



BRIEFING PAPER

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Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?

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1. 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. 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 almost nine out of 10 of MPs elected in June 2017 attended university and around 30% were privately educated, compared with 7% of the UK population.

Women are less likely to know a fair amount about politics than men, but nearly as 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.

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.

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

2. Political disengagement

2.1 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).

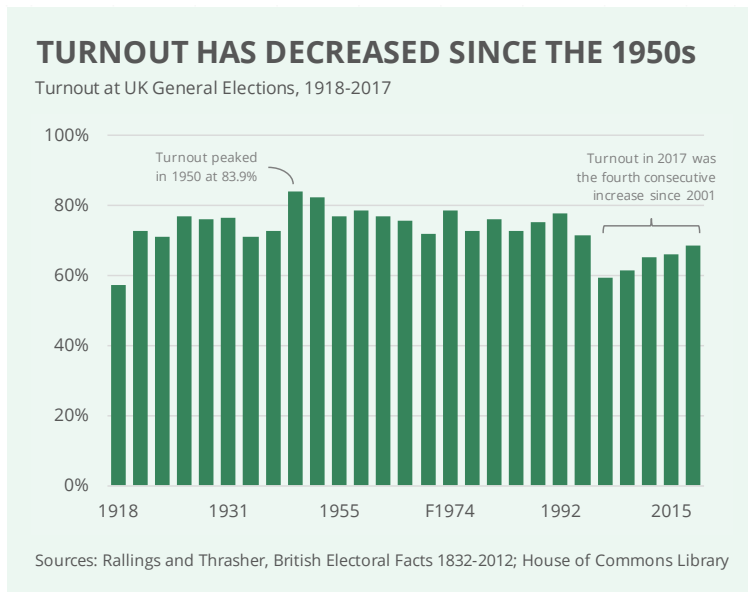
2.2 Why does political disengagement matter?

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.

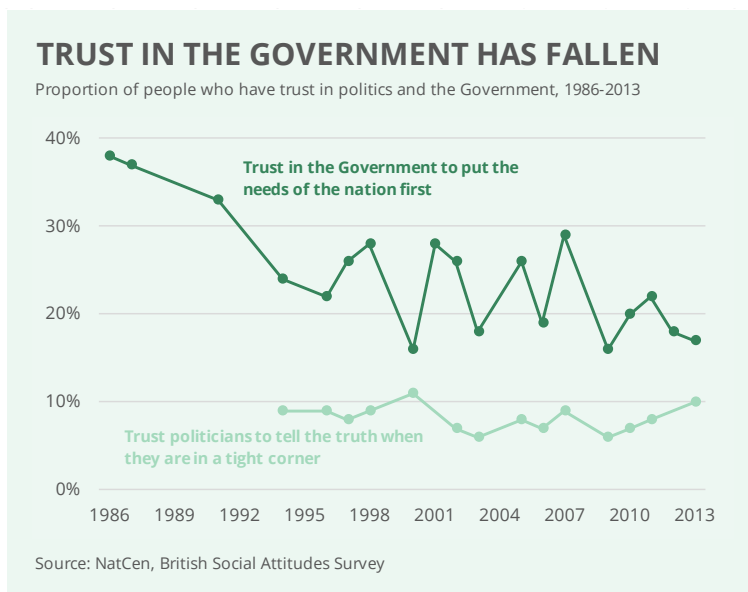
Across Western democracies, voter turnout and trust in politics has decreased since the 1950s. The chart below shows voter turnout in the UK between 1918 and 2017.

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, p. 123

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The chart 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 1986 to 17% in 2013. Trust in the credibility of politicians has been fluctuating around 9%.



Within this overall trend, there are significant differences between groups: some 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

2.3 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. The House of Commons Library paper [UK Election Statistics](#) provides turnout data for all elections in the 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 2017 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/>

² Matthew Lawrence, [Political inequality](#), Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), April 2015

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

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 is 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 - <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/research/audit-of-political-engagement>

2.4 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

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;

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

- 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;
- 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 Library paper [Membership of UK political parties](#) collates all available information on party membership figures.

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).⁷

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.⁸

In its report on The Completeness of the 2015 December electoral registers it found that age and moving home have the strongest

⁷ Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right*, Routledge, 2014, 149-151

⁸ Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

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negative effects on registration. Young people and those who move home are less likely to be registered.⁹

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.

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).¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹²

Councillors, candidates and MPs

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

⁹ Ibid, p. 12

¹⁰ Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, [The 2015 general election: aspects of participation and administration](#), Electoral Commission, August 2015, p. 6

¹¹ See for example '[Political parties are neglecting young people – it's time for unis to step in](#)', The Guardian, 25 February 2015

¹² Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, [Divided Democracy](#), IPPR, November 2013, p. 4-5

competitive and visible female candidates.¹³ 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.

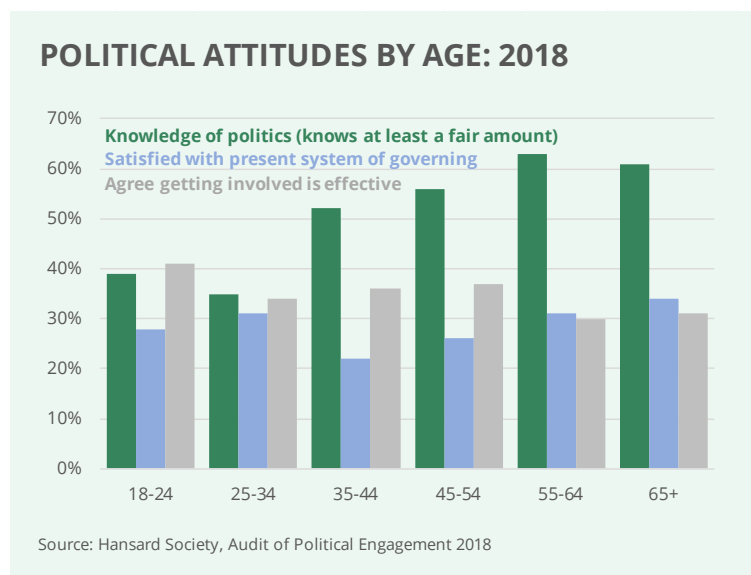
3. Young people

3.1 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.¹⁴

The chart 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.



