

Research Briefing

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# Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?



## Summary

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## Summary

### What is political disengagement?

People are politically disengaged if they do not know, value or participate in the democratic process. Research suggests that while some people are unhappy with the way democracy functions and would like to have more opportunities to participate, others share their unhappiness but do not want more involvement. In the UK, political disengagement takes different forms and is more prevalent among certain groups than others.

This briefing looks at the characteristics associated with indicators of political disengagement: selected political attitudes; participation in political activities; electoral registration; voting; and elected councillors, candidates and MPs.

Data is taken from surveys carried out by the British Election Study team, Ipsos Mori, the Electoral Commission and others and estimates are shown in charts in this briefing. The true value is likely to fall within a range around the figures.

### Age and political disengagement

Young people are less likely to register to vote, to vote and be elected, but older people tend to have more negative attitudes about politics and participate less in selected political activities. The average age of MPs has been around 50 for the last decades.<sup>1</sup>

### Ethnicity and political disengagement

People from minority ethnic groups were less likely to be registered to vote, turnout to vote and be elected. People from White ethnic groups were more likely to have negative attitudes to politics.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [British Election Study, Community Life Survey](#), Electoral Commission, [2019 report: Accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain](#)

<sup>2</sup> [British Election Study, Community Life Survey](#), Electoral Commission, [2019 report: Accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain](#)

## Social grade and political disengagement

Unskilled workers and people classed as long-term unemployed were more politically disengaged than people from other occupational backgrounds, as measured against all the indicators included in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

Not much is known about the socio-economic backgrounds of councillors, candidates and MPs, although the number of MPs from a lower-skilled background has decreased in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

## Gender and political disengagement

Women tend to have more negative attitudes towards politics than men, and to be less likely to participate in political activities. Men and women are equally likely to register to vote and – usually – to vote, although women were less likely to vote at the 2019 General Election. Women are underrepresented in local government and Parliament.<sup>5</sup>

## Disabilities and political disengagement

People with disabilities have more negative attitudes to politics than people without disabilities. People with disabilities that limit their activities a little (rather than a lot) are more likely to engage in political activities and to vote. People with disabilities are underrepresented in local government and Parliament.<sup>6</sup>

The Government has used a variety of measures to encourage greater political engagement among different groups in the UK.

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<sup>3</sup> [British Election Study; Community Life Survey](#); Electoral Commission, [2019 report: Accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain](#)

<sup>4</sup> [‘The Professionalisation of MPs: refining the ‘politics-facilitating’ explanation’](#), Parliamentary Affairs, 2012, 60:2, 212-233

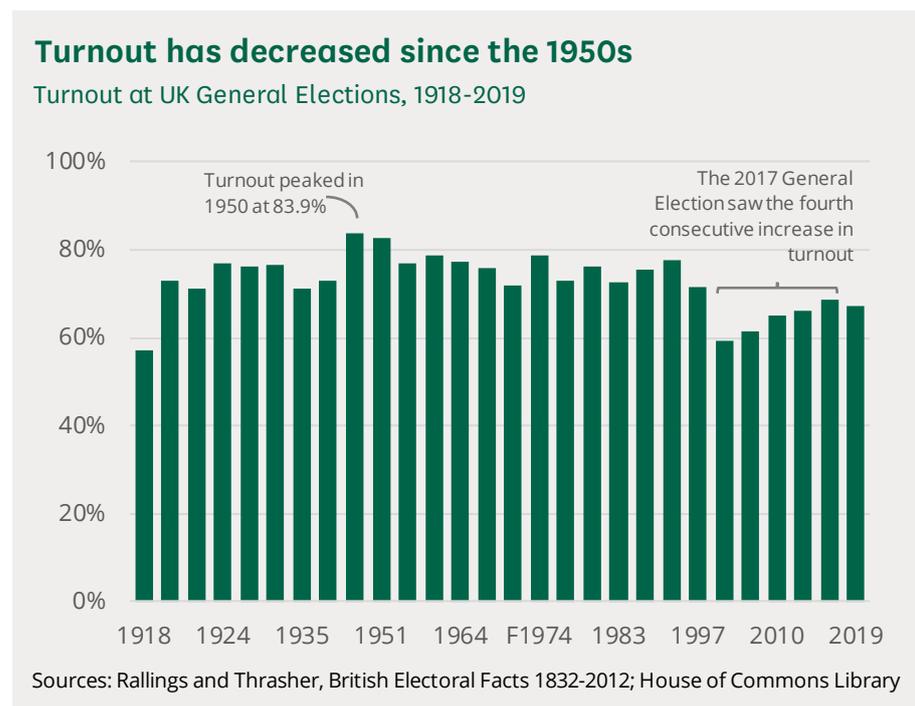
<sup>5</sup> [British Election Study; Community Life Survey](#); Electoral Commission, [2019 report: Accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain](#); Local Government Association, [Census of Local Authority Councillors 2022](#)

<sup>6</sup> [British Election Study; Community Life Survey](#); Electoral Commission, [2019 report: Accuracy and completeness of the electoral registers in Great Britain](#); Local Government Association, [Census of Local Authority Councillors 2022](#)

## 1

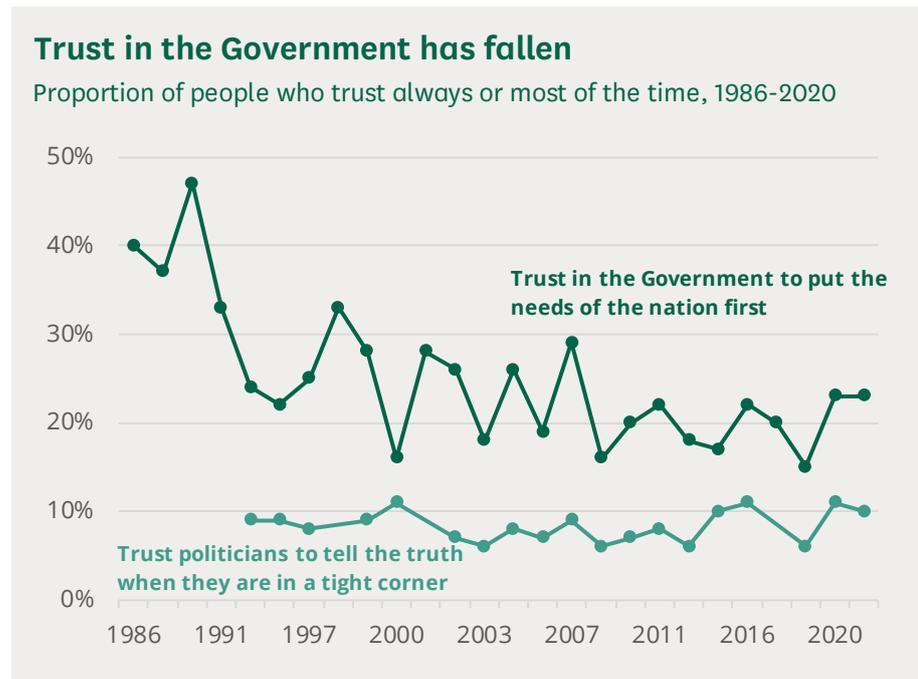
## Political disengagement

Falling levels of voter turnout and trust in governments across liberal democracies have raised concerns about political disengagement. In the UK, voter turnout at general elections is below the levels seen in the 1950s-1980s, despite recent increases.



Trust in the Government has also fallen, as shown in the chart below. 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 always or most of the time decreased from 38% in 1986 to 15% in 2019, before rising again to 23% in 2020. Trust in politicians has been fluctuating between six and 11%.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> [British Social Attitudes survey 38: Democracy](#)



Source: [British Social Attitudes survey 38: Democracy](#)

However, voting and trust are not the only signs of political engagement. Measured by other indicators, levels of political engagement in the UK appear much higher.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.1 Defining political disengagement

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

This briefing uses the term ‘political engagement’ to describe certain behaviours and attitudes towards the political system, defined as democratic engagement by academic 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.<sup>9</sup>

Positive engagement does not mean approval: it can take the forms of protest and activism aimed at reform.

Conversely, individuals and groups are **politically disengaged** if they are not positively engaged (in terms of attitudes and behaviours) with the political

<sup>8</sup> Miranda Philips and Ian Simpson, ‘Politics’, British Social Attitudes Survey, 32, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> David Sanders, Stephen Fisher, Anthony Heath and Maria Sobolewska, ‘The democratic engagement of Britain’s ethnic minorities’, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 2014, 37:1, p123

system. This term is used broadly here to capture a lack of participation but also disaffection or discontent with politics, as well as disconnection, alienation and apathy.

People who are disengaged may or may not be disenfranchised, which means they are not allowed to vote, for example because of nationality restrictions or because they are in prison.

## Why does political disengagement matter?

Representative governments are thought to need relatively high levels of political engagement to ensure their decisions and policies reflect the wishes of their citizens, which gives them legitimacy. Low levels of political engagement hence potentially undermine the legitimacy of a government, its policies and the wider political system.

## 1.2 Types of disengagement

Political disengagement takes different forms, shaped by different factors. Political scientist Paul Webb argues there are two types of politically disengaged groups in Britain:

- **Dissatisfied democrats:** educated, higher social status, politically interested citizens who believe in democracy and have high expectations of what can be achieved, but who are dissatisfied with current politics and want more opportunities to participate
- **Stealth democrats:** less educated, lower social status, less politically interested citizens who do not want to be involved in politics unless strictly necessary. These citizens relied on political parties to express their interests but no longer identify with these (typically left-wing) parties following changes to party politics.<sup>10</sup>

Academics Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman also differentiate between different types of political disengagement, driven by different beliefs, for example that politicians cannot make a difference; do not tell the truth about difficult decisions; or serve the interests of the rich and powerful. They conclude that people across these types tend to think politicians and their behaviour are the problem, rather than the political system.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Webb, 'Who is willing to participate? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the United Kingdom', *European Journal of Political Research*, 2013, 52: 747-773. See also Maria Sobolewska & Rob Ford, *Brexitland*, 2020, Cambridge University Press, pp135-141

<sup>11</sup> Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker & Joe Twyman, '[The Dimensions and Impact of Political Discontent in Britain](#)', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2016, 69:4, pp876-900

## Variation between groups

Experts have different interpretations of why political engagement varies among different groups of people. Some cast political disengagement as a failure of individual citizens to live up to their democratic obligations.<sup>12</sup> Many experts, however, highlight how socioeconomic structures in society may prevent certain people from participating in democracy fully and on an equal basis.<sup>13</sup> For example, people in different groups may not have the same opportunities and resources to get involved in political activities.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of the causes of differing engagement levels, groups that participate more may influence political decisions more. Such unequal influence raises concern, 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.<sup>15</sup>

There is also a risk that unequal engagement creates a vicious circle: people may not participate because they feel alienated from the political system, for the system to then ignore their interests in favour of more vocal groups, leading to further withdrawal.<sup>16</sup>

## 1.3

## Measuring political disengagement

Political disengagement is a phenomenon associated with a variety of attitudes and behaviours, including political interest, turnout and participation in formal and informal political activities. As noted above, people may be disengaged in different ways. The indicators used in this briefing are described in the next section.

This briefing identifies characteristics associated with low levels of political engagement, meaning people with these characteristics are more likely to be politically disengaged.

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<sup>12</sup> See for example: William Galston, [Civic education and political participation](#), *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 2004, 37:2, 263-6

<sup>13</sup> 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

<sup>14</sup> See Phil Parvin, '[Democracy without participation: a new politics for a disengaged era](#)', *Res Publica*, 2018, 24, 31-52

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Lawrence, [Political inequality](#), Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), April 2015

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, [Divided Democracy](#), IPPR, November 2013, p. 4-5

However, there are substantial differences between people who share these characteristics, and people may have more than one of the characteristics identified: a person may be young, a woman and from a minority ethnic background. The information discussed below does not always clarify how and to what extent different characteristics are related to political disengagement.

This is also not an exhaustive list of characteristics potentially associated with political disengagement. Research suggests disengagement may be shaped by the experience of being different from the dominant majority in politics, which can cause a sense of alienation. However, there is limited research on how other characteristics relate to different forms of disengagement. The box below gives examples of other characteristics potentially associated with political disengagement.

## Characteristics not covered in this paper

### Religion

Some research suggests that people from a religious minority (i.e., not Christian or non-religious) were less likely to vote and participate in political activities than Christians and non-religious people.<sup>17</sup> In 2010, British Muslims were found to be more politically alienated and less likely to vote if they perceived higher levels of Islamophobia and discrimination and opposed the war in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

However, other academics found higher levels of political participation (though not necessarily voting) among people from minority ethnic groups who regularly attended religious services, especially among Muslims and Sikhs.<sup>19</sup> There is no official data on the religious beliefs of MPs, but after the 2019 General Election there were reportedly [18 Muslim MPs](#).

### Sexual orientation

There is little research on the association between sexual orientation and political participation. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people (LGB) across Europe were found to be more likely to support political parties on the left.<sup>20</sup> LGB & transgender people (LGBT) were found to feel inadequately represented and concerns about discrimination and abuse were a barrier to standing for

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<sup>17</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [2015 Protected characteristics factsheets: religion](#), December 2016

<sup>18</sup> Nicole Martin, '[Are British Muslims alienated from mainstream politics by Islamophobia and British foreign policy?](#)', *Ethnicities*, 2017, 17:3, 350-370

<sup>19</sup> Maria Sobolewska, Stephen Fisher, Anthony Heath and David Sanders, 'Understanding the effects of religious attendance on political participation among ethnic minorities of different religions', *European Journal of Political Research*, 2015, 54:271-287

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Turnbull-Dugarte, '[The European lavender vote: Sexuality, ideology and vote choice in Western Europe](#)', *European Journal of Political Research*, 2020, 59:3, 517-537

office.<sup>21</sup> [After the 2019 General Election](#), there were at least 45 MPs who were openly gay, lesbian or bisexual.<sup>22</sup>

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

## 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 registered to vote. The House of Commons Library briefing [UK Election Statistics](#) provides turnout data for all elections in the UK. Estimates of voting by different groups in society are provided by Ipsos Mori and can be calculated using the British Election Study.

### British Election Study (BES)

The British Election Study is a long-running survey which has taken place immediately after every UK general election since 1964.

These are normally conducted face-to-face, but the 2019 random probability survey was partly conducted through computer-assisted interviews, web and mail-in surveys, due to the pandemic. In addition to the face-to-face interviews, BES also runs regular online panel surveys, and data from these are used in this briefing. These surveys are designed to help researchers understand changing patterns of party support and election outcomes. BES data are available online at the [britishelectionstudy.com](http://britishelectionstudy.com).

The British Election Study sample is designed to represent Britain as a whole. Subsets of the sample (for example respondents from a minority ethnic group) are not necessarily representative of that subset as a whole. Overall, panel study participants are likely to be more politically engaged than the general population.

### British Social Attitudes (BSA)

The British Social Attitudes is an annual survey from the National Centre 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 at [www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk).

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<sup>21</sup> Nathan Hudson-Sharp and Hilary Metcalf, '[Inequality among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups in the UK: a review of evidence](#)', National Institute of Economic and Social Research, July 2016

<sup>22</sup> '[Election 2019: Britain's most diverse Parliament](#)', BBC, 17 December 2019

Note that survey data shown in the charts throughout this paper are estimates: the true value of the selected indicators is likely to fall within a range around these figures. Error margins will be larger for smaller subsets of the sample, such as age groups.

