; General Register office for Scotland; Electoral Office for Northern Ireland; OPCS; and House of Commons Library communication

Notes: The release date changes in 2001 from Feb to Dec. The 2013 and 2014 figures for Scotland were published in March 2014 and 2014 as opposed to being published in December.

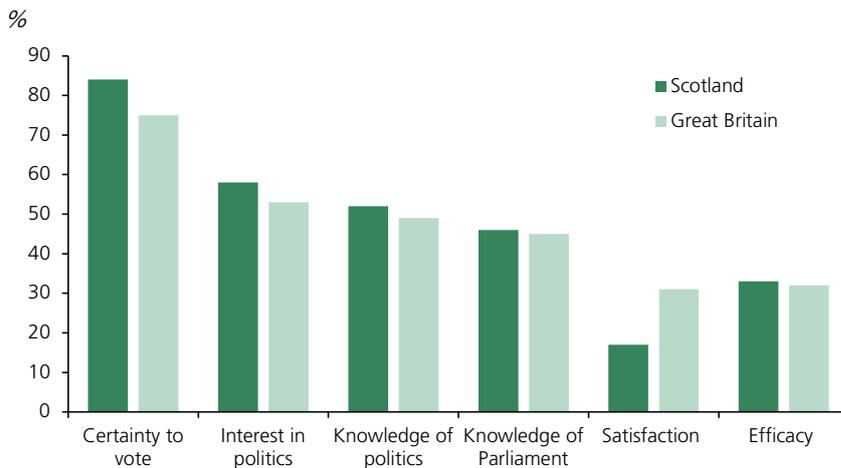
⁷⁰ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Voter Engagement in the UK*, 2014-15, HC 232, 14 November 2014, para 85-90

8. English regions, Scotland and Wales

8.1 Attitudes

The graph below shows that political engagement among people in Scotland was higher than the average in 2017, although they were less likely to report satisfaction with the British political system.

Levels of Engagement



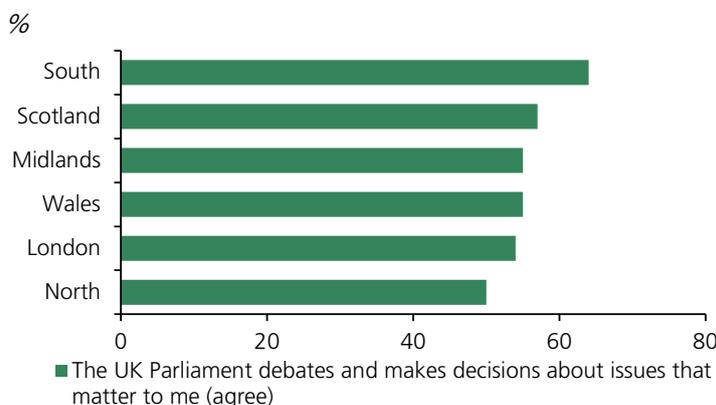
Note: Certainty to vote refers to scores 6 and above on a scale 1 - 10 (absolutely certain to vote)

Source: Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 2017

This findings are confirmed by research by experts at the University of Edinburgh: in 2015, satisfaction with the British democratic system was low in all parts of the country, ranging from 17% in Northern Ireland, to 18% in Wales, to 22% in Scotland, and 25% in England.⁷¹

However, as the chart below shows Scotland, along with the South was the most likely to agree with the statement “The UK Parliament debates and makes decisions about issues that matter to me”.