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

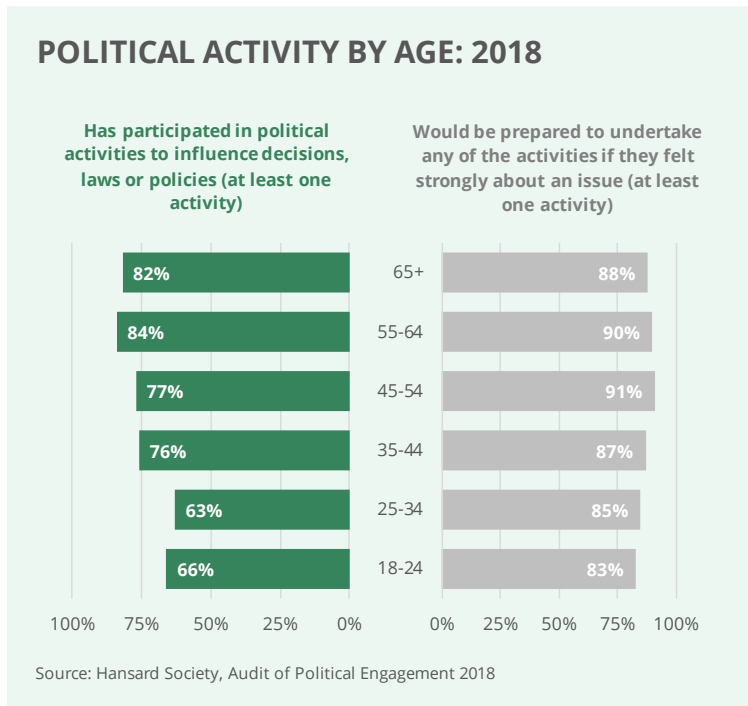
¹³ See for example Lonna Rae Atkeson, ‘[Not all cues are created equal: the conditional impact of female candidates on political engagement](#)’, *The Journal of Politics*, 2003, 65:4, p. 1040-61

¹⁴ Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, ‘[The party politics of youth citizenship and democratic engagement](#)’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 65:1, p. 139

competence and integrity of politicians. They found that young people were less likely than older people to see politicians as “self-serving”.¹⁵

3.2 Political activities

People aged 18-24 are the most likely group to feel getting involved is effective. They are less likely to say they have participated in political activities than other age groups (after 25-34 year olds) and the least likely to say they are willing to undertake political some form of activities in the future.



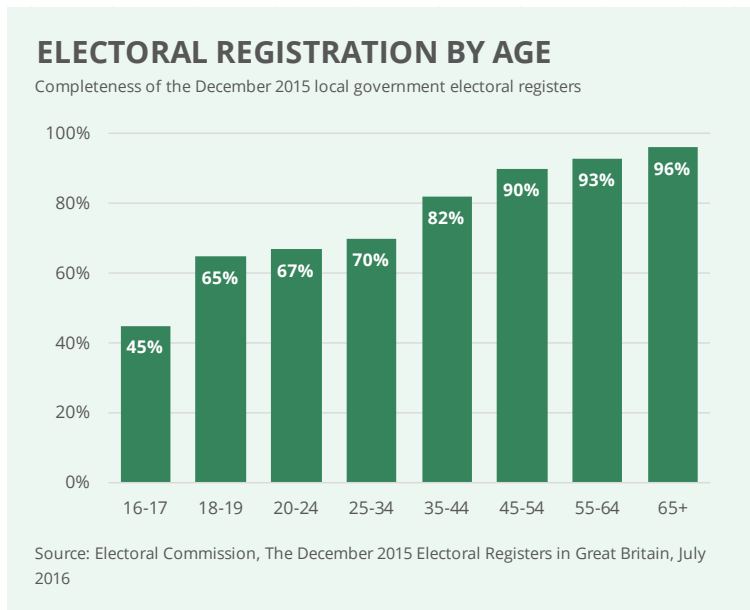
3.3 Electoral registration

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

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.¹⁶

¹⁵ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, [‘The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain’](#), Parliamentary Affairs, 2016, p. 8-11

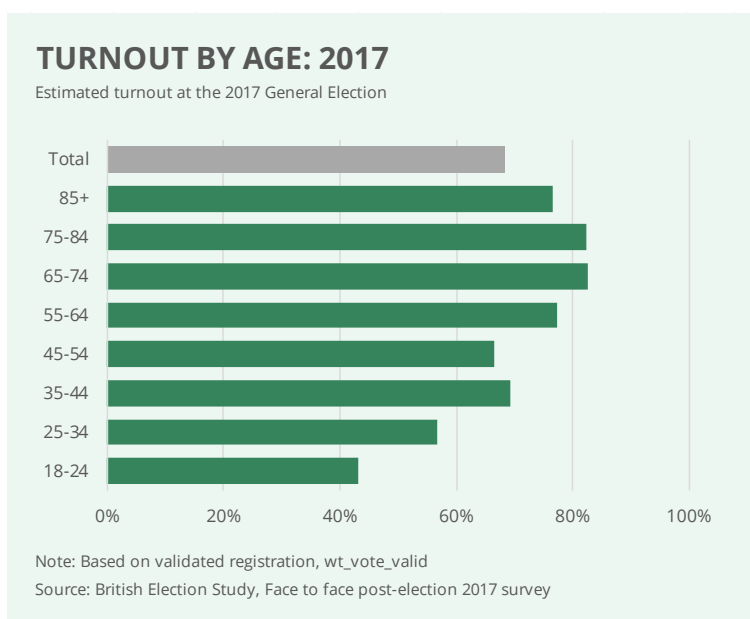
¹⁶ Electoral Commission, [‘The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain’](#), July 2016, p. 45-47



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”.¹⁷

3.4 Voting

Young people are generally 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.¹⁸



The chart above shows that estimated turnout at the 2017 General Election was lower among young people with 43% of 18-24 year olds

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, [Divided Democracy](#), IPPR, November 2013, p. 12