## 1.4

# Indicators of political disengagement

## Political attitudes

Attitudes can be predictors of political activities: for example, a belief in the duty to vote is held to be an important predictor of whether people vote. The British Social Attitudes survey found the proportion of people who believe they have a duty to vote has decreased from 76% in 1987 to 66% in 2015.<sup>23</sup>

But some attitudes can be understood as a manifestation of political disengagement in themselves. For example, when someone believes the political system does not respond to their interests, or lacks interest in politics.

The British Election Study asks respondents about their political attitudes. This paper covers four attitudes and presents the most recent data available for these indicators:<sup>24</sup>

- How much attention they pay to politics (lower levels are considered a sign of disengagement)
- Satisfaction with the way democracy works in the UK (dissatisfaction is considered a sign of disengagement)
- Finding it difficult to understand what is going on in government and politics (agreement with this statement is considered a sign of disengagement)
- Thinking that politicians don't care what 'people like me' think (agreement is considered a sign of disengagement).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John Curtice, [British Social Attitudes: Politics](#), 33, 2015

<sup>24</sup> Interest in politics is an important predictor of turnout; confidence in one's ability to understand and engage in politics (sometimes known as internal efficacy) and the sense that politicians listen so you can make a difference (sometimes known as external efficacy) increase political engagement.

<sup>25</sup> Political attention: on a scale of 0 (pay no attention) to 10 (pay a great deal of attention), any response lower than five is counted as 'disengaged'; satisfaction: both 'very dissatisfied' and 'a little dissatisfied' are counted as 'disengaged'; for the 'don't understand' and 'politicians don't care' indicators, both 'agree' and 'strongly agree' are counted as 'disengaged'. Data are weighted. 'Disengaged' respondents given as a proportion of respondents for whom the relevant characteristic (e.g. age/gender) was known

## Political activities

The British Election Study also asks respondents if they have participated in one or more of the following activities in the last seven days:

- Donated any work on behalf of a political party or action group
- Given money to a political party, organisation or cause
- Displayed an election poster
- Listened to or watched a party election broadcast
- Read a campaign leaflet/letter, text message or email from a political party
- Tried to persuade somebody which party they should vote for

People who have not participated in any of these activities are counted as ‘disengaged’.

Given that seven days is a relatively short period, this paper also includes data from the [Community Life Survey](#) on civic participation, defined as “engagement in democratic processes, both in person and online, including contacting a local official (such as a local councillor or MP), signing a petition, or attending a public rally (excluded voting)”. People who have not participated in any of these activities in the last 12 months are counted as ‘disengaged’.

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Since 2015, people need to register individually and can do so online. See our briefing paper on [Individual Electoral Registration](#) for more information

## Electoral registration

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

The Electoral Commission carries out regular reviews of the completeness of the electoral registers in Britain, measuring the proportion of the people who are eligible to vote who are registered to vote. The data do not allow an exact determination of the population eligible to vote in each area, so the Commission’s calculations need to be read as indicative.

The Commission found that in December 2018, like in 2015, “the main drivers” of lower rates of registration were “being younger, recent home movement and whether someone rents their home from a private landlord.”<sup>26</sup>

## Voting

Voting is seen as a key indicator of political disengagement. As shown above, voter turnout in the UK has decreased over the past decades and remains

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<sup>26</sup> Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

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 more likely to vote than others. Data on voters' characteristics is not collected, but estimates are available from social research agencies, such as Ipsos Mori and NatCen. This data is not directly comparable to official turnout figures because turnout estimates based on polling data tend to be based on the total population, rather than registered voters (or register entries), and self-reported turnout tends to be overreported. The British Election Study checks if people who say they voted actually did so.<sup>27</sup>

People may not vote if they feel their vote is unlikely to make much difference to the election result. 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).<sup>28</sup> But people may also choose not to vote because they are satisfied with the state of the country.

Political parties may target their communications at people who are more likely to vote – particularly for them. This means there could be a circle where people respond to (apparent) political indifference to their interests by not voting, reducing the incentive for political parties to address their interests.<sup>29</sup>

## 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 female candidates.<sup>30</sup> Political engagement among some groups may be higher at the local level, so local councillors are included in this indicator.

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.

In recent years, the number and proportion of female and minority ethnic MPs has increased, while the number and proportion of MPs with a background in a manual job has decreased.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Although this has not yet been done for the 2019 data, because of the pandemic. Other estimates can be scaled to actual figures

<sup>28</sup> Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, [The 2015 general election: aspects of participation and administration](#), Electoral Commission, August 2015, p6

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, [Divided Democracy](#), IPPR, November 2013, p4-5

<sup>30</sup> 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, pp1040-61

<sup>31</sup> Robert Ford et al, *The British General Election of 2019*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2022, pp387-420

## 2

## Age

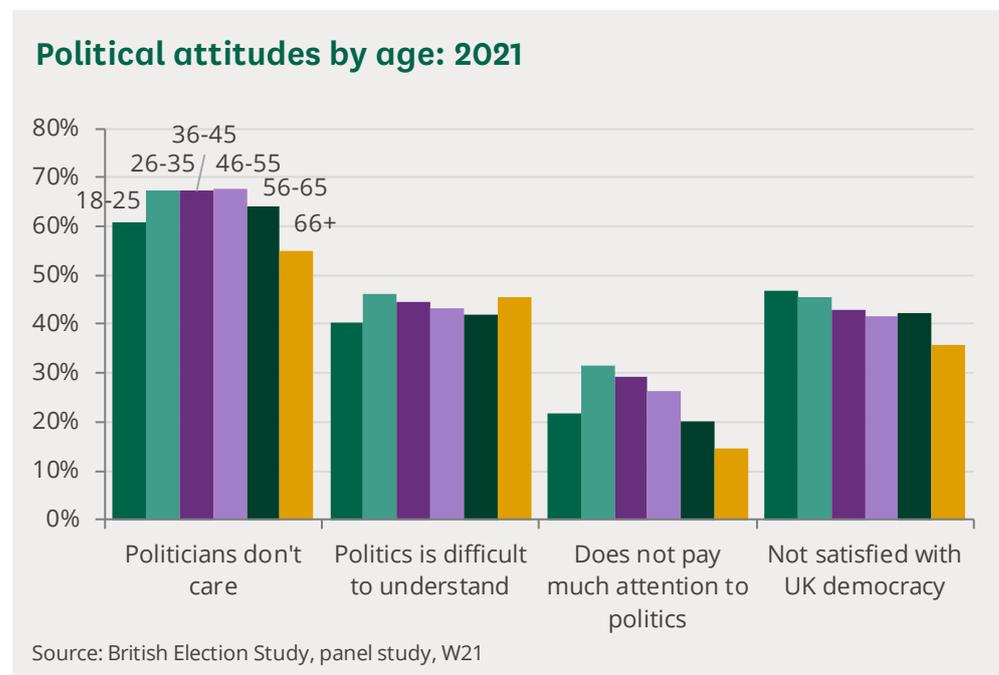
Political disengagement among young people has been well-documented, with studies showing that while young people participate less in traditional, formal politics (for example, voting and party membership), they do participate in other forms of political life.<sup>32</sup>

This section shows that younger people are less likely to register to vote, vote and be elected, but older people tend to have more negative attitudes about politics and participate less in political activities.

## 2.1

## Political attitudes

The chart below shows that 18–25-year-olds are most dissatisfied with how democracy works in the UK. However, they are least likely to say it is difficult to understand what is going on in politics and government. Several older age groups are more likely to say politicians don't care about them and pay less attention to politics.



Note: error margins are 1.0-2.1 percentage points. Smaller subgroups in the sample are not necessarily representative of the corresponding group in the population

<sup>32</sup> E.g. Ana Isabel Pontes, Matt Henn and Mark D Griffiths, '[Youth political \(dis\)engagement and the need for citizenship education](#)', in Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 2017, 14:1, 3-21

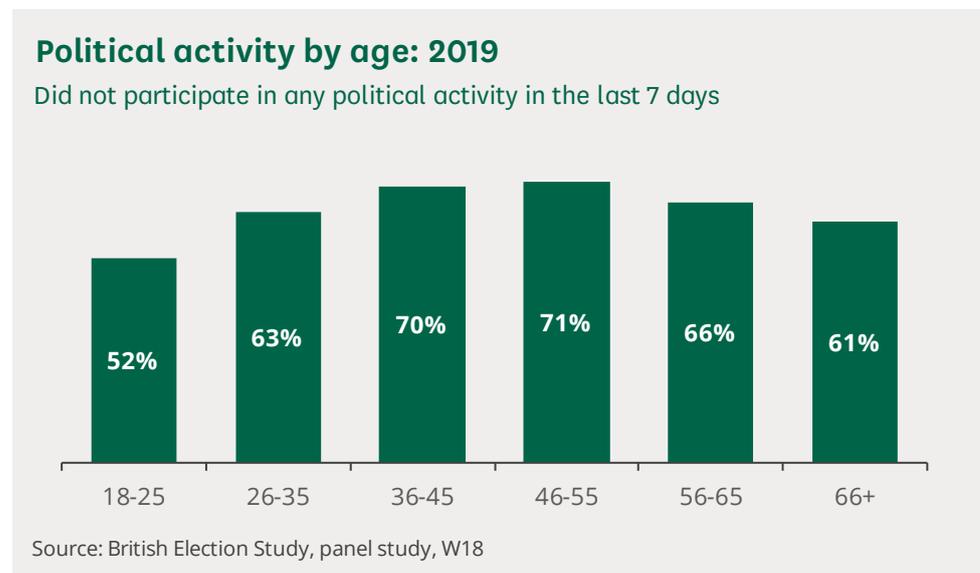
These findings are in line with a survey conducted by Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman sampling 1,905 adults on their opinions of the competence and integrity of politicians.

They found that young people were less likely than older people to hold negative views of politicians (including that they are self-serving), and more likely to disagree with the view that politics is a waste of time. Older age groups were more negative, which might be explained by their experience of “successive governments and periodic social and economic crises, political scandal and failures in policy delivery.”<sup>33</sup>

There are important differences between young people, based on their experience of life: young people with higher levels of formal education, or from minority ethnic groups, are more likely to hold more positive political attitudes than young white people with lower levels of education.<sup>34</sup>

## 2.2 Political activities

The chart below shows that people aged 36 to 55 were least likely to have participated in political activities in the last 7 days. Young people (18-25-year-olds) were the least likely to be disengaged.



Note: error margins are 0.8-2.3 percentage points. Smaller subgroups in the sample are not necessarily representative of the corresponding group in the population

The [Community Life Survey](#) also showed that in 2020/21 the youngest age group (16-24) was the most likely to participate in a political activity at least

<sup>33</sup> Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, [‘The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain’](#), Parliamentary Affairs, 2016, 876-900

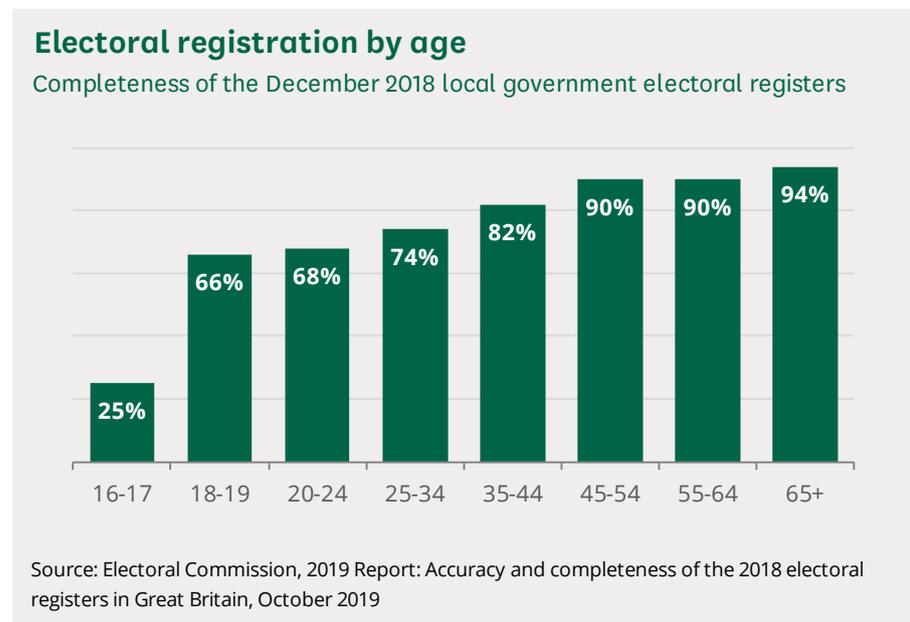
<sup>34</sup> Maria Sobolewska & Rob Ford, *Brexitland*, 2020, Cambridge University Press, pp. 135-141

once in the last 12 months (48%,  $\pm 4$ ). People over 65 were found to participate the least (37% for 65-74, 26% for 75 and over).

This confirms other research showing that young people may not vote but do participate in politics in other ways.<sup>35</sup> Paul Webb, however, finds that younger people were more likely than older people to be ‘stealth democrats’ who do not want to get involved in politics unless strictly necessary.<sup>36</sup>

## 2.3 Electoral registration

Young people are less likely to be on the electoral register than older people. Attainers (those who will turn 18 in the year after they register) were least likely to be registered. In 2015, 45% of them were registered, falling to 25% in 2018.<sup>37</sup>



In their study of the 2015 registers, the Electoral Commission also identified some differences between young people based on their level of qualification. 77% of 18–34-year-olds educated to degree level were estimated to be on the electoral register in December 2015, compared with 57% of those with no qualification.<sup>38</sup>

The Electoral Commission notes that in part, lower levels of registration among young people are explained by the fact that young people move house

<sup>35</sup> See Matt Henn and Nick Foard, ‘[Young people, political participation and trust in Britain](#)’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2021, 65:1, 47-67

<sup>36</sup> Paul Webb, ‘Who is willing to participate? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the United Kingdom’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 2013, 52: 759

<sup>37</sup> Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

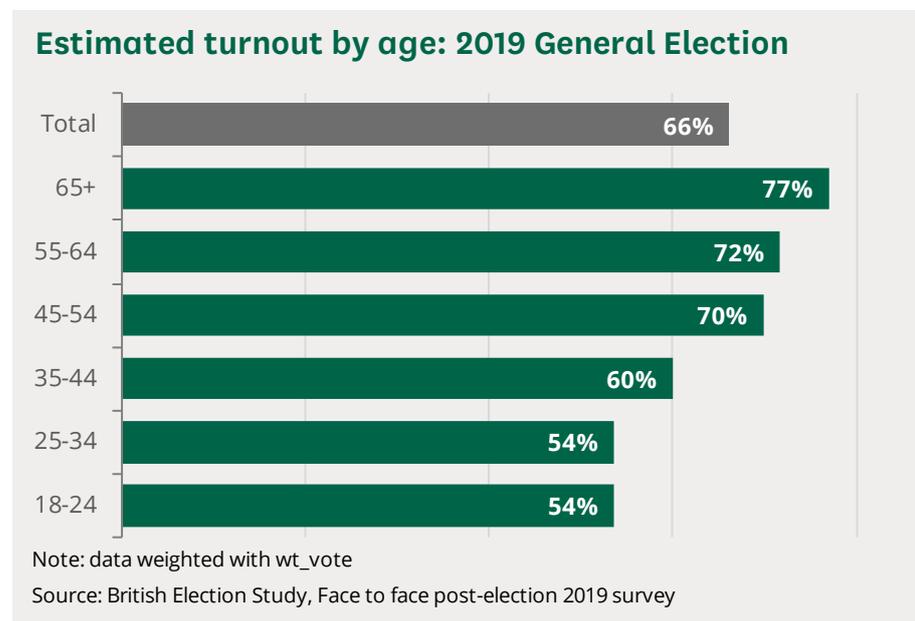
<sup>38</sup> Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016, p. 45-47

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”.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.4

### Voting

Younger people have been less likely to vote than older people, especially since the 1990s. The chart below shows turnout by age in the 2019 General Election. This is based on polling data, so there is some uncertainty around these estimates (around  $\pm 4$  percentage points). 54% of 18-24-year-olds turned out to vote, compared with 77% of people over 65.