Perception of Parliament’s responsiveness by region, Great Britain



⁷¹ Lindsay Paterson, Jan Eichhorn, Daniel Kenealy, Richard Parry & Alexandra Remond, *Elite and mass attitudes on how the UK and its parts are governed – democratic engagement with the process of constitutional change*, March 2015, 5

Source: Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement* 2017

8.2 Political activities

The same research team found evidence that people in Scotland (63%) were more likely than those in Wales (59%), Northern Ireland (57%) and England (56%) to have ever participated in one of four political activities: “signed a petition, written to a member of the UK Parliament, taken part in a boycott, or gone on a demonstration”.⁷²

8.3 Electoral registration

In their study of the 2015 electoral registers, the Electoral Commission found marginally higher levels of completeness in rural areas (86%) than in urban areas (84%).⁷³

The table below shows the completeness of local government registers compared with parliamentary registers by country. Scotland reports the highest level of registration both in local government and parliamentary registers with 85% and 86%, respectively. Conversely, London reports the lowest level of registration. The Electoral Commission suggests that nationality is one of the demographic characteristics of London that can explain the lower levels of completeness.⁷⁴ It also notes that the local government registers include EU nationals, whereas parliamentary registers don’t, which means that they are more likely to be completed.

Completeness of local government registers compared with parliamentary registers

December 2015

	Local Government	Parliamentary
Great Britain	84%	85%
England (exl. London)	84%	85%
Scotland	85%	86%
Wales	84%	85%
London	81%	84%

Source: Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#)

The Hansard Society reported in its 2015 *Audit of Political Engagement* that 97% of the Scottish population had registered to vote for the 2014 referendum on independence.⁷⁵ However, registration rates may have varied between local authorities. The Electoral Commission reported that this was the case for the April 2011 local government registers in Scotland: completeness estimates ranged from 82.9% in the Lothian council area, to 90.3% in the Tayside council area (with a completeness estimate of 86.5% for Scotland overall).⁷⁶

The Electoral Commission performed a regression analysis on the 2011 registers to isolate factors influencing registration rates. The

⁷² Ibid, 3

⁷³ The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement*, 2015, 18

⁷⁶ Electoral Commission, *Electoral registration in 2011*, July 2014, 38

Commission found that while registration rates in Inner London are lower than anywhere else in the country, this is “a result of demographic factors (and there is not something inherent about living in London which results in lower levels of registration).” In fact, once other factors are controlled for, “living in Inner London increases the likelihood that someone will be on the electoral register more than any other region with the exception of the East Midlands”.⁷⁷

8.4 Voting

According to the Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement*, nearly 85% of eligible voters cast their vote at the Scottish independence referendum in 2014.⁷⁸ Note that the franchise for the referendum was extended, so that 16 & 17 year olds were able to vote.

The table below shows that turnout in the UK General Elections has decreased since 1945, but also that there have been significant differences between different parts of the UK.

Turnout at UK General Elections, 1918-2015

Valid votes as % of electorate

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	United Kingdom
1918 ¹	55.7%	65.9%	55.1%	69.5%	57.2%
1922	72.8%	79.4%	70.4%	77.2%	73.0%
1923	71.1%	77.3%	67.9%	76.5%	71.1%
1924	77.4%	80.0%	75.1%	66.7%	77.0%
1929	76.6%	82.4%	73.5%	63.8%	76.3%
1931	76.1%	79.3%	77.4%	74.5%	76.4%
1935	70.7%	76.4%	72.6%	72.0%	71.1%
1945	73.4%	75.7%	69.0%	67.4%	72.8%
1950	84.4%	84.8%	80.9%	77.4%	83.9%
1951	82.7%	84.4%	81.2%	79.9%	82.6%
1955	76.9%	79.6%	75.1%	74.1%	76.8%
1959	78.9%	82.6%	78.1%	65.9%	78.7%
1964	77.0%	80.1%	77.6%	71.7%	77.1%
1966	75.9%	79.0%	76.0%	66.1%	75.8%
1970	71.4%	77.4%	74.1%	76.6%	72.0%
1974 Feb	79.0%	80.0%	79.0%	69.9%	78.8%
1974 Oct	72.6%	76.6%	74.8%	67.7%	72.8%
1979	75.9%	79.4%	76.8%	67.7%	76.0%
1983	72.5%	76.1%	72.7%	72.9%	72.7%
1987	75.4%	78.9%	75.1%	67.0%	75.3%
1992	78.0%	79.7%	75.5%	69.8%	77.7%
1997	71.4%	73.5%	71.3%	67.1%	71.4%
2001	59.2%	61.6%	58.2%	68.0%	59.4%
2005	61.3%	62.6%	60.8%	62.9%	61.4%
2010	65.5%	64.8%	63.8%	57.6%	65.1%
2015	66.0%	65.7%	71.0%	58.1%	66.2%

1. 1918 figures include all of Ireland.