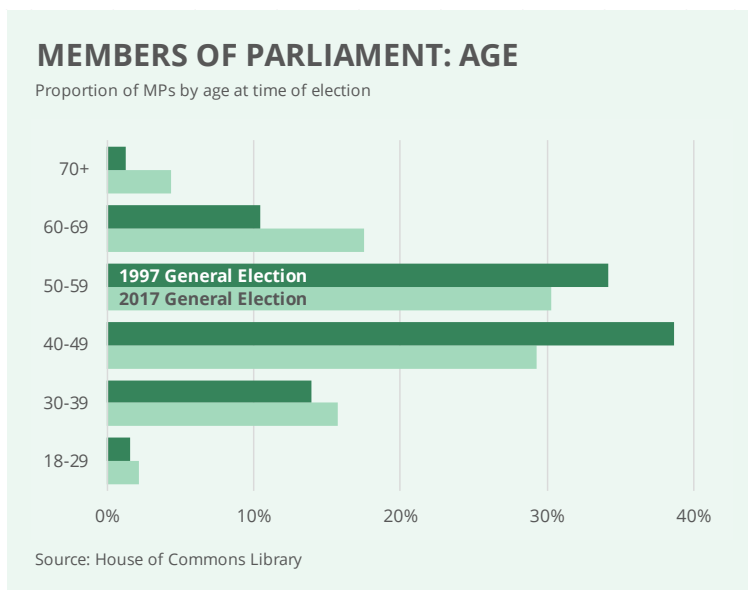
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voting, compared with 82% of people in the 65-74 and 75-84 age brackets.

3.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

The average age of councillors, MPs and party members is over 50 years.¹⁹

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.”²⁰



3.6 Brexit: turnout and vote

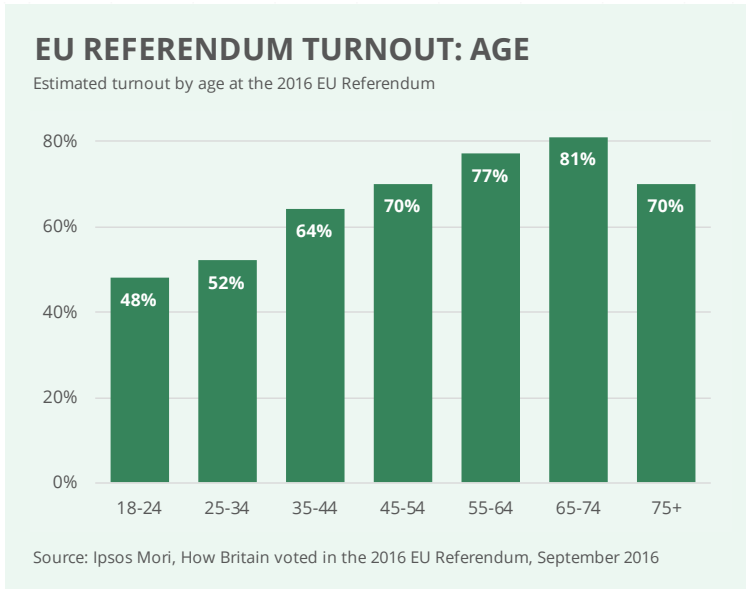
Turnout at the EU Referendum on 23 June 2016 broken down by voters’ characteristics is not recorded in official statistics. However, estimates are available from social research agencies, such as IpsosMori and NatCen.

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

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+.

¹⁹ Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, ‘[The party politics of youth citizenship and democratic engagement](#)’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 65:1, p. 144

²⁰ Kelly Kettlewell and Liz Phillips, [Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013](#), LGA research report, May 2014



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.

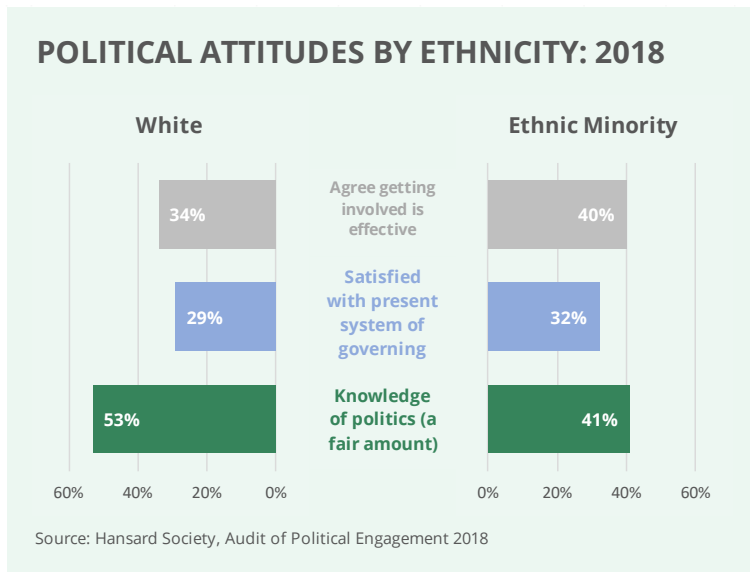
4. Ethnic Minorities

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.

4.1 Attitudes

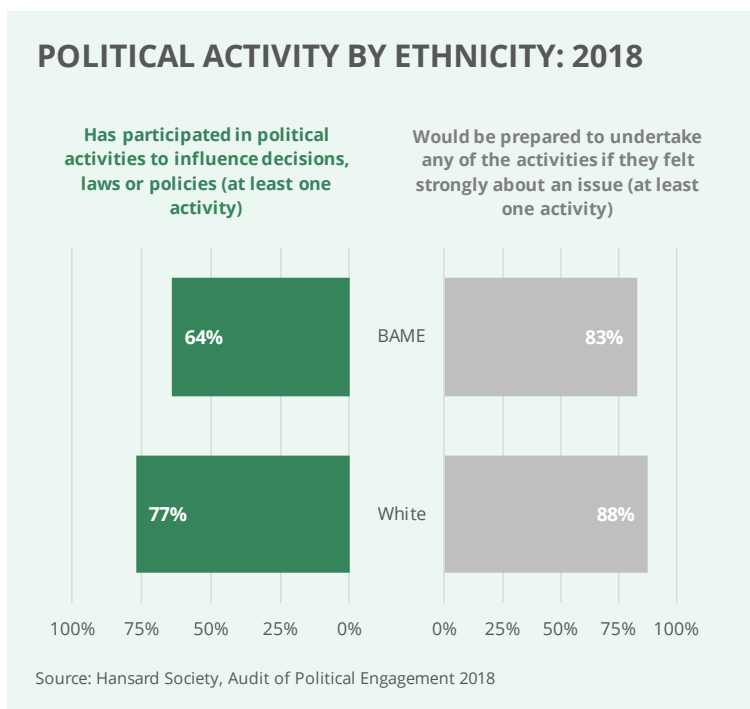
Ethnic minorities are less likely to report a fair amount of knowledge about politics. However, they are more likely to be satisfied with the democratic system in the UK and to feel getting involved is effective.