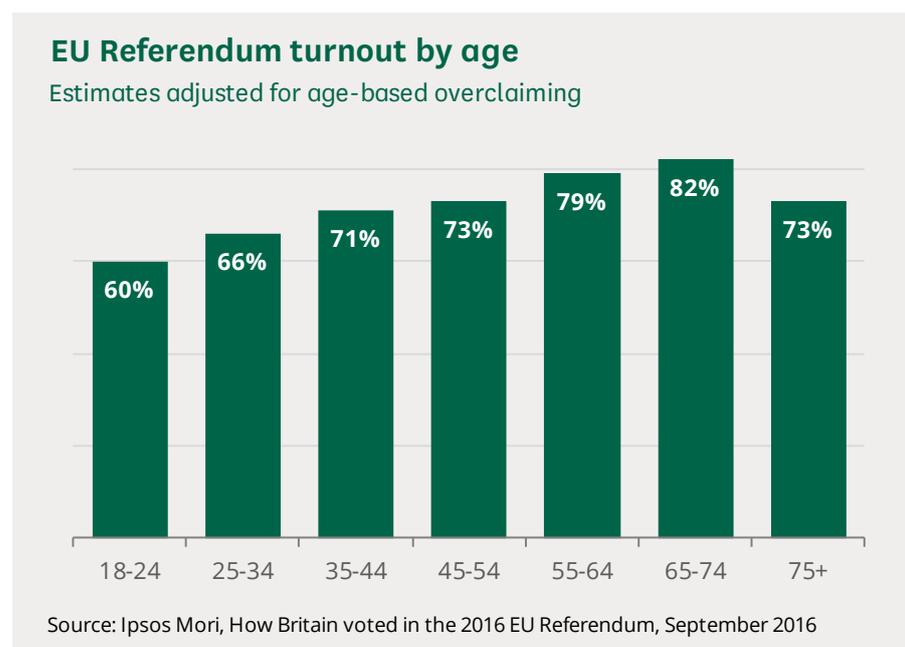
Older people tend to have different voting preferences (typically right-wing) to younger people (typically left-wing), and their size as a proportion of the population is increasing.<sup>40</sup>

### Brexit: turnout and vote

According to Ipsos Mori, turnout at the EU referendum increased with age. The chart below shows young people were less likely to vote than older age groups. The estimates have been adjusted to account for the fact that people tend to overclaim when it comes to turnout.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Joe Chrisp & Nick Pearce, ‘[The rise of the grey vote](#)’, IPR blog (University of Bath), 21 May 2019 [accessed 16 February 2021]



Ipsos Mori have also provided estimates of the proportion of the adult population (rather than the people on the electoral register) who turned out to vote, by age. This follows the same pattern, but suggests 48% of 18-24-year-olds voted, compared with 81% of 65-74-year-olds.<sup>41</sup>

NatCen writes in its report [Understanding the Leave vote](#) that people aged 18-34 were less likely to vote Leave (40%) than those aged 65+ (61%).

## 2.5

### Councillors, candidates and MPs

In 2012, the average age of councillors, MPs and party members was over 50 years.<sup>42</sup>

#### Councillors

The [2022 Census of Local Authority Councillors](#) in England noted that the average age of councillors was 59.5 in 2022, and that 16% were aged under 45 and 42% were 65 or over. The largest age category was 70+, with 27% of councillors.<sup>43</sup>

#### Candidates and MPs

There is no official data on the age of candidates for parliamentary elections. The Equality and Human Rights Commission commissioned a report on the

<sup>41</sup> Ipsos Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum](#), 5 September 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, 'The party politics of youth citizenship and democratic engagement', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 65:1, p. 144

<sup>43</sup> Based on a response rate of 30% of all councillors. [Census of Local Authority Councillors 2022](#)

[diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#). The authors found that based on a sample of 907 out of 3,195 candidates standing in the 2017 General Election (28%), “56% of all the candidates standing for the main parties were over 50, compared with 48% of the general population.”<sup>44</sup>

The average age of Members of Parliament has been around 50 years at each election since 1979. The 2019 General Election saw the highest number of young MPs elected in this period: 21 were aged between 18 and 29.

### Ages of Members of Parliament elected at General Elections

Election	Average Age at election	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Total
	(Years)							
1979	49.6	6	120	205	203	87	14	635
1983	48.8	10	120	223	201	86	9	649
1987	49.0	4	112	252	197	79	6	650
1992	50.0	1	82	259	211	95	3	651
1997	49.3	10	92	255	225	69	8	659
2001	50.3	4	79	236	247	83	10	659
2005	51.2	3	89	191	249	100	14	646
2010	49.9	15	108	196	216	99	16	650
2015	50.6	13	89	205	212	107	24	650
2017	50.5	13	105	188	202	114	28	650
2019	49.3	21	120	189	199	101	20	650

Note: Age at the time of general election

Source: Members Names Information Service; Wikidata

<sup>44</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#), March 2019, p17

## 3

## Ethnicity

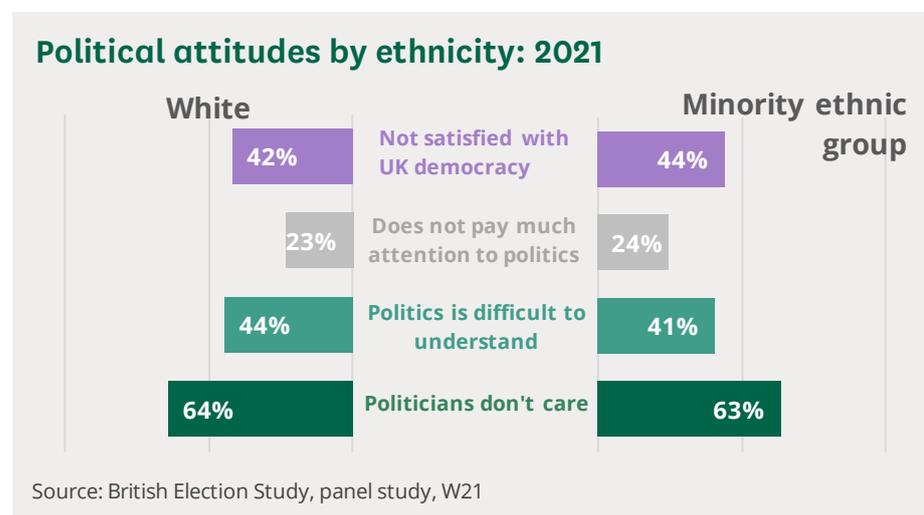
Research discussed here mostly focuses on people who self-identify as being from a minority ethnic group. Although research on political disengagement sometimes compares minority ethnic groups to Britain's White population, there are significant differences both between and within these groups (as well as within the 'White' group). Where data is available on smaller sub-groups, it is included in the sections below.

People from minority ethnic groups were less likely to be registered to vote, to vote and be elected. However, they were as or more likely to have positive political attitudes.

## 3.1

### Political attitudes

The chart below shows political attitudes among people from White and minority ethnic groups in Britain. Ethnic groups have been combined because the number of respondents from smaller groups was too small to be representative.<sup>45</sup> The British Election Study data shown here suggest that White and minority ethnic groups do not differ much.



Note: error margins are between 0.05-2.3 percentage points

However, as academics Maria Sobolewska and Andrew Barclay point out, the minority ethnic respondents in the sample of this survey may not be

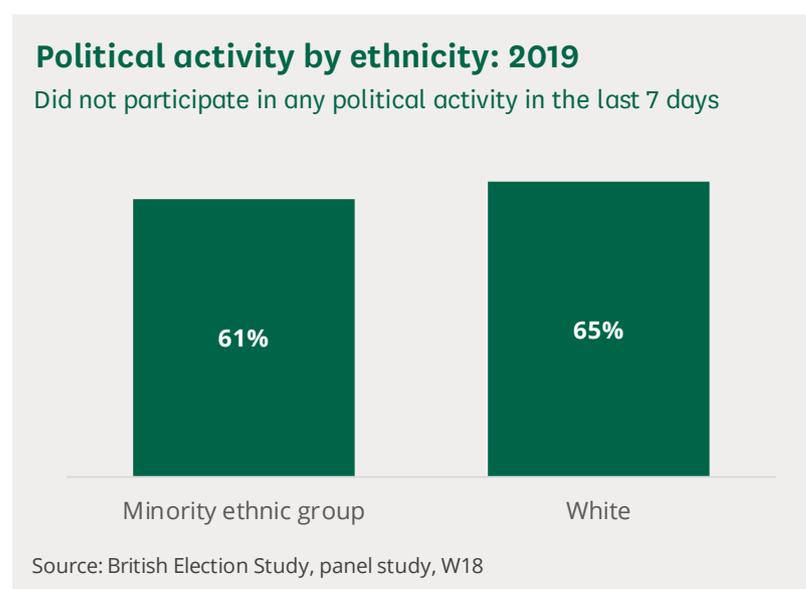
<sup>45</sup> White includes 'White British' and 'any other White background'; people selecting any other categories (including mixed origins) are counted as minority ethnic groups. Respondents for whom ethnicity is not known are excluded from the analysis

representative of the wider minority population. Other research suggests that people from minority ethnic groups tend to have higher levels of trust in, and satisfaction with politics than the White population; however, interest in politics was generally higher among White British people.<sup>46</sup>

Research also suggests that young people from minority ethnic groups are more likely to develop attachments to political parties than their White peers;<sup>47</sup> and that political disengagement has been especially pronounced among young White people with lower levels of formal education.<sup>48</sup>

## 3.2 Political activities

The chart below is based on data from the British Election Study, showing that White people were more likely to be politically disengaged than people from minority ethnic groups. Some of this may be explained by differences in the age structure of the minority ethnic and White populations in the UK: the minority ethnic population is younger, and younger people tend to participate in political activities more (see above).



Note: error margins are 0.4-2.2 percentage points

The Government's [Community Life Survey](#) showed no significant differences in political participation between White and minority ethnic groups in 2020/21. The minority ethnic respondents in both these surveys are likely not representative of the wider minority representation (as noted above); other

<sup>46</sup> Maria Sobolewska and Andrew Barclay, '[The democratic participation of ethnic minority and immigrant voters in the UK](#)', Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2021, pp30-50

<sup>47</sup> Nicole Martin and Jonathan Mellon, '[The puzzle of high political partisanship among ethnic minority young people in Great Britain](#),' Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 2020, 5:936-956

<sup>48</sup> Sobolewska, Maria and Rob Ford, *Brexitland*, 2020, Cambridge University Press, pp. 135-141

research suggests that White people were more likely to participate in political activities than people from minority ethnic groups.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.3 Electoral registration

People from minority ethnic groups are less likely to be included on the electoral register than White groups in Britain.

Academics Anthony Heath et al found that non-registration was higher among minority ethnic groups: 25% of first-generation people from minority ethnic groups and 20% of second-generation who were eligible to register to vote had not done so, compared to 10% of the White population.<sup>50</sup>

The chart below shows differences in registration levels among ethnic groups. This phenomenon is partly explained because some groups believe (often wrongly) that they are not entitled to be registered.<sup>51</sup>



Source: Electoral Commission, [2019 report: accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

There are further differences within these groups: Black minorities of African origin were least likely to be registered, while British Asians of Indian origin were as likely to be registered as White people. Moreover, minority ethnic

<sup>49</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015; 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

<sup>50</sup> As above, p. 136-7

<sup>51</sup> Omar Khan, '[Registration and race: achieving equal political participation](#)', in Runnymede Trust, [Race and Elections](#), April 2015, p. 24-5

women were less likely to be registered than men, especially for South Asian and Chinese groups.<sup>52</sup>

Academics Anthony Heath et al found the factors that influence registration levels are the same for people from White and minority ethnic groups: age, housing, and the belief in a duty to vote, although fluency in the English language was also an important factor for ethnic minorities.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, research commissioned by the Cabinet Office found that a range of factors, including age, housing tenure and socio-economic status, influence registration across ethnic groups.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup> The 2018 study suggested that other barriers included mistrust towards politicians.<sup>56</sup>

The Electoral Commission's analysis of the 2015 and 2018 registers found that UK citizens were more likely to be registered than Commonwealth and EU citizens, although registration rates went up for non-nationals who had been resident in the UK for longer.<sup>57</sup>

## 3.4

## Voting

Research has found that people from minority ethnic groups are generally less likely to vote than White ethnic groups.<sup>58</sup> Data from the British Election Study confirm this was the case at the 2015, 2017 and 2019 General Elections, as shown in the chart below.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Maria Sobolewska and Andrew Barclay, '[The democratic participation of ethnic minority and immigrant voters in the UK](#)', Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2021, pp30, 68

<sup>53</sup> 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

<sup>54</sup> Cabinet Office, [Registering to vote: insights from local authorities and civil society groups on registering people from ethnic minorities](#), August 2019

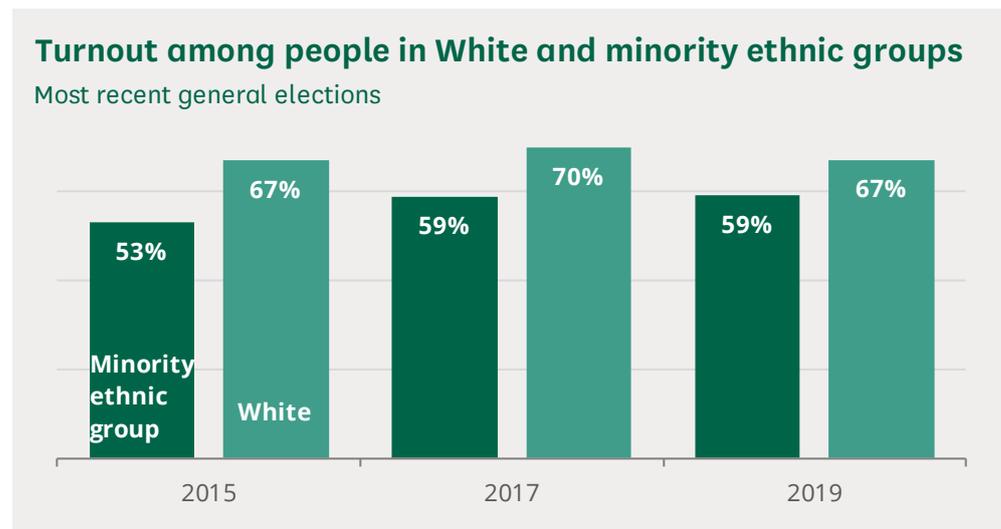
<sup>55</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015, p. 47-8

<sup>56</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? 2018](#) October 2018, p161

<sup>57</sup> Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019; Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

<sup>58</sup> Anthony Heath, Stephen Fisher, Gemma Rosenblatt, David Sanders and Maria Sobolewska, [The political integration of ethnic minorities in Britain](#), Oxford University Press, 2013, p.165

<sup>59</sup> White includes all survey respondents who categorise themselves as white (e.g. White British, White Gypsy/Traveller); people selecting any other categories (including mixed origins) are counted as minority ethnic groups



Notes: data for 2015 and 2017 based on validated registration and weighted with the wt\_vote\_valid variable; 2019 data weighted with the wt\_vote variable. Error margins are around  $\pm 4$  percentage points for minorities and  $\pm 2$  percentage points for white groups

Source: British Election Study, face to face survey, 2015, 2017 & 2019

As noted above, the minority ethnic respondents in the British Election Study sample are likely not representative of the wider minority population.