Sources

Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*

House of Commons Library, CBP7186 General Election 2015

The table below shows the 30 constituencies with the lowest turnout rate at the 2015 General Election, compared to the average turnout and the three constituencies with the highest turnout rate.

⁷⁷ Electoral Commission, *Electoral registration in 2011*, July 2014, 17

⁷⁸ Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement*, 2015, 18

2015 General Election turnout by constituency: average, top 3 and low

Constituency	Turnout
Average	66.2%
:	:
1 East Dunbartonshire	81.9%
2 East Renfrewshire	81.1%
3 Stirling	77.5%
:	:
621 Stoke-On-Trent Central	51.3%
622 Blackley and Broughton	51.6%
623 East Londonderry	51.9%
624 Manchester Central	52.7%
625 Birmingham, Ladywood	52.7%
626 Strangford	52.8%
627 Foyle	52.8%
628 Middlesbrough	52.9%
629 Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	53.0%
630 Birmingham, Erdington	53.3%
631 East Antrim	53.3%
632 West Bromwich West	53.5%
633 Kingston upon Hull East	53.5%
634 Nottingham North	53.6%
635 Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle	53.8%
636 Stoke-On-Trent North	54.1%
637 South Antrim	54.2%
638 Birmingham, Hodge Hill	54.5%
639 Leicester West	54.6%
640 Washington and Sunderland West	54.6%
641 Walsall North	55.0%
642 Leeds Central	55.1%
643 Kingston upon Hull North	55.1%
644 North Antrim	55.2%
645 Glasgow Central	55.4%
646 Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford	55.6%
647 Wolverhampton South East	55.6%
648 Doncaster North	55.6%
649 Wolverhampton North East	55.7%
650 Barnsley East	55.7%

Source: House of Commons Library, [General Election 2015](#)

The tables below show the local authorities with the lowest turnout rates for local elections. In England, councillors are elected for 4 year terms. They are not all elected at the same time: some authorities (including London boroughs and all county councils) hold elections every four years, while others elect a proportion of members in each year. In Scotland and Wales, councillors are elected every four years. Local elections are often held together with other elections (for example, in 2014 they coincided with the European Parliamentary elections), which can affect turnout. This means turnout figures cannot straightforwardly be compared across different types of local authorities and across time, although they do provide a rough indication of which localities are more disengaged than others.

Highest and lowest participation turnout rates**Participation turnout in the 2014 local elections in England (excl London) by local authority***Average, top 3 and lowest 15*

		% Rate
Avg		36.2
1	South Lakeland	47.9
2	Purbeck	45.6
3	Mole Valley	45.6
:	:	:
115	Sandwell	31.7
116	North East Lincolnshire	31.6
117	Wakefield	31.2
118	Liverpool	31.0
119	Manchester	30.6
120	Cannock Chase	30.5
121	Lincoln	30.4
122	Barnsley	30.0
123	Coventry	29.8
124	Halton	29.7
125	Salford	29.6
126	Knowsley	29.6
127	Wigan	29.5
128	Hartlepool	27.7
129	Kingston Upon Hull	27.1

Source: Electoral Commission**Notes:** Average figure does not take into account rounding errors**Participation turnout in the 2014 local elections in London (excl City of London) by local authority***Top 3 and lowest 15*