4.2 Political activities

Ethnic minorities are less likely than the white population to engage in political activities, or to do so if they felt strongly about an issue.

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".²¹

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.²²

4.3 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.²³

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.²⁴

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.²⁵

The Electoral Commission's study of the 2015 registers showed that UK citizens (86%) were more likely to be on the local government register than Commonwealth citizens (61%) and European Union citizens (53%).²⁶

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.

²¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015

²² Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska, [The political integration of ethnic minorities in Britain](#), Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 179

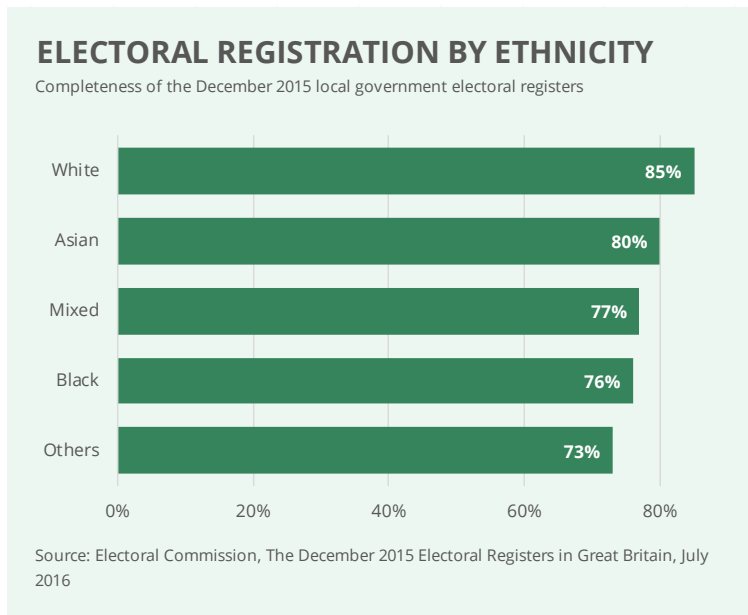
²³ Ibid, p. 136-7

²⁴ Omar Khan, '[Registration and race: achieving equal political participation](#)', in Runnymede Trust, Race and Elections, April 2015, p. 24-5

²⁵ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015, P. 47-8

²⁶ Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

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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.²⁷

4.4 Voting

Ethnic minorities are generally less likely to vote than white people. In the 2017 General Election, turnout among BAME voters is estimated to be around 59%, 11 percentage points lower than the turnout among white voters (70%).²⁸ In the 2015 General Election turnout among BAME voters is estimated to be around 53% and 67% for white voters.²⁹

In a study of the 2010 General Election (that used validated data instead of self-reporting) 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

²⁷ Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska, [The political integration of ethnic minorities in Britain](#), Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 141-2

²⁸ British Election Study, [Face to face post-election 2017 survey](#); based on validated registration and weighted with wt_vote_valid

²⁹ British Election Study, [Face to face post-election 2015 survey](#); based on validated registration and weighted with wt_vote_valid

³⁰ Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska, [The political integration of ethnic minorities in Britain](#), Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 136-7

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

4.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

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

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 and 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 At the 2017 General Election, Labour selected a total of 58 BME candidates, around 9% of all Labour candidates.³⁶

House of Commons Library briefing paper [Ethnic minorities in politics and public life](#) notes that 52 BME MPs were elected at the 2017 General Election, 8% of the total. If the non-white population were represented proportionally in the House of Commons, there would be around 88 ethnic minority MPs.

Only one MP (Bernadette Devlin, representing Mid Ulster from 1969-1974) is known to have come from a Traveller background.³⁷

4.6 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.³⁸

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](#), Improvement Service

³⁴ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015, p. 51

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

³⁶ The Guardian, [Labour risks losing more minority ethnic voters to Tories](#), 21 May 2017

³⁷ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015, p. 51

³⁸ Ipsos Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum](#), September 2016

People with an ethnic minority background were also less likely to vote Leave than white people.³⁹

It is estimated that 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 'other' ethnic background were the most likely to vote Leave (43%).⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

5. 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.

SOCIAL GRADES		
Estimated proportion of each social grade within general 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%

Note: Based on 2008 data
Source: Ipsos Mori, Social grade: a classification tool, 2009

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

5.1 Attitudes

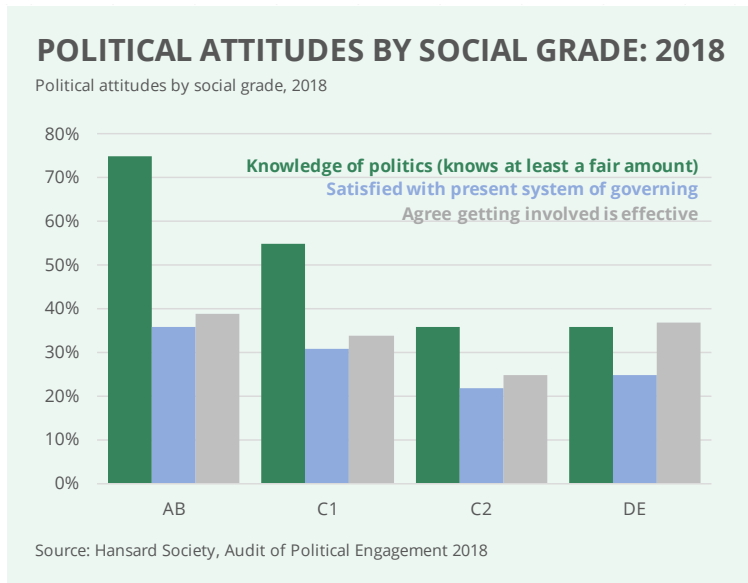
The IPPR's 2013 [Divided Democracy](#) report notes that democracy should ideally represent all groups in society, and their interests, equally. However, their research shows that people from the C2DE social grades