Research by academics Maria Sobolewska and Andrew Barclay shows that a turnout gap exists between minority ethnic and White voters. This gap is largely explained by differences in voter registration: among registered voters, turnout was similar across ethnic groups. They find that socio-economic marginalisation and patriarchal power structures in some communities hinder registration and turnout.<sup>60</sup>

Other research found that at the 2010 General Election, turnout was low (53%) among first generation immigrants, but higher in the second generation (63%), although it remained below turnout among the White population (70%).<sup>61</sup> In its analysis of turnout at the 2005 General Election, the Electoral Commission found that people from minority ethnic groups who did not vote, often thought they were ineligible to vote (20%) or circumstances on the day had prevented them from doing so (18%).<sup>62</sup>

The Labour Party has historically attracted most support among minority ethnic groups.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Maria Sobolewska and Andrew Barclay, [‘The democratic participation of ethnic minority and immigrant voters in the UK’](#), Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2021, p69

<sup>61</sup> 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

<sup>62</sup> Electoral Commission, [Black and Minority Ethnic Survey](#), May-July 2005

<sup>63</sup> Maria Sobolewska & Rob Ford, *Brexitland*, 2020, Cambridge University Press

## Brexit: turnout and vote

Ipsos Mori research found that people from minority ethnic groups were less likely to vote in the 2016 EU referendum (57%) than White groups (74%). They were also less likely to vote Leave (31%) than White groups (54%).<sup>64</sup>

It is estimated that among non-White groups, Black people were the least likely to vote Leave (29%), with people from 'other' ethnic backgrounds the most likely (43%).<sup>65</sup> Both these figures are well below the average of 51.8% of UK voters favouring a UK exit from the European Union.

## 3.5

## Councillors, candidates and MPs

### Councillors

The [2022 Census of Local Councillors](#) in England showed that 8% of respondents came from a minority ethnic group and 92% were White. Across the UK, 7% of councillors were from a minority ethnic background, compared with around 14% of the population.

London had the highest proportion of minority ethnic councillors (26%), although its councillors were not as diverse as its population (40% from ethnic minority groups in the 2011 Census). There were more South Asian councillors (around 5%) than Black councillors (around 1%).<sup>66</sup>

It was estimated that 1.8% of candidates for the 2017 local elections in Wales were from minority ethnic groups.<sup>67</sup> In Scotland, 98% of local councillors responding to a survey in 2017 were White, compared with 96% of the population.<sup>68</sup>

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.”<sup>69</sup>

### Candidates and MPs

There is no official data on the number of parliamentary candidates from minority ethnic groups. Academics provide estimates based on observation

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<sup>64</sup> Ipsos Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum](#), September 2016. Turnout reported as the proportion of registered voters casting a valid vote, scaled by the BES 2017 estimate of over-claiming turnout

<sup>65</sup> NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

<sup>66</sup> Prof Maria Sobolewska and Dr Neema Begum, [Ethnic minority representation in UK local government](#), 7 July 2020

<sup>67</sup> [Local Government Candidates Survey 2017](#), Government Social Research, Welsh Government

<sup>68</sup> [Scotland's Councillors](#), Improvement Service

<sup>69</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? Evidence paper series, Domain J](#), October 2015, p. 51

and surveys. The estimated number of parliamentary candidates from minority ethnic groups has increased:

- At the 1979 General Election, there were **5**;
- At the 2010 General Election, there were **139**;
- At the 2015 General Election, the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats fielded a total of **163** minority ethnic candidates.<sup>70</sup>
- At the 2017 General Election, **256** (8% of) candidates in Great Britain were from minority ethnic groups, compared with 13% of the population.<sup>71</sup>

Candidates from minority ethnic groups have attracted lower vote shares than White candidates standing for the same parties – which could lead to them only contesting safe seats.<sup>72</sup> Research also suggests that parties do not select minority ethnic candidates in seats where they perceive that citizens are less tolerant of diversity.<sup>73</sup>

The think tank British Future found that parties were more likely to select minority ethnic candidates in safe seats for the 2019 General Election.<sup>74</sup>

House of Commons Library briefing paper [Ethnic diversity in politics and public life](#) shows the number of MPs from minority ethnic backgrounds has increased markedly since 1987. 66 minority ethnic MPs were elected at the 2019 General Election, 10% of the total.

If the minority ethnic population were represented proportionally in the House of Commons, there would be around 85 MPs from minority ethnic backgrounds.

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<sup>70</sup> Cowley P. and Kavanagh D., The British General Election of 2015, 7 April 2015

<sup>71</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#), March 2019

<sup>72</sup> 'Minority candidates face "ethnic penalty" in elections, study shows,' *The Guardian*, 4 December 2018

<sup>73</sup> '[BAME parliamentary candidates not picked to fight 'winnable seats' in areas with less tolerance to diversity. study suggests](#)', University of Exeter, January 2021

<sup>74</sup> British Future, '[Late surge in minority candidates paves way for most diverse parliament ever](#)', November 2019

## 4 Social grade: 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. ‘Social grade’, based on occupation, is often used as a proxy to capture these different dimensions. 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. Social grades DE would include both traditional routine and manual jobs and newer precarious jobs and service industries, for example Deliveroo drivers and baristas.

This section shows that people in ‘lower’ social grades are less politically engaged in terms of attitudes, activities, registration, voting and being elected. This group is sometimes referred to as disadvantaged, marginalised, or socially excluded: they are more likely to live in poverty and deprivation and tend to have lower levels of cultural and social capital, and often face obstacles to participating effectively in society, including in politics.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>75</sup> See Electoral Commission, [Social exclusion and political engagement](#), November 2005

Social grade has been linked to location: where you live affects the opportunities available to you and it may shape the way you see the world and your place in it, including your political outlook. Academics Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker distinguish between two types of areas that share negative views about politicians and the political system but differ in cultural values and economic prospects:

- ‘cosmopolitan’ areas that see economic growth create high-skilled, high-paid jobs (mostly cities). People here tend to hold socially liberal attitudes and be open to immigration; and participate more in political activities.
- ‘backwater’ areas that are in economic decline, where most jobs are low-skilled and low-paid (for example former industrial areas and seaside towns). People here tend to be socially conservative and nostalgic and oppose immigration; and participate less in political activities (but do turn out to vote). They are more likely to feel alienated by mainstream politics, see political elites as out of touch and attracted to populist alternatives.<sup>76</sup>

There are important differences within these areas: even the most affluent areas often have ‘pockets of deprivation’ where life experiences are very different and people are more likely to feel alienated, marginalised and powerless.<sup>77</sup>

## 4.1

### Political attitudes

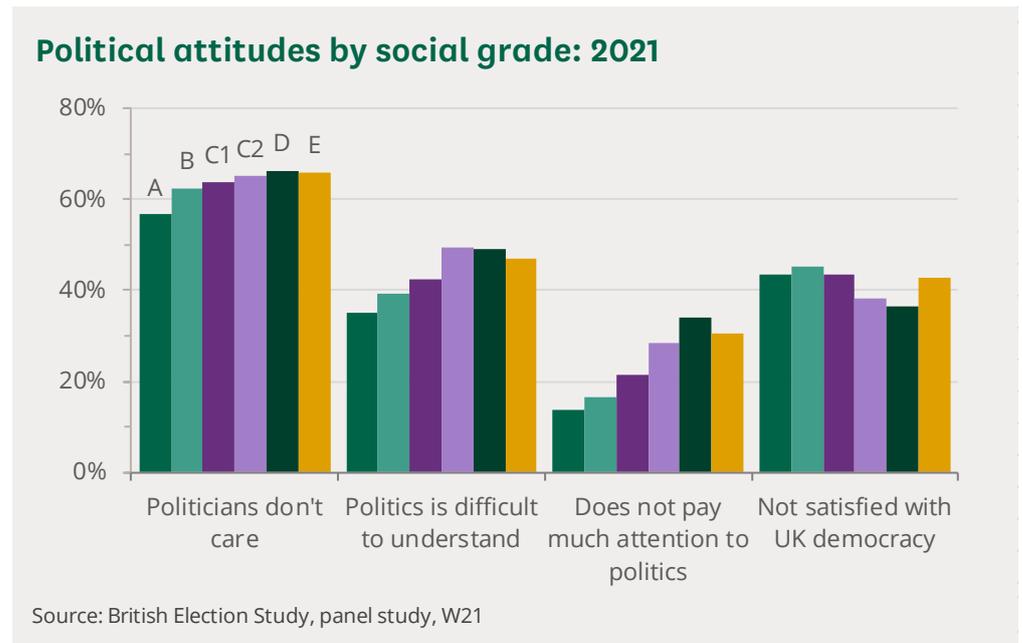
The chart below shows that people in the A, B and C1 social grades were less satisfied with how democracy works in the UK, while people in the C2, D and E social grades were more likely to say that politicians don’t care about people like them, find politics difficult to understand and pay less attention to politics. This is in line with other research which found that people in 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.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker, ‘[The bifurcation of politics: two Englands](#)’, *The Political Quarterly*, 2016, 87:3, 372-382; see also Electoral Commission, [Social exclusion and political engagement](#), November 2005

<sup>77</sup> John Boswell et al, ‘[Place-based politics and nested deprivation in the UK: beyond cities-towns. ‘Two Englands’ and the ‘Left Behind’](#)’, *Representation*, 2020, 1:23

<sup>78</sup> Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, [Divided Democracy](#), IPPR, November 2013



Note: error margins are 0-2.0 percentage points. Smaller subgroups in the sample are not necessarily representative of the corresponding group in the population

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”.<sup>79</sup>

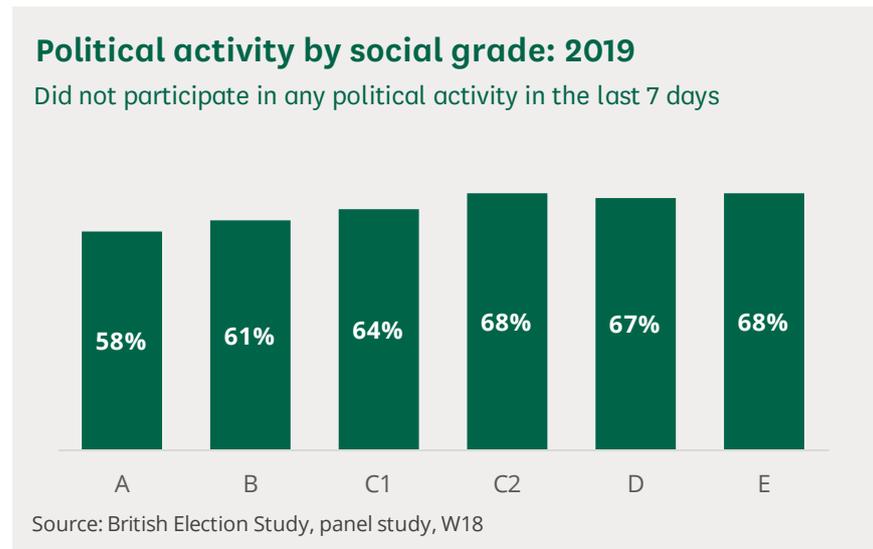
## 4.2

### Political activities

As the chart below shows, people from social grades C2DE are least likely to have participated in political activities in the last seven days.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, [‘The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain’](#), Parliamentary Affairs, 2016, p. 14

<sup>80</sup> See also Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015; p164



Note: error margins are 0.9-1.5 percentage points. Smaller subgroups in the sample are not necessarily representative of the corresponding group in the population

The [Community Life Survey](#) shows that in 2020/21, people living in the most deprived areas were the least likely to have engaged in political activities in the past 12 months (37%,  $\pm 2$ ). Conversely, people living in the least deprived areas were the most likely to have done so (46%,  $\pm 3$ ).

Paul Webb finds that people in lower social grades are more likely to be 'stealth democrats' who are disillusioned with political elites and unwilling to participate in mainstream politics.<sup>81</sup> Phil Parvin suggests that activities designed to increase participation risk entrenching existing inequalities, because poorer citizens may lack the skills, resources, norms and identity to get involved.<sup>82</sup>

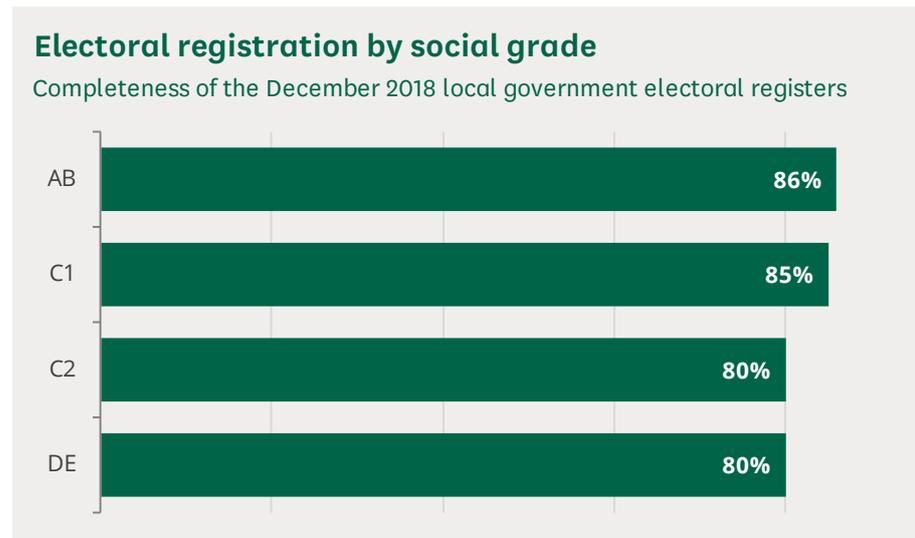
## 4.3

### Electoral registration

People from the DE social grades were less likely to be included on the 2018 electoral registers than people from other grades.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Webb, 'Who is willing to participate? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the United Kingdom', *European Journal of Political Research*, 2013, 52: 747-773

<sup>82</sup> Phil Parvin, '[Democracy without participation: a new politics for a disengaged era](#)', *Res Publica*, 2018, 24, 31-52



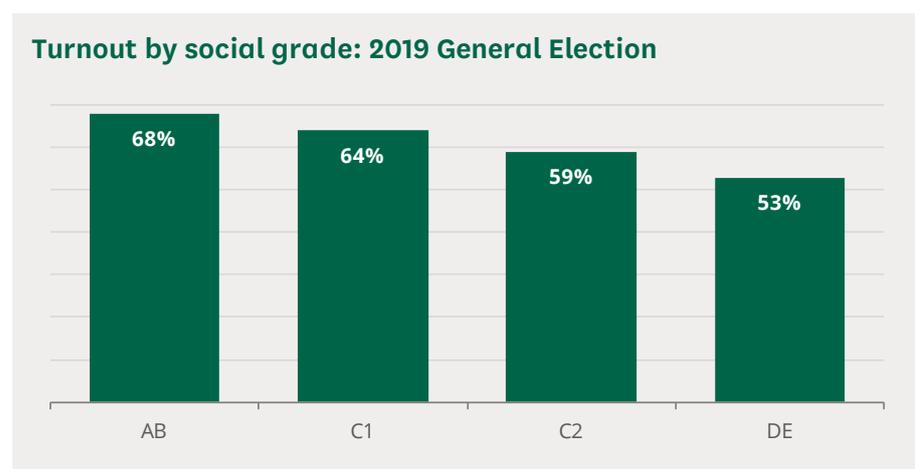
Source: Electoral Commission, [2019 report: accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

The Electoral Commission found that people who did not attend formal education after they left school were least likely to be on the register. Housing tenure was strongly related to registration: homeowners are more likely to be registered than people in other types of tenure. Private renters are the least likely to be registered. This is probably because private renters tend to move more frequently than those in other tenures. The longer people live in the same house, the more likely they are to be registered.<sup>83</sup>

## 4.4

### Voting

People in the DE social grades are usually least likely to vote. This was true in the 2019 General Election, as shown in the chart below.