		% Rate
Avg		36.2
1	Tower Hamlets	48.9
2	Richmond Upon Thames	46.4
3	Kingston Upon Thames	43.6
:	:	:
18	Waltham Forest	38.3
19	Enfield	38.3
20	Hammersmith & Fulham	38.1
21	Greenwich	37.6
22	Lewisham	37.5
23	Wandsworth	37.2
24	Barking & Dagenham	36.8
25	Southwark	36.8
26	Hillingdon	36.6
27	Brent	36.5
28	Bexley	34.9
29	Lambeth	34.8
30	Westminster	32.1
31	Kensington & Chelsea	30.8
32	Hounslow	28.7

Source: Electoral Commission**Notes:** The City of London elects 25 Aldermen, see www.londoncouncils.gov.uk

Turnout figures were not recorded for some London voting districts

Valid vote turnout in the 2012 local elections in Scotland by ward*Average, top 3 and lowest 15*

		% Rate
Avg		39.1
1	Shetland Islands	54.2
2	nan Eilean Siar	52.2
3	Orkney	50.6
:	:	:
18	West Dunbartonshire	40.1
19	Clackmannanshire	40.1
20	Midlothian	40.1
21	Angus	38.7
22	East Ayrshire	38.7
23	North Ayrshire	38.2
24	Falkirk	37.7
25	South Lanarkshire	37.5
26	Fife	37.4
27	Moray	37.3
28	North Lanarkshire	37.2
29	Aberdeenshire	36.9
30	Dundee	35.8
31	Aberdeen	33.2
32	Glasgow	31.6

Source: Electoral Commission**Valid vote turnout in the 2012 local elections in Wales by local authority***Average, top 3 and lowest 15*

		% Rate
Avg		36.0
1	Blaenau Gwent	44.3
2	Bridgend	44.3
3	Caerphilly	38.9
:	:	:
7	Conwy	37.0
8	Denbighshire	36.4
9	Flintshire	36.3
10	Gwynedd	35.8
11	Merthyr Tydfil	35.7
12	Monmouthshire	35.7
13	Neath & Port Talbot	35.3
14	Newport	34.4
15	Pembrokeshire	34.1
16	Powys	33.7
17	Rhondda/Cynon/Taff	33.0
18	Swansea	31.9
19	Torfaen	31.9
20	Vale of Glamorgan	31.8
21	Wrexham	31.7

Source: Electoral Commission

8.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

Currently, England has 533 MPs, Wales 40, Scotland 59 and Northern Ireland 18.

8.6 Brexit: Turnout and vote

Turnout at the EU referendum was 72.2%. This is the highest turnout since the 1992 General Election, with the exception of the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, when 84.6% of the eligible electorate voted.

Across the UK, turnout was 73.0% in England, 71.7% in Wales, 67.2% in Scotland and 62.7% in Northern Ireland.

Turnout by region, ranked highest to lowest

2016 EU Referendum

Counting region	Remain (% of valid votes)	Leave (% of valid votes)	Turnout (valid votes as % of electorate)	Electorate
South East	48.2%	51.8%	76.7%	6,465,404
South West and Gibraltar	47.4%	52.6%	76.7%	4,138,134
East of England	43.5%	56.5%	75.7%	4,398,796
East Midlands	41.2%	58.8%	74.1%	3,384,299
West Midlands	40.7%	59.3%	72.0%	4,116,572
Wales	47.5%	52.5%	71.7%	2,270,272
Yorkshire and the Humber	42.3%	57.7%	70.6%	3,877,780
North West	46.3%	53.7%	69.9%	5,241,568
London	59.9%	40.1%	69.6%	5,424,768
North East	42.0%	58.0%	69.3%	1,934,341
Scotland	62.0%	38.0%	67.2%	3,987,112
Northern Ireland	55.8%	44.2%	62.7%	1,260,955
United Kingdom	48.1%	51.9%	72.2%	46,500,001

Source: House of Commons Library, [CB 7639: European Union Referendum 2016](#)

Among UK regions, the South East and the South West and Gibraltar registered the highest turnout (76.7%), about 7 percentage points higher than the North West, where 69.3% of the eligible electorate voted.