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

⁴¹ Hansard Society, [Audit of Political Engagement 2017](#), June 2016

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

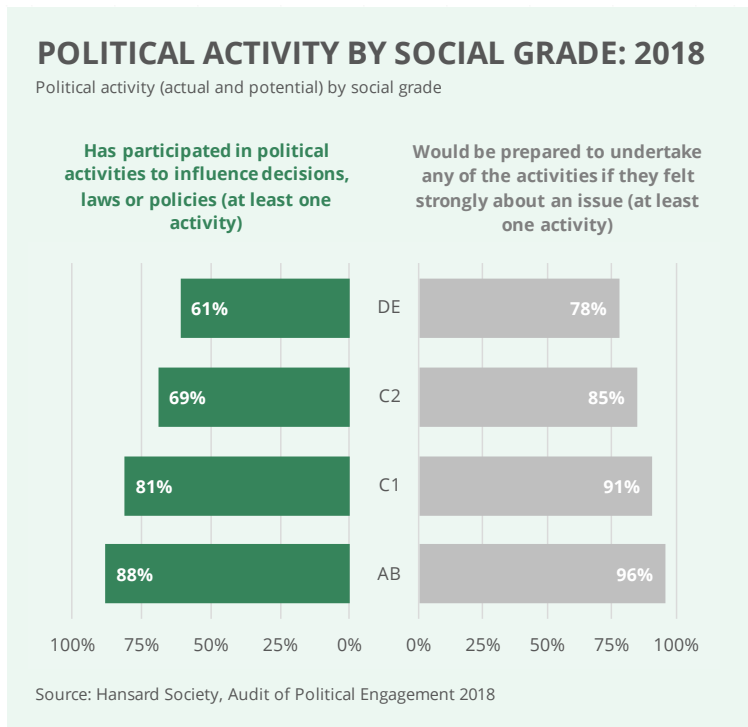


Academics Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman found that people from the ABC1 grades were more likely than people from the C2DE grades to think that politicians lack technical skills and the leadership to tell the public the truth about decisions, and see them as given to chasing short-term headlines. 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”.⁴²

5.2 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.

⁴² Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, [‘The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain’](#), Parliamentary Affairs, 2016, p. 14



5.3 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.⁴³

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

A possible explanation for 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.⁴⁴

5.4 Voting

People in the DE social grades are least likely to vote: 61% were estimated to have voted at the 2017 General Election, compared to 73% in the AB social grades; 66% of those in the C1 social grade; and 66% of those in the C2 social grade.⁴⁵

Turnout is estimated to have been lowest among social and private renters: 51% and 53% respectively. People who own their own home

⁴³ The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016
⁴⁴ The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016
⁴⁵ IPSOS Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2017 elections](#), July 2017. These figures are not as reliable as BES figures presented earlier.

(either outright or with a mortgage) were more likely to vote: mortgage (72%), own outright (80%).⁴⁶

5.5 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 Library briefing [Social background of MPs 1979-2017](#) gives information on the social grade of MPs when they entered Parliament. 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).

5.6 Brexit: turnout and vote

People in lower social grades were less likely to vote in the EU referendum than those in higher social grades.

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."⁴⁷

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%).⁴⁸

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.

6. Gender

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

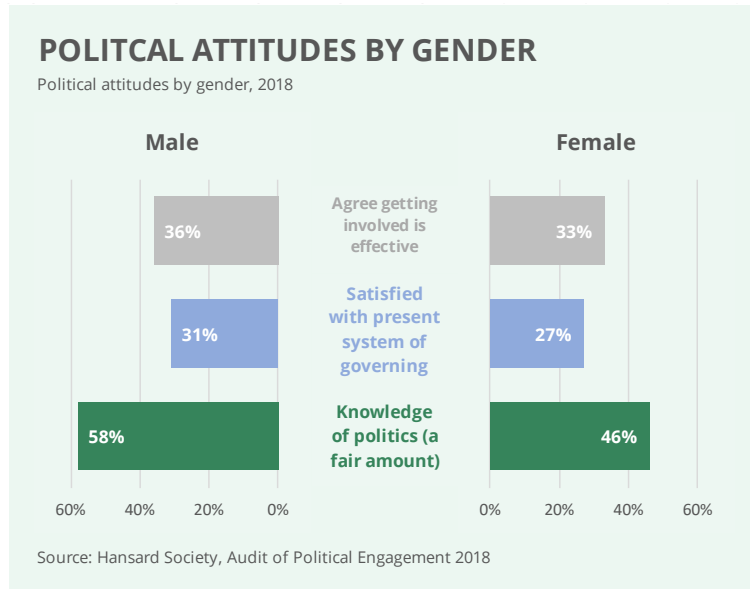
⁴⁶ British Election Study, [Face to face post-election 2017 survey](#); based on validated registration and weighted with wt_vote_valid

⁴⁷ Ipsos-Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum](#), September 2016

⁴⁸ NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

6.1 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.



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).⁴⁹

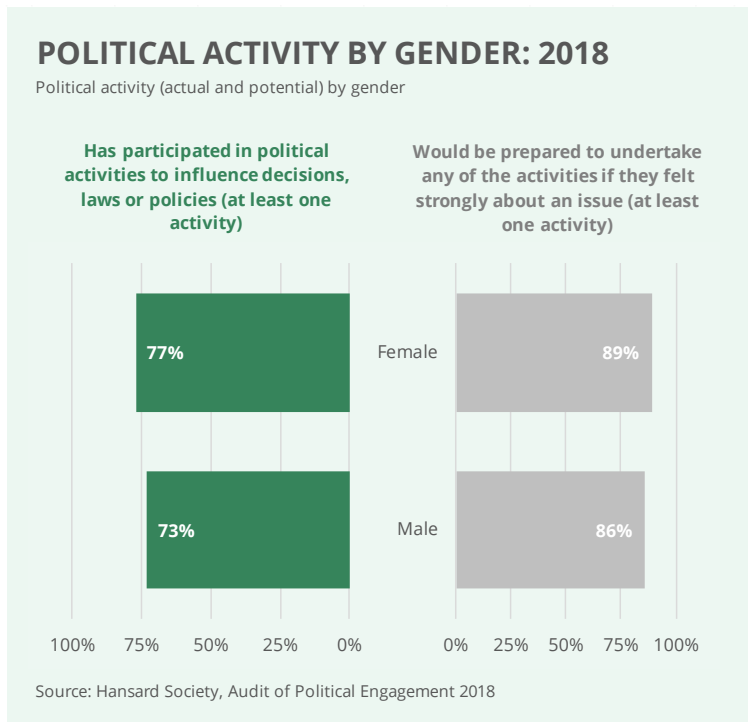
Academics Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman found that women held more favourable opinions of politicians: women were less likely than men to think of politicians as lacking technical skills and the leadership to tell the public the truth about decisions, and given to chasing short-term headlines.⁵⁰

6.2 Political activities

The chart 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.