Source: Ipsos Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2019 election](#), December 2019

<sup>83</sup> The Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

The face-to-face British Election Study does not include data on social grade, but it does allow analysis of related variables like education level and housing tenure.

At the 2019 General Election, people living in housing rented from a local authority were least likely to vote (38%), followed by those renting from a private landlord (48%) and a housing association (49%). Homeowners were the most likely to vote (79% for those owning their home outright, followed by 72% for those with a mortgage).

Turnout increased with education level, with those with no qualifications least likely to vote (52%) and those with a postgraduate qualification most likely to vote (82%).<sup>84</sup>

Research suggests that people in lower social grades are more likely to be attracted to populist alternatives to mainstream politics and vote for non-mainstream parties like UKIP.<sup>85</sup>

## Brexit: turnout and vote

Ipsos Mori found that people in social grades DE were less likely to vote in the EU referendum (64%) than those in social grades AB (79%); and they were most likely to vote Leave (64%), with people in AB the least likely (41%). Age was a stronger predictor of how people voted than social grade: “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.”<sup>86</sup>

These findings are in 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%). NatCen also reports that there was a clear relationship between income and the Leave vote: people earning less than £1,200 per month were more likely to vote Leave than higher earners.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> British Election Study, Face to face post-election 2019 survey, weighted with wt\_vote. People whose highest level of education was GCSE were more likely to vote (66%) than those with A-levels (62%), although error margins for these groups were  $\pm 4$  percentage points

<sup>85</sup> Paul Webb, ‘Who is willing to participate? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the United Kingdom’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 2013, 52: 747-773, see also Maria Sobolewska & Rob Ford, *Brexitland*, 2020, Cambridge University Press

<sup>86</sup> Ipsos Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum](#), September 2016. Turnout reported as the proportion of registered voters who cast a valid vote, scaled by the BES 2017 estimate of over-claiming turnout

<sup>87</sup> NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

## 4.5

# Councillors, candidates and MPs

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

## Councillors

The [2022 Census of Local Authority Councillors](#) in England noted that 64% of councillors were educated to degree level (or equivalent), while 11% were educated to A level (or equivalent) and 11% to GCSE level (or equivalent). 4% of councillors had no qualifications. Around 37% of the UK working age population (16-64) had a degree level qualification in 2021.<sup>88</sup>

## MPs

Library Briefing Paper [Social background of MPs 1979-2019](#) 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).

This coincides with a wider trend of the ‘professionalisation’ of politics seen across Western democracies. The professional background of MPs has become increasingly narrow, with most now drawn from middle-class ‘communicating professions’: the law, politics, education and journalism.<sup>89</sup>

Research suggests career politicians and MPs from working class backgrounds tend to have different life experiences which influence their political choices, with the latter more likely to represent working-class interests; it has been suggested that with decreasing numbers of working-class MPs, working class voters feel increasingly alienated from political elites, lowering turnout.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Annual Population Survey, Jan – Dec 2021, accessed through [Nomis](#)

<sup>89</sup> Paul Cairney suggests we should look at the combination of jobs MPs held before their election, ‘[The Professionalisation of MPs: refining the ‘politics-facilitating’ explanation](#)’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 60:2, 212-233

<sup>90</sup> Tom O’Grady, ‘[Careerists versus Coal-Miners: Welfare reforms and the substantive representation of social groups in the British Labour Party](#)’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 2019, 52:4, 544-578

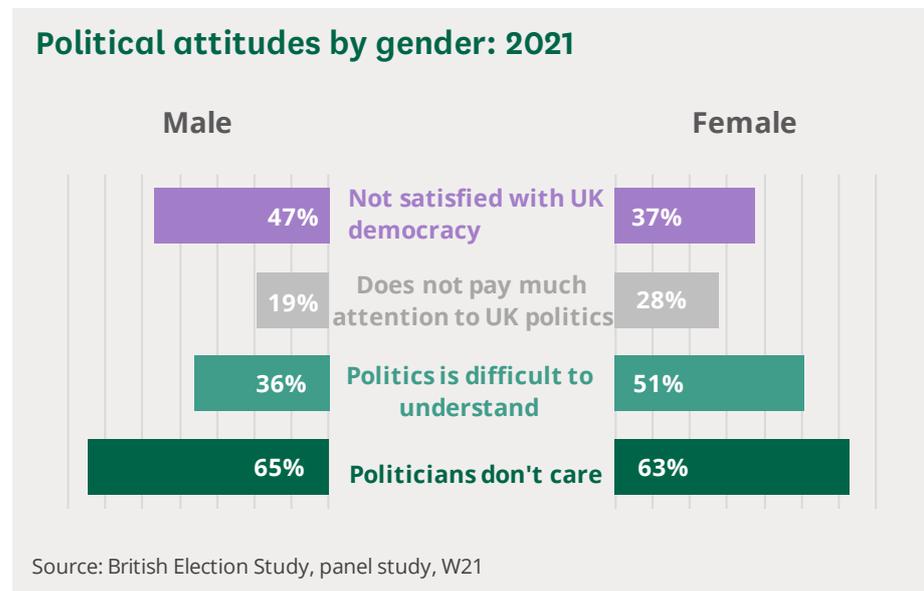
## 5 Gender

Women tend to have more negative attitudes to politics than men, and to be less likely to participate in political activities. Men and women are equally likely to register to vote and – usually – to vote, although women were less likely to vote at the 2019 General Election. Relative to the population, women are underrepresented in local government and Parliament.

Meanwhile, research suggests that men are more likely to be unhappy with mainstream politics and political elites, and to turn to populist parties in response.<sup>91</sup>

### 5.1 Political attitudes

Women held more negative political attitudes on the whole, but men were more likely to be dissatisfied with democracy, as shown in the chart below.<sup>92</sup>



Note: error margins are 0.06-1 percentage points

<sup>91</sup> E.g. Niels Spierings and Andrej Zaslove, '[Gender, populist attitudes, and voting: explaining the gender gap in voting for populist radical right and populist radical left parties](#)', *West European Politics*, 2017, 40:4, 821-847. Although Paul Webb finds that women are more likely to be 'stealth democrats' who do not want to engage unless strictly necessary, 'Who is willing to participate? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the United Kingdom', *European Journal of Political Research*, 2013, 52: 747-773

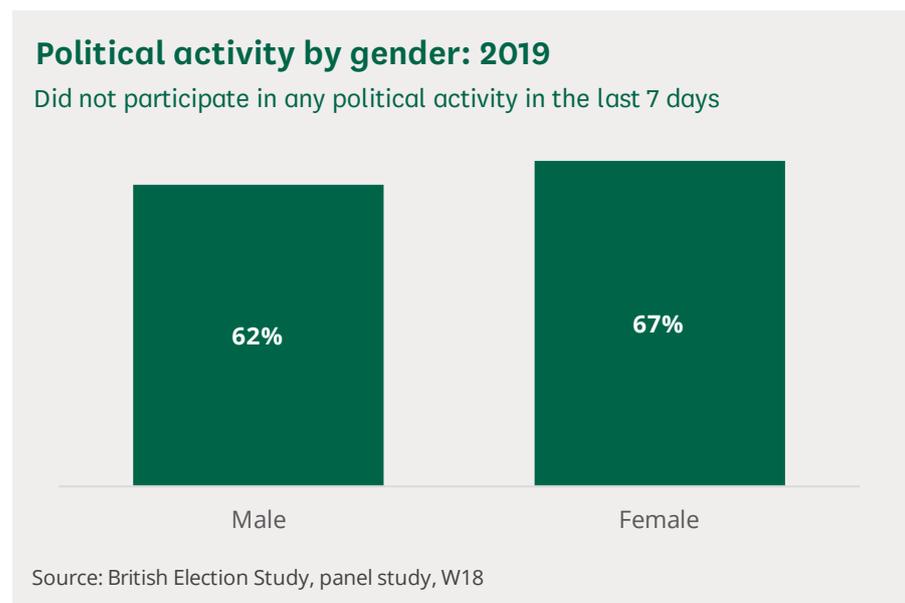
<sup>92</sup> One respondent was excluded from the analysis as no gender was known

Research carried out by YouGov and the Institute for Public Policy Research in 2014 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).<sup>93</sup>

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. They suggest this might be explained by different norms that affect what men and women expect from politicians.<sup>94</sup>

## 5.2 Political activities

The chart below shows that women were more likely than men to have not participated in political activities in the last seven days.



Note: error margins are 0.6-0.7 percentage points

The Government’s [Community Life Survey](#), conversely, shows that women (44%) were more likely to have participated in political activities than men (39%) in the last 12 months. This difference may be due to the different set of activities covered in each survey as well as the different time scale.

<sup>93</sup> YouGov/IPPR, Fieldwork 9th-11th September 2014, survey results. Weighted

<sup>94</sup> 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 of participating 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 with 27.9% of women.<sup>95</sup>

The aggregation of activities in this measure may hide differences between men and women: a study from 2004 found that women were equally or more likely than men to participate in ‘cause-oriented’ activities, but less likely to participate in ‘campaign-oriented’ activities. Women from minority ethnic groups were less politically active than women from White groups.<sup>96</sup>

## 5.3 Electoral registration

The Electoral Commission found that men and women were equally likely to be on the electoral registers in December 2018 (83%).<sup>97</sup> Previously, they had found that women were slightly more likely to be on the December 2015 electoral registers than men (85% of women compared to 83% of men).<sup>98</sup> This was also the case in April 2011 (87% of women compared to 85% of men).<sup>99</sup>

## 5.4 Voting

There was no substantial difference in turnout between men and women at general elections between 2001-2017.<sup>100</sup> At the 2019 General Election, however, men were more likely to vote (69.9%) than women (62.5%).<sup>101</sup>

Research from 2004 found that women were more likely to turn out to vote in constituencies represented by female MPs.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Is Britain Fairer? Evidence papers series, Domain J, Participation, influence and voice*, Autumn 2015, P. 56. 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.”

<sup>96</sup> The Electoral Commission, [Gender and political participation](#), April 2004

<sup>97</sup> The Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

<sup>98</sup> The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

<sup>99</sup> The Electoral Commission, *Electoral registration in 2011*, July 2014, p. 44

<sup>100</sup> Ipsos Mori, *How Britain voted in 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015*; British Election Study, [Face to face post-election 2017 survey](#); based on validated registration and weighted with wt\_vote\_valid

<sup>101</sup> British Election Study, [Face to face post election 2019 survey](#), weighted with wt\_vote. Error margins were about ± 2 percentage points

<sup>102</sup> The Electoral Commission, [Gender and political participation](#), April 2004

## Brexit: turnout and vote

Ipsos Mori reports that men were slightly more likely to vote in the 2016 EU Referendum (74%) than women (71%). Men were also more likely to vote Leave (55%) than women (49%). Ipsos Mori also suggests that gender differences were 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.<sup>103</sup>

## 5.5

## Councillors, candidates, and MPs

Women are underrepresented among elected representatives. Research suggests that women face particular barriers, including:

- British politics is dominated by white, middle-class men. The associated masculine culture can discourage women (and other underrepresented groups) from seeking election
- Women tend to take on the majority of caring and household responsibilities. Combining the unsociable hours associated with elected office with family life can be challenging
- Women are more likely to be in part-time and lower paid jobs: they are less likely to have the financial resources required to stand for office
- Political parties' candidate selection practices and a lack of access to networks, role models and information sources.<sup>104</sup>

### Councillors

The [2022 Census of Local Councillors](#) in England shows that in 2022, 39% of those responding to their survey were female while 57% were male. In 2017, 33% of those responding to a survey of [Scottish local councillors](#) were women. An estimated 66% of local government candidates were women in [Wales](#) in 2017. In Northern Ireland in 2015, women held 25% of council seats.<sup>105</sup>

### Candidates and MPs

The proportion of female candidates at general elections did not rise above 10% until 1979, when 11% of candidates were women. In 2005 women accounted for 20% of all candidates for the first time. In the 2019 General Election there were 1,123 female candidates, up from 973 in 2017. This was the

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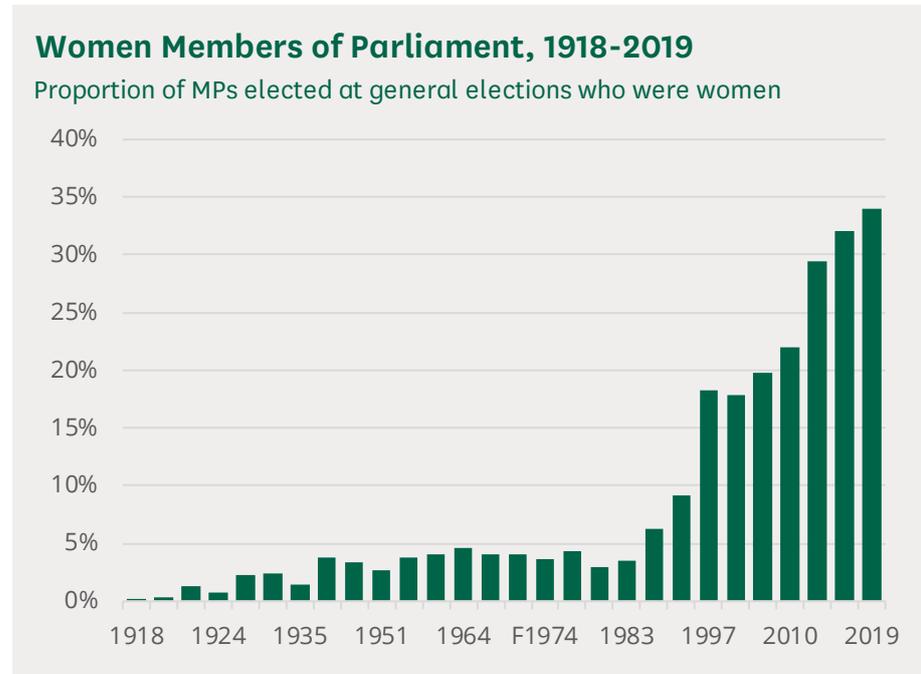
<sup>103</sup> Ipsos-Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum](#), September 2016 Turnout reported as the proportion of registered voters who cast a valid vote, scaled by the BES 2017 estimate of over-claiming election turnout

<sup>104</sup> Sue Maguire, [Barriers to women entering Parliament and local government](#), Institute for Policy Research report, 2018

<sup>105</sup> Northern South Inter-Parliamentary Association, [Women in Public life](#), 27 November 2015

highest number and percentage (33.8%) on record. For more information, see House of Commons Library briefing paper [Women in Politics and Public Life](#).