Whether the majority voted in the referendum to Leave or Remain in the EU varies across the UK. Leave won the highest share in England (53.4%) and Wales (52.5%), whereas a larger proportion of the electorate voted Remain in Scotland (62.0%) and Northern Ireland (55.8%). London was the only region in England, where Remain won a majority (59.9%).

House of Commons Library briefing paper [European Union Referendum 2016](#) provides further analysis of EU referendum results.

9. Political disengagement: policy initiatives

The groups discussed above show different forms and levels of disengagement. For example, women are less likely than men to participate in political activities, but as likely to vote; and young people are more likely than older people to believe getting involved in politics is effective, but less likely to be included on the electoral register.

Where groups show the same form of disengagement, this may not be explained by the same drivers. As noted, certain factors impact on all groups: mobility and housing affect electoral registration, regardless of other characteristics. But there may also be group-specific factors that could explain low levels of participation: for example, academics David Sanders et al found that discrimination is associated with low levels of engagement among ethnic minorities.⁷⁹

The Government and previous governments have tried to address different forms of political disengagement through a variety of initiatives. Some of these are highlighted below.

9.1 Government initiatives

The Cabinet Office published a policy paper on the Government's democratic engagement programme on 8 May 2015. The programme "is part of the government's strategy to increase levels of voter registration and engagement", and includes a commitment to maximising electoral registration, as well as custom made resources to engage a variety of disengaged groups.

The programme builds on initiatives developed by the Coalition Government, which announced in February 2014 that it would make funding available to local authorities and five organisations "to develop new approaches to encourage democratic engagement amongst some of the groups who feel most disengaged from democracy and politics in the UK". The five partnerships were described as follows:

- the [Royal Mencap Society](#) created an [Easy read guide to registering to vote and voting](#) for people with a learning disability, their families and carers, to encourage and enable engagement with the democratic process, including registering to vote
- the [Hansard Society](#), in partnership with [Homeless Link](#), worked with other charities and housing associations to develop a [Your Vote Matters](#) resource pack and ways to engage homeless people and those in social housing to register to vote and use their voice
- [UK Youth](#) developed [Democracy Challenge](#), which provides 16-year-olds and older who are interested in democracy and politics with the tools to spread their enthusiasm to

⁷⁹ David Sanders, Stephen D. Fisher, Anthony Heath and Maria Sobolewska. 'The democratic engagement of Britain's ethnic minorities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29(14), 37:1, 120-139

others. This resource is available for use by youth workers and others who work with young people

- the [Scottish Youth Parliament](#) developed a [peer educator training pack](#) for young people
- [Gingerbread](#) developed a [digital voter registration toolkit](#) with tips and examples for raising online awareness with single parents about voter engagement and registering to vote.⁸⁰

The Coalition Government also funded the [Rock Enrol](#) learning resource aimed at encouraging young people to register to vote.

The Electoral Commission arranges voter registration drives, including Voter Registration Day, general registration campaigns before elections, and campaigns aimed at particular groups of voters such as overseas voters and the armed forces.

One of the aims of the Citizenship Education curriculum that was introduced as a statutory subject for key stages 3 and 4 in schools in England by the Labour Government in 2002 was to raise political awareness and engagement among young people.⁸¹ The Minister of State, Department for Education Nick Gibb responded to a Parliamentary Question on 20 October 2015, reaffirming the current Government's continued commitment to citizenship education:

Citizenship education is in the national curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 and helps young people to prepare to play a full part in society, informed by a sound understanding of what it means to be a responsible citizen. [...] Pupils also learn about democracy, government and how laws are made and upheld. Teaching should equip pupils to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, to debate, and to make reasoned arguments. It should also prepare them to take their place in society as responsible citizens.⁸²

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 allowed political parties to draw up all-women shortlists of candidates for elections, in order to raise the number of women holding elected office. The Act would expire at the end of 2015, but the period in which all-women shortlists may be used was extended until 2030 by the Equality Act 2010. Library Briefing Paper 5057 [All-women shortlists](#) gives more information.