⁴⁹ YouGov/IPPR, Fieldwork 9th-11th September 2014, survey results. Weighted

⁵⁰ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, ‘[The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain](#)’, Parliamentary Affairs, 2016, P. 14



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.⁵¹ 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”.⁵²

6.3 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).⁵³ This was also the case in April 2011 (87% of women compared to 85.1% of men).⁵⁴

6.4 Voting

Men and women were equally likely to vote in the 2017 General Election around 68-69%.⁵⁵ There has been no significant difference in turnout between men and women at general elections since 2001: men were slightly more likely to vote than women (but only by 1 to 3 percentage points).⁵⁶

⁵¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Is Britain Fairer? Evidence papers series, Domain J, Participation, influence and voice, Autumn 2015*, P. 56

⁵² *Ibid*, 54.

⁵³ The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

⁵⁴ The Electoral Commission, *Electoral registration in 2011*, July 2014, p. 44

⁵⁵ British Election Study, [Face to face post-election 2017 survey](#); based on validated registration and weighted with wt_vote_valid

⁵⁶ IPSOS Mori, *How Britain voted in 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015*

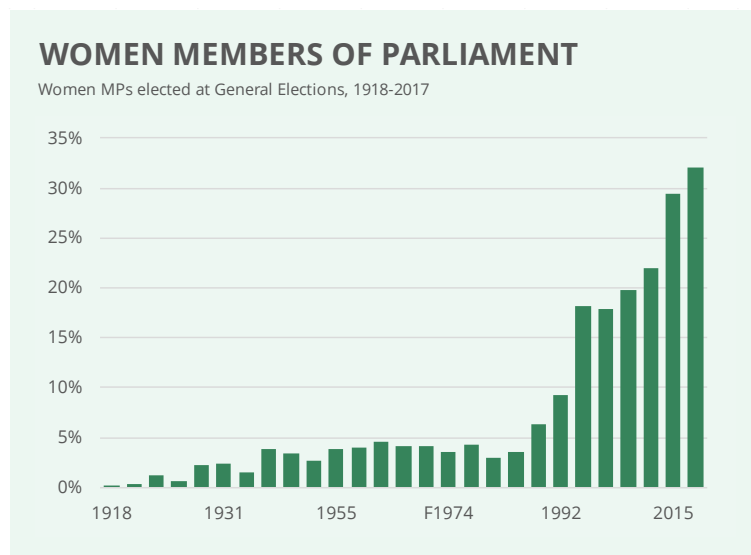
6.5 Councillors, candidates, and MPs

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 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 2012.⁵⁷ In Northern Ireland in 2015, women held 25% of council seats.⁵⁸

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 2017 General Election there were 973 women candidates, 29% of the total (3,304). Although this is the highest proportion on record, the number of women candidates was lower than at the 2015 General Election (1,033 out of 3,971).

Since 1918, 489 women have been elected as Members in the House of Commons (including by-elections). This is about 9% of all MPs elected over the period. The chart below shows that the percentage of female MPs has increased since 1918.

208 women MPs were elected at the 2017 General Election, 32% of all MPs and a record high.

6.6 Brexit: turnout and vote

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

⁵⁷ LGiU Scotland, Where are all the women, July 2016

⁵⁸ Northern South Inter-Parliamentary Association, Women in Public life, 27 November 2015

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.⁵⁹

7. 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.⁶⁰

7.1 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.⁶¹ 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".⁶²

7.2 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.⁶³ Those with a mental disability were least likely to be registered.

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 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).⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ipsos-Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum](#), September 2016

⁶⁰ Speaker's conference (on Parliamentary Representation), Final report, 2009-10, HC239-I, 11 January 2011, paras 167-244

⁶¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? Evidence papers series](#), Domain J, Participation, influence and voice, Autumn 2015, p. 55

⁶² Ibid, p. 54

⁶³ The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

⁶⁴ 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

7.3 Voting

The charity Mencap claims that only one third of people with learning disabilities in the UK vote.⁶⁵

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%.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷

7.4 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".⁶⁸ 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."⁶⁹

MPs

There is no monitoring of disability of candidates or MPs. It has been reported that five disabled MPs were elected at the 2017 General Election.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ [Mencap website](#), accessed on 1 February 2016

⁶⁶ Lisa Schur, Todd Shields, Douglas Kruse and Kay Shriner, '[Enabling democracy: disability and voter turnout](#)', *Political Research Quarterly*, 55:1, p. 167-190

⁶⁷ Andrew Ward, Paul Baker and Nathan Moon, '[Ensuring the enfranchisement of people with disabilities](#)', *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 2009, 20:2, p. 79-92

⁶⁸ Speaker's conference (on Parliamentary Representation), Final report, 2009-10, HC239-I, 11 January 2011, para 173

⁶⁹ Kelly Kettlewell and Liz Phillips, *Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013*, LGA research report, May 2014

⁷⁰ The Guardian, [New intake brings number of disabled MPs in Commons to five](#), June 2017

8. 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.

8.1 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.⁷¹

Until 2015 the number never rose above 35,000. There were small peaks in the years when there is a general election (with the exception of 1991) before falling again over the next few years.

The large increase in numbers of overseas electors in 1991 can be attributed to measures in the *Representation of the People Act 1989* which extended the period during which overseas voters could be registered to vote in UK Parliamentary elections from 5 years to 20 years.