Since 1918, 552 women have been elected as Members in the House of Commons (including by-elections). This is about 10% of all MPs elected over the period. The chart below shows that the percentage of female MPs has increased since 1918. 220 female MPs were elected at the 2019 General Election, 34% of all MPs and a record high.



## 6 Disabilities

Disabilities can be physical or mental impairments: the [Equality Act 2010](#) counts people as disabled when they have impairments that have a ‘substantial’ (more than minor or trivial) and ‘long-term’ (12 months or more) negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities.

This covers a diverse group of conditions such as sight, hearing and mobility impairments, mental health issues, learning disabilities and long-term illnesses.

Disabilities affect groups differently: for example, chronic health conditions affect people who are less well-off more.<sup>106</sup> There is a strong link between disability and age, with disabilities much more common among older people (in 2020/21, [42% of pension-age people reported having a disability](#) compared with 21% of working age people).

This section shows that disabled people have more negative attitudes to politics than people without disabilities. This doesn’t translate into political activity: people with disabilities that limit their activities a little (rather than a lot) are most likely to engage in political activities, and people with disabilities tend to engage in non-traditional political activities such as online petitioning and social media use.

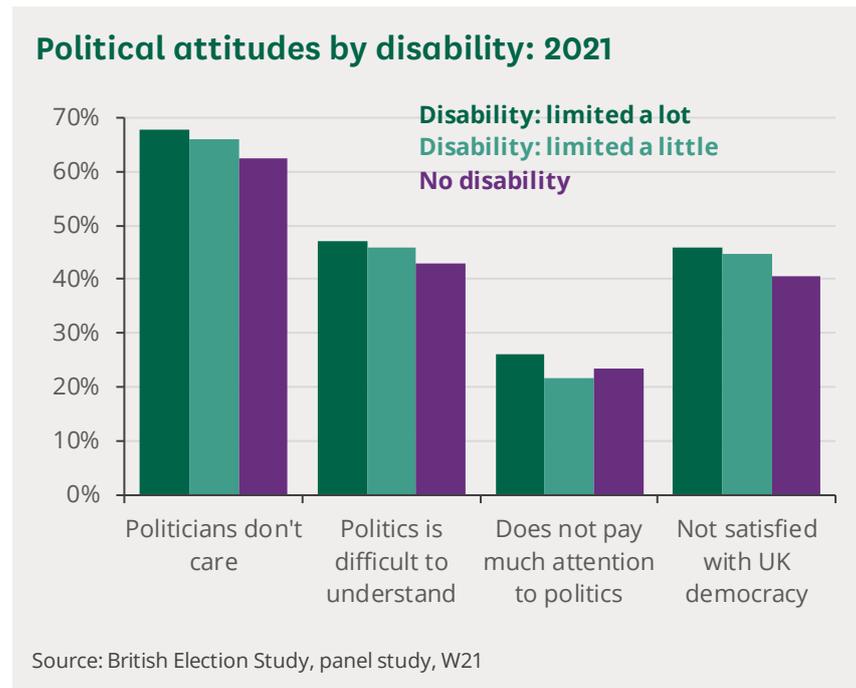
Disabled people that limit their activities a lot are less likely to vote. Overall, they are underrepresented in local government and Parliament.

### 6.1 Political attitudes

The chart below shows that people with disabilities that more seriously limit their daily activities are more likely to be disengaged across all attitudes included here. Non-disabled people are most engaged, although people with disabilities that limit their activities a little pay more attention to politics.

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<sup>106</sup> Mikko Mattila, ‘[Health and disability gaps in political engagement: a short review](#)’, in Besley T and Bucelli I (eds) *Wellbeing: alternative policy perspectives*, LSE Press, 2022, pp 170



Note: error margins are 0.6-1.8 percentage points. Smaller subgroups in the sample are not necessarily representative of the corresponding group in the population

Analysis of political engagement among people with disabilities across Europe found that:

disabled people feel less confident in their ability to participate in and influence politics, perceive the political system as less responsive, and have lower trust in parliament, parties, and politicians. They also have less interest in politics and a lower propensity to vote.<sup>107</sup>

Research also shows that while people with disabilities tend to have lower levels of trust in the political system, this does not necessarily translate to lower levels of engagement: some studies find that while turnout is lower, participation in non-traditional political activities is higher.<sup>108</sup>

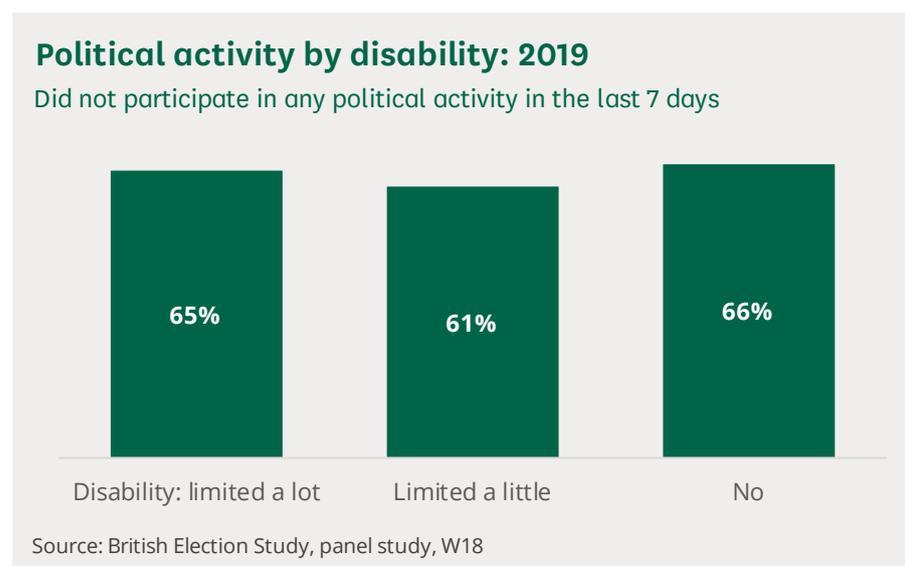
## 6.2 Political activities

The chart below shows that people with more serious disabilities were as likely to have participated in political activities as people with no disabilities.

People with disabilities that limit them a little in daily life were most likely to engage in political activities.

<sup>107</sup> Stefanie Reher, 'Mind this gap, too: political orientations of people with disabilities in Europe', [Political Behaviour](#), 2018, pp1-28

<sup>108</sup> Mikko Mattila, '[Health and disability gaps in political engagement: a short review](#)', in Besley T and Bucelli I (eds) *Wellbeing: alternative policy perspectives*, LSE Press, 2022, pp 174



Note: error margins are 0.5-1.5 percentage points. Smaller subgroups in the sample are not necessarily representative of the corresponding group in the population

The Government’s [Community Life Survey](#), found that people with a disability (46%) were more likely than people without a disability (43%) to have engaged in political activities in the last 12 months.

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.<sup>109</sup>

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”.<sup>110</sup>

Research from Europe found people with disabilities were more likely to contact politicians, sign petitions and be active politically on social media than people without disabilities; and that they may be motivated to participate in political activities because issues related to their health become more pertinent.<sup>111</sup>

## 6.3 Electoral registration

The Electoral Commission researched registration among people with (self-reported) disabilities. In December 2018, people with a physical disability were more likely to be registered (92%) than those without a disability (82%)

<sup>109</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? Evidence papers series](#), Domain J, Participation, influence and voice, Autumn 2015, p. 55

<sup>110</sup> As above, p. 54

<sup>111</sup> Mikko Mattila, ‘[Health and disability gaps in political engagement: a short review](#)’, in Besley T & Bucelli I (eds) *Wellbeing: alternative policy perspectives*, LSE Press, 2022, pp 172

or those with a mental disability (83%).<sup>112</sup> This was in line with previous findings. The Electoral Commission suggested in 2016 that this might be because people with physical disabilities are less likely to move home than the general population and mobility is an important driver of low levels of registration.<sup>113</sup>

The charity Mencap ran a survey of 533 people with a learning disability in 2014 showing that 60% found registering to vote too difficult; while 70% said they would like to vote in the next election. Respondents also said they found the language politicians use too complicated.<sup>114</sup>

## 6.4

### Voting

Research consistently shows that voter turnout is lower among people with disabilities.<sup>115</sup> Various factors likely play a role: for example, getting to or into a polling station may be difficult for some, while election materials – including information on how to register, how to vote and party manifestos – may be difficult to understand for others.<sup>116</sup>

The British Election Study asked people if they voted in the 2019 General Election. Turnout tends to be overreported, so the survey responses have been scaled to the observed turnout (using the same adjustment for each group). As the chart below shows, although differences were very small, people with a disability that limits their daily activities a little (rather than a lot) were most likely to vote.

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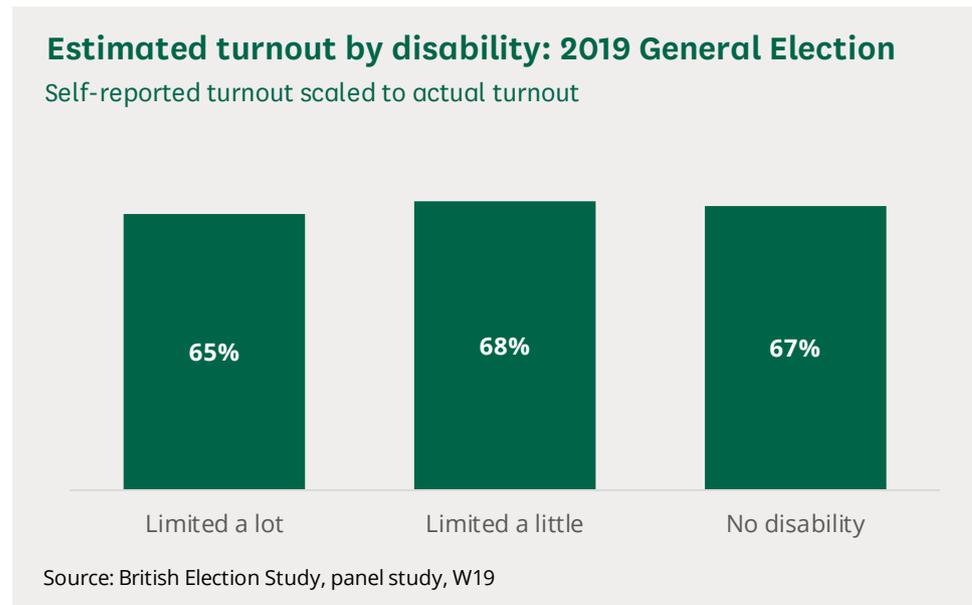
<sup>112</sup> The Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

<sup>113</sup> The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

<sup>114</sup> Mencap, [‘People with a learning disability’s passion for politics thwarted by system of excludes them’](#), 8 October 2014

<sup>115</sup> Mikko Mattila, [‘Health and disability gaps in political engagement: a short review’](#), in Besley T and Bucelli I (eds) *Wellbeing: alternative policy perspectives*, LSE Press, 2022, pp 171

<sup>116</sup> Electoral Commission, [Elections for everyone](#), November 2017



Note: error margins are 0.5-1.4 percentage points

Lower turnout among people with disabilities may have electoral consequences as people with poor health and disabilities have been found to favour political parties on the left. However, recent research from Europe suggests they may favour right-wing populist parties.<sup>117</sup>

## 6.5

### Councillors, candidates and MPs

Complete and reliable statistics on people with disabilities in politics are not available: this data is sensitive, and where it is collected, it relies on self-reporting, possibly missing people who do not report their disability.

Data suggest people with disabilities are underrepresented among elected officials. Research has identified several barriers to standing and campaigning for election:

- **Accessibility:** for example, the locations of political meetings and campaign events are not always easily accessible (including by public transport); canvassing is difficult for people with mobility issues; and materials are not always written and published in accessible ways.
- **Resourcing:** political parties often don't address accessibility issues because of financial constraints. Disabled people may not have the resources to make these adjustments themselves.
- **Ableism:** there are strong norms and expectations about how politics is done that may not be inclusive of people with disabilities who need, for

<sup>117</sup> Mikko Mattila, '[Health and disability gaps in political engagement: a short review](#)', in Besley T and Bucelli I (eds) *Wellbeing: alternative policy perspectives*, LSE Press, 2022, pp 171-2

example, more time or less heckling, or who may not have the energy to be constantly visible and accessible.<sup>118</sup>

## Councillors

The [2022 Census of Local Councillors](#) of England shows that in 2022, 15.5% of local councillors had a long-term health condition or disability. This compares with about [22% of the total population](#) in 2020/21, or [20% of the working age population](#) in October-December 2020.

The report by the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, published in 2011, had noted "many of them [local councillors] appear to have age-related conditions which may well have developed years after first election".<sup>119</sup>

## Candidates and MPs

There is no official data on disability among candidates or MPs.

A study by the Equality and Human Rights Commission reported on a survey of parliamentary candidates for the 2017 General Election. 24% responded to the question whether they had a disability. Among these respondents, 10% said they had a disability.<sup>120</sup>

Meanwhile, only 1 per cent of MPs or less are thought to have a disability.<sup>121</sup> The Disability News Service reported after the 2019 General Election that the number of MPs with a disability had fallen from seven immediately prior to the election to five.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Elizabeth Evans & Stephanie Reher, '[Disability and political representation: analysing the obstacles to elected office in the UK](#)', *International Political Science Review*, October 2020

<sup>119</sup> Speaker's conference (on Parliamentary Representation), Final report, 2009-10, HC239-I, 11 January 2011, para 173

<sup>120</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#), March 2019, p20

<sup>121</sup> Rosie Campbell and Oliver Heath, Candidate characteristics and representation, presentation at the Elections, Public Opinions and Parties (EPOP) annual conference 2019

<sup>122</sup> Disability News Service, [Election post-mortem: number of disabled MPs may have fallen to just five](#), December 2019

## 7

## Tackling disengagement

As noted already in this briefing, political disengagement takes different forms and different people are disengaged in different ways.