The [Equality Act 2010](#) also created the Public Sector Equality Duty, requiring public authorities to encourage participation by disabled people in public life. The [Representation of the People Act 2000](#) already allowed disabled voters, and those voters who are unable to read, to have a companion to assist them when voting. Voters with disabilities may also seek the assistance of the presiding officer (the electoral administrator in charge of a polling station) to help them cast their vote.

⁸⁰ 'Democratic engagement programme: policy paper', Cabinet Office, [GOV.UK](#), 8 May 2015

⁸¹ See 'GCSE subject content for citizenship studies', Guidance, Department for Education, [GOV.UK](#), 12 February 2015

⁸² [WQ12132](#)

Every polling station should provide a tactile voting device to allow sight impaired voters to cast a vote without assistance if they so choose.

There is also a requirement that local authorities to review the accessibility of all polling stations to disabled voters and ensure every polling place, and prospective polling place, for which it is responsible is accessible to disabled voters 'so far as is reasonable and practicable'. Reviews of polling stations must be conducted every five years.

The Coalition Government ran a fund to support disabled candidates to stand for elected office. The fund was extended to cover the 2015 General Election.⁸³

The Accessibility of Elections Group, overseen by the Cabinet Office, includes representatives of Mencap, the RNIB, Scope and MIND as well as electoral administrators.

Developments since 2015

The Government announced its plan to introduce a *Votes for Life Bill* in the Queen's Speech of 27 May 2015. The Government indicated that its provisions would abolish the 15 year rule: make it easier for overseas voters to cast their votes in time for them to be counted and allow for the secure and accessible registration of overseas voters.

This Bill was not introduced but, on 9 March 2016, Lord Bridges of Headley said that the government "will introduce a Bill in due course".⁸⁴

In the [Government's background notes](#) accompanying the Queen's Speech in 2016 the Government again included a commitment to legislate to end the 15 year rule under the heading 'Overseas electors'. No Bill was brought forward during the session but on 7 October 2016 the Government published a policy statement, [A democracy that works for everyone: British citizens overseas](#), which set out proposals for how the 15 year rule will be removed. There was no draft legislation in the policy document.

In a [speech to returning officers](#) in January 2017, the Minister, Chris Skidmore, reiterated the Government's commitment to legislate to end the 15 year rule.

The Minister has also conducted a series of meetings around the country as part of his 'every voice matters' tour. He has met with over 100 organisations, including civil society organisations, to understand the barriers to voter registration and voting.

Another policy document was released by the Cabinet Office in March 2017, [A democracy that works for everyone: survivors of domestic abuse](#). This was in relation to anonymous registration for those at risk if their name and address appeared on the electoral register. The policy document sets out the Government's approach to removing the barriers to anonymous registration following meetings with campaigners for reform.

⁸³ HC Deb 9 July 2012 c7WS

⁸⁴ [PQ HL6395](#) [on Political Parties: Finance], 9 March 2016

Sian Hawkins, campaigns manager for the charity Women's Aid, said that for women living in a refuge it was currently "an almost insurmountable challenge" to register to vote.

In March 2017, the Minister visited the Glasgow Disability Alliance to hear the experiences of disabled voters and the problems they face when voting or registering to vote.⁸⁵ He has also met with groups such as Shelter, Crisis and St Mungo's to discuss the barriers to registration experienced by those with no fixed address.

The Minister has met with a number of student groups to encourage registration in the run up to elections in May 2017. The Cabinet Office has also provided funding for a scheme trialled at Sheffield University, along with Sheffield City Council, to encourage students to register to vote when they register for the start of the academic year. In the first year, 2014-15, 75 per cent of students (14,481) joined the electoral roll and in 2015-16, that number rose to 15,352 (76 per cent of students). This is compared with figures as low as 13 per cent for similar sized universities.

The Government has committed to publish its evaluation of the initiative in "due course".⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Cabinet Office, [Minister discusses barriers to voter registration for disabled people in Scotland](#), 2 March 2017

⁸⁶ [PQ HL5655 27 February 2017](#).

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