In 2015 and 2016 the numbers of registered overseas voters increased significantly. In advance of the 2015 UK General Election the Electoral Commission ran a overseas voter registration campaign (from 2 February to 17 April 2015). A record number of overseas voters were registered for that election – almost 106,000 – three times the previous record in 1991.⁷²

The EU referendum, in June 2016, saw that record surpassed. The referendum used the Parliamentary franchise which meant overseas voters were eligible to vote. In December 2016, there were nearly 264,000 registered overseas voters. Over 135,000 of these were registered during the Electoral Commission's public awareness campaign for overseas voters, which ran from 17 March to 9 June 2016.⁷³

The figure for the June 2017 General Election reached just over 285,000 registered overseas voters, surpassing the December 2016 record. The introduction of the ability to register to vote online in Great Britain, which includes overseas voters, is also thought to have had an impact on the number of overseas voters registering.

⁷¹ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, *Voter Engagement in the UK*, 2014-15, HC 232, 14 November 2014, para 85-90

⁷² Electoral Commission, [Report on the administration of the 7 May 2015 elections, including the UK Parliamentary general election](#), July 2015, p36

⁷³ Electoral Commission, [Analysis of the December 2016 electoral registers in the United Kingdom](#), March 2017

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.⁷⁴

These problems are not new. The Home Affairs Committee conducted an inquiry into electoral administration and registration in 1982-3 and noted then concerns about under-registration and that certain groups were less likely to register. Its work identified that:

Groups as showing a particularly high rate of non-registration, namely ethnic minorities, attainers...and those living in bed-sitters and lodging houses.⁷⁵

The same report called for extension of the availability of postal voting to make it easier for people to cast an absent vote. At this time postal voting on demand was not available although neither the Committee of the Government favoured extending postal voting to anyone who requested it.

Following the 1997 general election there were calls for an overhaul of electoral administration generally and for improvements to the level of registration. A Home Office working party (the Howarth Committee) made several recommendations, including the introduction of a system of rolling registration. This was introduced following the *Representation of the People Act 2000*. The 2000 Act also introduced postal voting on demand in Great Britain.

All-women shortlists

Candidate selection is a matter for political parties' rules and standing orders and generally speaking is not regulated. However, an employment tribunal ruling found that the use of all-women shortlists by the Labour Party in the selection of candidates for the 1997 General Election breached the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* (the Jepson case).

⁷⁴ 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, p. 120-139

⁷⁵ Home Affairs Select Committee, *Representation of the People Acts*, HC 32, 1982-3, p6

The *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002* was subsequently passed and allowed political parties to draw up all-women shortlists of candidates for elections to raise the number of women holding elected office. The Act was due to 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, [All-women shortlists](#) gives more information.

The *Equalities Act 2010*, allows parties to make arrangements in relation to the selection of election candidates to address the under-representation of people with particular protected characteristics in elected bodies. Although the legislation allows for single-sex shortlists for election candidates, it does not allow for shortlists restricted to people with other protected characteristics. However, the Act makes limited provision to address under-representation in elected bodies for people with protected characteristics other than sex. In drawing up a candidate list, parties may reserve some places for BAME candidates (or for other protected characteristics) but, as noted, may not create a shortlist restricted only to people of that protected characteristic.

In 2010, the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation recommended that the provisions in place for all-women shortlists should be extended to other protected characteristics, including BAME.⁷⁶ So far, this recommendation has not been taken up by the Government.

The Speaker's Conference also recommended that all registered political parties should be required to publish details of their candidate selections online every six months on the sex, ethnicity of selected candidates and whether the candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person. The Labour Government responded by including a provision in the 2010 *Equality Act*. This became Section 106 of the Act and gives the Government the power to make regulations to require political parties to publish diversity data on party candidates seeking selection. The requirement to publish could apply to diversity data related to some or all protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, race, sex, sexual orientation and religion or belief. Candidates would be free to refuse to disclose some or all the information requested.

This provision has not been commenced and would require regulations to be approved by both Houses of Parliament. The current Government does favour commencing Section 106.

Electoral Commission

In 2000, the Electoral Commission was established, and part of its remit was to promote participation in the democratic process. This work includes analysis of electoral registration to see how accurate and complete electoral registers are. The Commission also undertakes publicity campaigns to encourage electoral registration in the run up to electoral events.

⁷⁶ Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), Final Report, 11 January 2010, HC 239-I 2009-10, paras 147-149

Since 2015 the Commission has published [annual evaluations](#) of its publicity work. For example, in 2017, in the run up to the UK Parliamentary General Election, campaigns included TV and radio advertisements and social media campaigns. The campaigns included targeted ads to encourage some groups known to be less likely to register, 18-year-olds, students, and recent home movers. The Electoral Commission estimated that almost 1 million names were added to the electoral register during its campaigning activity, between the 8 and 22 May (*the deadline for registering for the June 2017 General Election*).⁷⁷

The Electoral Commission's current five-year plan continues to highlight maximising electoral registration as one of its key priorities:

We do this by delivering effective, value for money, voter registration campaigns across the UK, targeting in particular under registered groups such as recent home movers, young people, students, Black and Minority Ethnic groups and UK citizens living overseas. We will continue working in partnership with public, private and voluntary organisations to expand our public awareness activities for voters.⁷⁸

Democratic engagement programme

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

The programme built 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 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](#)

⁷⁷ Electoral Commission, [2017 UK general election campaign](#), undated

⁷⁸ Electoral Commission, [Corporate Plan 2018/19 – 2022/23](#), June 2018, p18

- [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.⁷⁹

9.1 Democratic engagement plan

In December 2017 the Government launched its Democratic Engagement Plan.⁸⁰ It is designed to be a five-year plan to encourage greater participation and involvement in democracy and followed the 'Every Voice Matters' tour undertaken by then Minister for the Constitution, Chris Skidmore MP.

The tour consisted of roundtable discussions and visits with various organisations to discuss different groups experience of voter registration and voting, in particular, under-registered groups.

The plan also committed the Government to specific actions to increase electoral registration, particularly of under-registered groups. Some of these actions are set out below.

Anonymous registration

As part of the 'Every Voice Matters' tour the Minister met with groups representing survivors of domestic abuse to discuss the barriers they face from registering to vote. 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.⁸¹

As a result in March 2017 the Cabinet Office published, [A democracy that works for everyone: survivors of domestic abuse](#). The policy document set out the Government's approach to removing the barriers to anonymous registration following meetings with campaigners for reform. Following a consultation these proposals were implemented in July 2018.⁸²

Accessibility of elections

The [Equality Act 2010](#) 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.

Every polling station should provide a tactile voting device to allow sight impaired voters to cast a vote without assistance if they so choose. Electoral officers are also now required to make certain information and documents about the electoral process available to electors in other formats upon request, including Braille and audio format.