Where groups show the same form of disengagement, this may not be explained by the same drivers. 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.<sup>123</sup>

Barriers to engagement within a group with protected characteristics can mask differences within the group. For example, Electoral Commission research on the completeness of the electoral register found that people with physical disabilities are more likely to be registered to vote than people without disabilities, but people with learning disabilities or long-standing mental health conditions are less likely to be registered.<sup>124</sup>

The Power Inquiry, which reported in 2006, was established to investigate disengagement from formal democratic politics in Britain. It found that apathy was not the problem behind disengagement and that there was evidence that involvement in pressure politics, such as signing petitions and joining campaign groups had been growing. The Inquiry found that voters' explanations behind disengagement were that they didn't have enough influence over political decisions, electoral systems leading to wasted votes, political parties lacking in principle and a lack of information about formal politics.<sup>125</sup>

As barriers to engagement vary, so will the solutions to tackle them. Some, like ensuring electoral registration is as complete as possible, will be for government and local authorities. Others, like tackling distrust in politicians, will be for the political parties.

This section outlines some of the issues and approaches being taken to tackle disengagement.

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<sup>123</sup> David Sanders, Stephen D. Fisher, Anthony Heath and Maria Sobolewska. '[The democratic engagement of Britain's ethnic minorities](#)', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2914, 37:1, p. 120-139

<sup>124</sup> Electoral Commission, *Completeness in Great Britain*, [Key findings](#), September 2019

<sup>125</sup> [Power to the People](#), The Power Inquiry, February 2006, p17-8

## 7.1

# Electoral registration

Before you can vote you must be registered. Under individual electoral registration (IER), each person is responsible for registering themselves but as this briefing has shown, some groups are less likely to register than others.

These problems are not new. The Home Affairs Committee conducted an inquiry into electoral administration and registration in 1982-3 and noted their 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.<sup>126</sup>

### Central government

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.<sup>127</sup>

The Government reported progress in a follow up report in January 2019, *Democratic Engagement: [Respecting, Protecting and Promoting Our Democracy](#)*. It highlighted some of the approaches it had taken in areas where it had responsibility.

This included the improvements to the anonymous registration scheme, which allows people whose safety would be at risk if their name or address were listed on the electoral register (for example, survivors of domestic abuse) to register to vote without their details made public.<sup>128</sup>

The Government also amended legislation relating to the electoral registration annual canvass. This is where each local electoral registration officer contacts all households to check registration details are correct. The reforms streamlined the process and made it easier for voters to understand. Research conducted by the Government after the reforms were introduced indicated it had made the process more flexible for registration officers so they can innovate, and more time and resources could be freed up to target properties in low response areas.<sup>129</sup>

Other examples were working with local authorities and civil societies to target under-registered groups, such as homeless people and disabled

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<sup>126</sup> Home Affairs Select Committee, *Representation of the People Acts, HC 32, 1982-3*, p6

<sup>127</sup> Cabinet Office, '[Democratic engagement programme: policy paper](#)', 8 May 2015

<sup>128</sup> Library briefing CBP 8202, [Anonymous electoral registration](#)

<sup>129</sup> Cabinet Office, [Evaluation of the Modern Electoral Registration Programme](#) (PDF), October 2021, p17-18

people, and understand the barriers to registration. This included conducting research to understand of barriers to registration. The Government said this would use the information “to design, user test and pilot interventions to improve registration that could meet local authority and citizens’ needs.”<sup>130</sup>

The Government has produced an [easy read guide on registering to vote \(PDF\)](#). This is designed for people with learning disabilities and provides step by step instructions to help them register to vote online. [Easy read versions of the paper forms](#) for registering to vote are also available on the Government’s website.

### Electoral commission

One of the Electoral Commission’s strategic objectives is to facilitate accessible registration and voting.<sup>131</sup> It has worked with stakeholders to produce guidance for disabled voters and run mass-media voter registration campaigns across Great Britain, to raise awareness of the need to register. Some of its targeted resources include a ‘[Registering to vote](#)’ guide produced with Mencap, and [British Sign Language videos](#) on registering to vote and other aspects of voting.

The Electoral Commission report of 2019, [Elections for everyone](#), notes that some people find wording on election forms difficult for them to understand. To make wording easier to understand the Government would need to change the law. The Commission has said “we would like Government to make changes so that election forms can be easily understood by everyone.”<sup>132</sup>

The Commission runs annual registration campaigns. In 2021, in the run up to local elections in May, its advertising and awareness campaigns helped the delivery of over 600,000 additions to electoral registers ahead of the registration deadline for the May elections.<sup>133</sup>

At the time of the Welsh local elections of 2022, the Commission re-ran its ‘Welcome to Your Vote’ paid voter registration campaign, targeted at newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds, alongside its ‘Got 5?’ campaign targeting the whole electorate. During the campaign period, a total of 38,438 people in Wales applied to register to vote, including 3,596 16–17-year-olds and 663 qualifying foreign citizens. The Commission also worked with British Deaf Association Wales, Mencap Cymru, Welsh Women’s Aid, Llamau and Gypsies and Travellers Wales to target under-registered groups.<sup>134</sup>

In early 2023, the Commission is running Welcome to Your Vote week 2023. It is aimed schools and youth groups and encourages young people to start a

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<sup>130</sup> Cabinet Officer, [Democratic Engagement: Respecting, Protecting and Promoting Our Democracy](#) (PDF), January 2019, p29

<sup>131</sup> Electoral Commission, [Annual Report and Accounts 2021-2022](#) (PDF), July 2022, p13

<sup>132</sup> Electoral Commission, [Elections for everyone](#), May 2019

<sup>133</sup> Electoral Commission, [Annual Report and Accounts 2021-2022](#) (PDF), July 2022, p20

<sup>134</sup> Electoral Commission, [Report on the May 2022 elections in Wales](#)

conversation about democracy and politics. The Commission [has made resources available](#) on its website. It hopes:

Discussing these topics, and encouraging young people to think about how they can make their voices heard, can help them to become engaged voters and citizens for years to come.<sup>135</sup>

The Commission also provides guidance for electoral registration officers on running electoral registration, including suggestions on reaching under-registered groups.<sup>136</sup>

### Local authorities

Some local authorities run also local schemes or use local solutions outside of the annual canvass to enable registration. For example, some authorities make electoral registration forms in languages other than English available. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has [forms in 25 other languages](#) available for download.

### Charities

Other stakeholders make resources available to help people to register. For example, United Response, a charity that supports people with learning disabilities, autism and mental health needs, [has easy read resources](#) to help people with learning disabilities find out more about what politics is, how it affects them and how they can get involved.

Stonewall provides [advice for trans voters](#) on registering to vote. Some trans people encounter problems when registering to vote, particularly if they have changed their name by deed poll, informed HMRC of their trans status, or obtained a Gender Recognition Certificate and their National Insurance number is protected.

Centrepoin, a homeless charity, [provides information for homeless people](#) on how to register.

The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust has established [a UK Democracy Fund](#) with an aim to support a million more people from lower propensity voting groups to register and vote in the next General Election. The Trust has an interest in fields of democratic and political reform in the UK, which it describes has its roots in the vision of Joseph Rowntree, the philanthropist, Quaker and Liberal.

## Student registration

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. During the trial 75% of students registered to vote. This is compared with 13%

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<sup>135</sup> Electoral Commission, [Resources for educators](#)

<sup>136</sup> Electoral Commission, [Resources for Electoral Registration Officers - Your public engagement strategy and registration plan](#)

students in neighbouring Sheffield Hallam University, which did not participate in the trial.<sup>137</sup>

The students could not be automatically registered by the University, under IER. Instead, Sheffield Council worked with the University to include a section at the end of the university's online student registration process for the 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.<sup>138</sup>

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 (education is a devolved policy area, and so other arrangements exist in the other parts of the UK).

One of these conditions relates to facilitating student electoral registration. This provision was added to the Bill during its passage through Parliament and was initially resisted by the Government. The Office for Students has now published [Regulatory advice 11: Guidance for providers about facilitating electoral registration](#).

The Welsh Government is consulting on the possibility of allowing greater automation in registering students to vote in Wales for devolved elections (see below).

## Automatic voter registration

Some have argued that automatic registration would be the solution to the problem of lower registration among some groups.

Currently each individual is responsible for making sure they are registered. Automatic voter registration (AVR) would allow registration officers to add anyone eligible to the electoral register without requiring the potential voter to do anything.

This might be when the registration officer becomes aware of someone who may be eligible using other government or local government data – for example when someone is sent a national insurance number just before their sixteenth birthday, or someone informs a public agency that they have moved address. It may also be possible using other data sources, for example

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<sup>137</sup> Office for Students, [Regulatory advice 11: Guidance for providers about facilitating electoral registration](#), September 2018, p10

<sup>138</sup> Department for Education, [Facilitating Electoral Registration Secretary of State for Education Guidance to the Office for Students \(OfS\)](#), February 2018

university data when new students register with their university, as demonstrated by the Sheffield trial noted above.

The Electoral Commission has evaluated the feasibility of improving voter registration using existing public data, including automatic registration by integrating registration with other public service transactions members of the public might undertake.<sup>139</sup> In the Commission's view, more automated solutions could help improve registration levels among some under-registered groups.<sup>140</sup> However, the Commission acknowledged such a move would raise broader public policy questions about data sharing, data protection, and Government use of personal data.

The Government opposes automatic voter registration. In a response to a Parliamentary question, it said:

The Government opposes automatic registration as it contradicts the principle that individuals are responsible for registering and that this should be done at a time and place of their choosing. Automatic registration would raise privacy and security concerns. It would also risk introducing errors and inaccuracies to the registers, creating unwarranted opportunities for fraud.<sup>141</sup>

The Welsh Government is consulting on taking forward automatic voter registration. It has already made provision for this kind of approach in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The provisions are not yet active and the Welsh Government is seeking views on how best to use local data. It also wants to establish a model in which data sharing agreements between higher education and local authorities are in place for the register to vote process as part of enrolment.

The Welsh Government believe these measures would be of particularly help those newly eligible 16- and 17-year-olds and qualifying foreign citizens in Wales eligible to vote in devolved and local elections in Wales.<sup>142</sup>

## 7.2

## Voting

Voting should be accessible for everyone, but disabled people sometimes experience difficulties in access polling stations or voting independently.

There are also concerns that voter ID requirements to be introduced in 2023 may make it harder for some groups, including disabled voters, to participate in voting in polling stations.

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<sup>139</sup> Electoral Commission, [Modernising electoral registration: feasibility studies](#), undated

<sup>140</sup> [WPO UIN 164608, Electoral Register](#), March 2021

<sup>141</sup> [WPO UIN 114939, Electoral Register](#), November 2020

<sup>142</sup> Welsh Government, [Consultation on the electoral administration and reform White Paper](#), 11 October 2022

## Polling stations

Returning officers are required to have regard to the public sector equality duty contained in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. The broad purpose of the equality duty is to integrate consideration of equality and good relations into the day-to-day business of public bodies. The duty is explained in more detail on the Equality and Human Rights Commission website, [Public Sector Equality Duty](#).

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.

A report by RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People), [Turned Out 2019](#), found over one in 10 (13%) of blind voters, and less than half of partially sighted voters (44%), said they could vote independently and in secret. Nearly a quarter had to rely on a member of polling station staff to help them to vote.<sup>143</sup> The RNIB has made online information available for voters with sight loss and visual impairment: [Voting and elections: what you need to know](#).

Cabinet Office guidance issued in 2019 to returning officers suggested allowing people with sight loss to use other devices, such as mobile phones to read documents audibly or visually, was a reasonable adjustment. However, RNIB, while welcoming this, highlighted that the decision rests with the individual Returning Officers.<sup>144</sup>

There is also a requirement that local authorities 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.

Wheelchair users and voters who use other mobility aids often find polling stations inaccessible. Although returning officers are required to make reasonable adjustments, the only suitable building for use as a polling station may not be fully accessible.

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<sup>143</sup> RNIB, Turn Out 2019,

<sup>144</sup> RNIB, [Accessible voting win \(but still a way to go\)](#), December 2019.

In 2015 the charity Revitalise found in a survey of local authorities' websites 88% did not provide accessibility information about polling stations on their website.<sup>145</sup>

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.<sup>146</sup>

The Government published its response in August 2018.<sup>147</sup> It lists 17 actions that it would work on with the Accessibility of Elections Group, which includes representatives of Mencap, the RNIB, Scope and MIND as well as electoral administrators, 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 report demonstrated that despite existing provisions some disabled voters still experienced difficulty in voting in secret by themselves, or voting at all.

In polling stations some of the experiences of voters were described:

- polling booths not wide enough for a voter's wheelchair
- staff not offering or knowing how to use the tactile voting device
- instructions on how to vote were not clear
- pencils provided were difficult to hold.

Disabled voters were more likely to vote by post than other voters. Here too, voters experienced problems. Issues associated with postal voting included instructions difficult to understand, and not knowing alternative formats (for example Braille, or audible instructions) were available.

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<sup>145</sup> Revitalise, [Disabled voters are still being overlooked, finds Revitalise study](#), May 2015

<sup>146</sup> Cabinet Office, [Access to Elections: Call for Evidence](#), September 2017

<sup>147</sup> Cabinet Office, [Call for Evidence: Access to Elections Government response](#), August 2018

The actions listed by the Government in its response 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.

## Elections Act 2022

The Elections Act 2022 included a provision to increase support available to disabled people wanting to vote in polling stations. The provisions on accessibility in the Act are expected to take effect in May 2023.

The Equality Impact Assessment accompanying the Elections Bill says the measures requiring Returning Officers to consider the needs of people with a wider range of disabilities in polling stations will result in improvements in accessibility. It also notes:

Our experience from the Call for Evidence on Access to Elections and the Accessibility Working Group shows that whereas some local authorities make considerable effort to address the needs of disabled voters, others provide only the device to support voters with sight loss required in legislation and do not consider further support. The intention of these measures is to move to a system where all local authorities consider the additional needs of disabled voters, supported by guidance from the Electoral Commission and the Government.<sup>148</sup>

The measures have been broadly welcomed but the RNIB has expressed concern that the new wording, which does not explicitly mention a large print example of a ballot paper or the TVD, is “inadvertently reducing the legal protections for blind and partially sighted people”.<sup>149</sup>

During the progress of the legislation the Government accepted amendments designed to address the concerns raised by the RNIB. The new requirements will, as summarised in a RNIB press release:

impose new statutory duties on the Electoral Commission:

- To draw up new guidance to support an independent and secret vote at the polling station from 2023.
- To consult relevant organisations in the production of that guidance.
- To hold Returning Officers to account for following that guidance.<sup>150</sup>

The Electoral Commission has consulted on draft guidance for Returning Officers.<sup>151</sup> The Commission has said this will contribute to further development of the guidance, in advance of its statutory consultation which, expected to run from 28 November 2022 until 10 January 2023.

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<sup>148</sup> Elections Bill [Equality Impact Assessment](#), p11-2

<sup>149</sup> Elections Bill Public Bill Committee, [Written evidence submitted by the RNIB \(EB04\)](#), September 2021

<sup>150</sup> RNIB, [#BlindVotersCount campaign update](#), 11 April 2022

<sup>151</sup> Electoral Commission, [Consultation on draft guidance for Returning Officers: Assistance with voting for persons with disabilities](#), 5 September 2022

## Voter ID

The Elections Act introduces a requirement that voters at local elections in England, at police and crime commissioner elections and at UK Parliamentary elections across the UK, should show ID before being issued with a ballot paper. This measure will be introduced in May 2023.