⁷⁹ 'Democratic engagement programme: policy paper', Cabinet Office, [GOV.UK](#), 8 May 2015

⁸⁰ Cabinet Office, [Every Voice Matters: building a democracy that works for everyone](#)

⁸¹ [Guardian](#), [Registering to vote anonymously to be made easier](#), 7 September 2016

⁸² House of Commons Library, [Anonymous electoral registration](#), September 2018

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 and the next review is required between 1 October 2018 and 31 January 2020.

In September 2017, the Government issued a Call for Evidence on the accessibility of elections. The consultation was open for 10 weeks and asked for views on how disabled people experience registering to vote and voting with a view to:

- enhancing the Government's understanding of the experiences of disabled people in registering to vote and casting their vote;
- help identify if current mechanisms to support disabled people to participate in the democratic process are sufficient; and
- identify examples of good practice provided by Electoral Service Teams to disabled people at elections.⁸³

The Government published its response in August 2018. In it the Government listed 17 actions that it would work with the Accessibility of Elections Group to determine how best they can be taken forward for polls reserved to the UK Government (local election administration is devolved in Scotland and Wales). The response also took into account a report by the Electoral Commission published in November 2017, *Elections for everyone: Experiences of people with disabilities at the 8 June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election*.

The actions listed by the Government cover a number of areas aimed at making polling stations and voting more accessible to people with disabilities including sight loss, mobility problems, and learning difficulties.⁸⁴

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

The 2010-15 Coalition Government ran a fund to support disabled candidates to stand for elected office. The fund was extended to cover the 2015 General Election.⁸⁵

On 17 May 2018 the Government announced a £250,000 to support disabled candidates, primarily for the forthcoming English local elections in 2019.⁸⁶ At the same time the Government announced work to help political parties support disabled candidates:

The Government Equalities Office, together with the Office for Disability Issues and the Cabinet Office, will consult with disability stakeholders to undertake a programme of work over the next 12

⁸³ Cabinet Office, *Access to Elections: Call for Evidence*, September 2017

⁸⁴ Cabinet Office, *Call for Evidence: Access to Elections Government response*, August 2018

⁸⁵ HC Deb 9 July 2012 c7WS

⁸⁶ Written statement [HCWS695](#) Access to Elected Office for Disabled People, 17 May 2018

months to help both major and smaller political parties best support disabled candidates.

The prime responsibility for this would sit with political parties themselves. However, within this, there will be ways the government can help too, for example by looking at extending the support we already provide in other areas such as employment to enable other activities such as volunteering or representing their communities.

In a written Parliamentary question answered on 23 May 2018, the Government confirmed that “These arrangements replace the Access to Elected Office pilot fund, which closed after the 2015 general election: further announcements will be made about them in due course.”⁸⁷ An evaluation of the 2015 pilot was conducted and the Government published this on 18 June 2018.⁸⁸

Young voters

In England, in 2002, the Labour Government introduced the Citizenship Education curriculum was introduced as a statutory subject for key stages 3 and 4 in schools. One of the aims of the Citizenship Education curriculum was to raise political awareness and engagement among young people.⁸⁹

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 citizens⁹⁰

In 2015-16, the Cabinet Office provided funding for a scheme trialled at Sheffield University, along with Sheffield City Council, to encourage students to register 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 of about 13% students in neighbouring Sheffield Hallam University, which did not participate in the trial. The students could not be automatically registered by the University, under individual electoral registration (IER) each person is personally responsible for registering themselves.

Instead, Sheffield Council worked with the University to include a section at the end of the university’s online registration process for the

⁸⁷ [PO 144789 23 May 2018](#)

⁸⁸ Government and Equalities Office, [Access to Elected Office Fund: evaluation report](#), 18 June 2018

⁸⁹ See ‘GCSE subject content for citizenship studies’, Guidance, Department for Education, [GOV.UK](#), 12 February 2015

⁹⁰ [WQ12132](#)

beginning of the academic year. Students were offered the option to register to vote and taken to a next page which had been pre-populated with some of the information already provide in the university registration process.

The only additional information required was the student's National Insurance number (a requirement for anyone registering to vote) and to say whether they wanted a postal vote or not.⁹¹

The *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, included a provision that allows the new Office for Students (OfS) to oversee the English Higher Education sector and to set conditions on higher education providers (Section 13). Education is a devolved matter. One of these conditions relates to student electoral registration. This provision was added to the Bill during its passage through Parliament and was initially resisted by the Government. The Department for Education, working with the Cabinet Office, has now issued its guidance to the OfS on how to facilitate the electoral registration of students by higher education providers. The guidance includes practical examples of how this can be achieved, including the Sheffield trial.⁹²

During the 'Every Voice Matters' tour, the Minister met with a number of student groups to encourage registration in the run up to elections in May 2017.

Overseas voters

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".⁹³

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 Overseas Electors Bill 2017-19 is a Private Member's Bill that presented and given a [first reading on 19 July 2017](#). The Bill was given a

⁹¹ Department for Education, *Facilitating Electoral Registration Secretary of State for Education Guidance to the Office for Students (OfS)*, February 2018

⁹² Department for Education, *Facilitating Electoral Registration Secretary of State for Education Guidance to the Office for Students (OfS)*, February 2018

⁹³ [PO HL6395](#) [on Political Parties: Finance], 9 March 2016

Second Reading on 23 February 2018. Second Reading was passed without a division. The Bill is sponsored by Glyn Davies MP but was drafted with the assistance of the Government to give effect to its manifesto pledge to introduce votes for life.

Innovation in Democracy pilots

In late 2018 the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is expected to announce pilot schemes under its Innovation in Democracy Programme (iIDP). This is a new programme aimed involving people in local decision-making through participatory democracy:

Participating local authorities will be piloting Citizens' Juries to open up a decision they have to make to citizen deliberation. One of the key elements of a Citizens' Jury is that they are made up of a random selection of the local population accounting for age, ethnicity, gender and potentially other characteristics. This means that the Jury is truly representative of the demographics of the area in which it takes place. The Local Authorities will be supported in this by a Democracy Support Contractor (to be appointed) who will assist them in designing and implementing a process that works for their context, as well as funding to cover costs.⁹⁴

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