The Government says voter ID is required to combat voter fraud in polling stations. During the debate on the Elections Bill (now Act) the Minister said, “Showing photo identification is a reasonable and proportionate way to confirm that a person is who they say they are.”<sup>152</sup>

This measure is seen as controversial by some. Opposition MPs criticised the proposals for ID at polling stations, with many focusing on the barriers that requiring ID would create for many voters.

Several MPs referred to the potential for it to be harder to vote for people without suitable ID. Joanna Cherry, an SNP Member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, highlighted the [Committee’s report](#) (PDF) on the ID provisions in the Bill. She told the House:

from the evidence the Committee heard we concluded that the voter ID measures risk making voting less accessible to some people and will have a discriminatory impact on some voters with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, including the disabled, certain ethnic minorities and Gypsy and Traveller communities.<sup>153</sup>

The Government pointed to the research it had commissioned indicating that [96% of voters held some form of photo ID](#) with a recognisable photo (this includes expired ID) that would be acceptable under its proposals. It also promised a widespread public communication campaign to ensure voters knew of the new requirements.<sup>154</sup> Expired ID will be acceptable as long as the photo was still recognisable.

The Government also pointed out Northern Ireland already has photographic voter ID requirements for all elections and research suggests it has not impacted turnout. However, the Government’s equality impact analysis of the Bill recognised that some groups of electors will find it harder than others to provide photo ID. For these groups it says communication will be important to inform them of the new voter ID requirements and how to get a free voter ID document from their local authority.<sup>155</sup>

The Electoral Commission has scheduled an advertising campaign to inform voters of the requirements. It will run across a combination of mass media and targeted digital channels to maximise the reach of the campaign, including social media, website banners, TV and radio, including on demand

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<sup>152</sup> [HC Deb 7 September 2021 \[Elections Bill\], c200](#)

<sup>153</sup> [HC Deb 7 September 2021 \[Elections Bill\], c252](#)

<sup>154</sup> [HC Deb 7 September 2021 \[Elections Bill\], c200](#)

<sup>155</sup> Elections Bill [Equality Impact Assessment](#), p9

and streaming services, Google search, in-game adverts and traditional newspaper adverts.<sup>156</sup>

During the passage of the Elections Bill, Disability Rights UK told the Bill Committee that communicating the voter ID requirement to disabled voters with very varied needs would be a communication challenge: a communication campaign would have to start well in advance of it being required.<sup>157</sup>

Disability Rights UK also drew attention to the concerns about obtaining a free voter ID card. People without existing appropriate ID face barriers in obtaining official documents - those reasons could be cognitive, sensory, digital exclusion:

We are asking the most disadvantaged people in our community, who have not got one of those other cards, to go and apply for a card. It just does not make any sense. These are the people who are least likely to apply for a card.<sup>158</sup>

The Joint Committee on Human Rights held two evidence sessions after the announcement of the Bill in the Queen's Speech and before the details of its contents had been published. Operation Black Vote (OBV) highlighted the impact on voters in Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. It said some minority groups are already distrustful of public authorities and government institutions. It cited vaccine hesitancy during the Covid-19 vaccine rollout and reluctance to register to vote, as examples. For those who need to apply for ID to vote, OBV said:

if there is another layer of bureaucracy it will be another impediment for a group that is already hesitant about fully engaging in the democratic process.<sup>159</sup>

[Operation Black Vote](#) seeks greater racial justice and equality in the UK by inspiring "BME communities to engage with our public institutions in order to address the persistent race inequalities we face in areas such as: education, health and employment".<sup>160</sup>

## Postal voting

Although postal voting is an option for many people who are unable to visit a polling station, it still presents barriers for some.

The Electoral Commission report of 2019, [Elections for everyone](#), as noted above, showed some voters find forms, including those needed to apply for a postal vote, hard to understand and used too much jargon. Other people said

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<sup>156</sup> Electoral Commission Roll Call voter registration newsletter, 1 November 2022

<sup>157</sup> [HC Deb 16 September 2021 \[Elections Bill \(Fourth sitting\)\], c110](#)

<sup>158</sup> [HC Deb 16 September 2021 \[Elections Bill \(Fourth sitting\)\], c113](#)

<sup>159</sup> As above, Q2

<sup>160</sup> OBV, [About us](#)

there were too many bits of paper, and it was not easy to know which bits of the postal vote went in which envelope.

People gave the Commission examples of how to make postal voting easier, which included audible versions of the instructions, digital information online showing how to apply for a postal and proxy vote, clearer information so that people know they can ask for an alternative versions of the postal voting instructions, easy read version of the postal voting instructions and use of pictures and symbols.<sup>161</sup>

## 7.3 Standing for elections

### Parliament

Parliament can be seen by some as distant from the wider population, partly because for a long time many people did not see a Parliament that reflected much more closely the diversity in society, particularly in relation to certain characteristics.

In 2008 a Speaker's conference was established to: "Consider, and make recommendations for rectifying, the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large".<sup>162</sup>

Its final report, in January 2010, made a number of wide-ranging recommendations. This included recommendations for political parties on culture-change, and government to make legislative provision for unpaid leave or the right for flexible working for candidates seeking election to the House of Commons. It also included recommended actions for the House of Commons to take.

Following the report academic Sarah Childs spent a year embedded in Parliament. Professor Child's report on that year, [The Good Parliament](#), published in July 2016 made over 40 recommendations on how the House of Commons could be more inclusive. It focused on making the Commons more gender-sensitive, but many recommendations address diversity more broadly to make Parliament more representative.

The Women and Equalities Committee from the 2017-19 Parliament undertook an audit of progress made on the recommendations made in the Good Parliament.<sup>163</sup> A further report in 2022 considered further progress made in creating a more gender-sensitive Parliament, along with progress for support for MPs who are parents, such as proxy voting for new parent MPs so they did

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<sup>161</sup> Electoral Commission, [Elections for everyone](#), May 2019

<sup>162</sup> [Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation](#)

<sup>163</sup> Women and Equalities Committee, [Gender Sensitive Parliament \(House of Commons\) inquiry](#), House of Commons Service, [Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group - written evidence](#)

not need to be in the Chamber, and inclusivity in the workplace in Parliament.<sup>164</sup>

The Government responded to the report in June 2022. The response included a response from the House of Commons Commission, the body responsible for the administration and services of the House of Commons. The Commission responded by saying:

We will report to the Committee in six months' time and thereafter annually on progress against recommendations made within our remit in the Good Parliament and Gender Sensitive Parliament reports. We will particularly focus on the three outstanding or ongoing priority areas we identified for action: MPs' security; responding to inquiries established to address bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct; and support for MPs with children and families.<sup>165</sup>

## Political parties

Policies to combat some of the barriers to engagement are for individual political parties, rather than parliament or government. For example, encouraging members from diverse backgrounds to stand as candidates. (Research suggests that people who join political parties are more likely to be white, middle class and educated to a higher level than the people who support those parties.<sup>166</sup>)

The Institute for Government report from 2011, *Party People*, noted that:

Political parties are central to the functioning of Parliament and they are the gatekeepers to parliamentary representation...How parties select their candidates therefore has a significant impact on the representativeness of Parliament and the level of public engagement in the political system.<sup>167</sup>

Candidate selection is a matter for political parties' rules and standing orders and generally speaking is not regulated. Parties are covered by the Equality Act 2010, the UK's anti-discrimination law which protects individuals from unfair treatment based on protected characteristics.

Author Isabel Hardman, writing in 2018, highlighted barriers faced by potential candidates for the House of Commons. Some still faced inappropriate questioning during the selection process even though equalities legislation prevents it. She cites Fabian Society research that surveyed Labour candidates in 2015 and found 22% of women candidates were asked questions that related directly to their gender. She also noted the

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<sup>164</sup> Women and Equalities Committee, [Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons](#), HC 131 2021-22

<sup>165</sup> Women and Equalities Committee, [Second special report - Equality in the heart of democracy: A gender sensitive House of Commons: responses to the Committee's fifth report of session 2021-22](#), HC 417 2022-23, Appendix 2

<sup>166</sup> Mile End Institute, [Grassroots Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do](#) (PDF), January 2018

<sup>167</sup> Institute for government, [Party People: How do - and how should - British political parties select their parliamentary candidates?](#) (PDF), November 2011, p9

cost of standing for Parliament once selected faced by many candidates is borne by the candidate themselves and can be prohibitive.<sup>168</sup> Her work also indicates that the cost of standing for election is preventing “vast swathes of the population who could be excellent MPs but who simply cannot afford it”.<sup>169</sup>

The Institute for Government report, *Party People*, suggested the provision of means-tested bursaries for parliamentary candidates as a way to improve diversity in the “supply” of candidates.<sup>170</sup>

The following policies and legislation have been introduced to help parties improve representation of under-represented groups.

### All-women shortlists

Library Briefing Paper, [All-women shortlists](#) gives more information on the background to all-women shortlists.

### Labour Party

In the 1990s the Labour Party attempted to increase the number of women MPs by using all-women shortlists for selecting Parliamentary candidates. However, the provisions were not universally welcomed within the party. Two potential male candidates affected by women-only shortlists took the Labour Party to an employment tribunal. The 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).<sup>171</sup>

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.

As well as all-women shortlists the Labour Party runs the [Jo Cox Women in Leadership Programme](#), in memory of the Labour MP, Jo Cox. The programme is designed to prepare women to take roles of leadership into politics. Another scheme, MotherRED, is a time-limited fund focussed on financially supporting mums to be selected and then elected as Labour Party candidates to stand for Parliament.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Isabel Hardman, *Why we get the wrong politicians*, 2018, Chapter 1: Getting in

<sup>169</sup> Isabel Hardman, [How ordinary people are priced out of Parliament by the most expensive job interview on earth](#), *Spectator*, 3 September 2018

<sup>170</sup> Institute for government, [Party People: How do – and how should – British political parties select their parliamentary candidates?](#), November 2011

<sup>171</sup> *Jepson and Dyas-Elliott v the Labour Party and others* [1996] IRLR 166

<sup>172</sup> [MotherREDLabour](#), accessed 1 November 2022

## Conservative Party

The Conservative Party does not support the use of quotas or all-women shortlists for candidate selection.

Speaking in 2018, then Party's Vice Chairman for Candidates, Kemi Badenoch said that she was against quotas or all-women shortlists because they were a "short-term fix which do nothing to resolve the underlying problem of why fewer women decide against a career in politics".<sup>173</sup>

In 2017, the Conservative Government responded to a Women and Equalities Committee recommendation for a domestic target of 45% representation of women in Parliament and local government and for a statutory minimum proportion of female parliamentary candidates in general elections for each political part by saying:

The Government does not believe that quotas set out in legislation for parliamentary candidates are the right approach to this issue. It is for political parties, at a local and national level, to determine the best candidate for each constituency based on a range of factors

...

The Government would be willing to support parties on approaches to improve diversity of representation, but does not believe it would be appropriate to dictate what individual parties should do.<sup>174</sup>

The [Women2Win campaign](#) is a Conservative Party campaign that aims to increase the number of Conservative women in Parliament and in public life by training and mentoring female candidates for office.

## Cross-party campaigns

Other cross-party campaigns exist, such as [50:50 Parliament](#) and [Women 50:50 and the Parliament Project](#) is a non-partisan project working to motivate, support and equip women to run for political office in the UK.

The Local Government Association also provides information and support. Examples are its [Twenty-first Century Toolkit to support women, parents and carers](#) and its [Be a councillor toolkit](#) aimed at people from all backgrounds and experiences to put themselves forward for election.

## Other protected characteristics

Although the Equality Act 2010 allows for single-sex shortlists for election candidates, it makes only limited provision to address under-representation for people with other protected characteristics. In drawing up a candidate list, parties may reserve some places for BAME candidates (or for other

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<sup>173</sup> ConservativeHome, [Kemi Badenoch: My plan for candidates – a transparent, democratic process, for an even stronger Party](#), 22 March 2018

<sup>174</sup> Government Response to the Women and Equalities Committee Report on Women in the House of Commons, September 2017, Cm 9492

protected characteristics). But they 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 for candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds.<sup>175</sup> 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. However, some parties have voluntarily published some statistics. The Conservative party reported 12% of its Parliamentary candidates in 2019 were from minority ethnic backgrounds and 31% were female.<sup>176</sup> Figures for the 2010-2017 elections are available on the Labour Party website.<sup>177</sup>

In 2019 the Equality and Human Rights Commission called for Section 106 to be brought into force. Its research said available data were fragmented and often from small samples. It recommended data should be collected in a consistent and transparent manner and that the Government should establish a working group to develop guidance for political parties and representative bodies on how to collate and publish diversity data.<sup>178</sup>

### Disabled candidates

Election expenses for candidates are capped and must be declared. The levels are different for each type of election. Rules have now been changed to exclude the expenses incurred by disabled candidates for reasonable

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<sup>175</sup> Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), Final Report, 11 January 2010, HC 239-I 2009-10, paras 147-149

<sup>176</sup> Conservative Party, [Parliamentary Candidate Diversity Data](#), 2019 General Election

<sup>177</sup> Labour Party, [Building a Representative Parliament](#)

<sup>178</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission, Research report 124: [Diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#), March 2019

adjustments as a result of their disability from the spending limits on candidates.<sup>179</sup>

This permanent change stemmed from the Funds made available by the UK, Scottish and Welsh governments to assist disabled candidates standing for election.

The UK Government's Access to Elected Office Fund was launched in July 2012 and was initially due to run until March 2014.<sup>180</sup> The concept for the Fund came out of the report by the Speaker's Conference. It was extended to cover the 2015 General Election and local elections in England. The Fund was run by a contractor to ensure independence from Government.

The Government Equalities Office jointly published an evaluation report on the Fund in 2018 along with the contractor who ran the scheme.<sup>181</sup>

The evaluation found that:

- Candidates were generally positive about the support the Fund provided for canvassing/leaflet delivery, etc., saying that they could not have stood without the support. However, one said that more funding was needed, e.g. to cover costs of at least one mail drop to every voter, as some mobility impaired candidates were still not as fast as able-bodied candidates.

For some candidates, funding has made a real difference in enabling them to stand for election, whilst for others it has been less effective because the scope of the Fund does not cover costs which all candidates, disabled or non-disabled, can face. This is reinforced by the fact that disabled people on average have less disposable income than non-disabled people.

The evaluation noted that the Fund was expensive to administer as it was a "a 'niche product' for a very small market (and one which is unlikely to grow significantly) and without any meaningful comparator". No two candidates had the same requirements.

Overall it found a need "for extreme caution in making comparisons, assumptions and in claiming any form of 'success' or otherwise" because, although clearly making a difference to the people the Fund helped, it had to be viewed in the context of assisting about 58 local election candidates in the period of the fund out of 60,000 candidates in total.<sup>182</sup>

The [EnAble Fund for Elected Office](#) was launched in December 2018. It was launched as an interim fund with £250,000 to support disabled candidates,

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<sup>179</sup> The changes were implemented via various statutory instruments, but see for example the [Representation of the People \(Election Expenses Exclusion\) \(Amendment\) Order 2019](#)

<sup>180</sup> [HC Deb 9 July 2012, c8WS](#)

<sup>181</sup> [Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund 2012 to 2015 Report by: Government Equalities Office \("GEO"\) And Digital Outreach Ltd \("Convey"\)](#), p11

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, p14

primarily for the English local elections in 2019.<sup>183</sup> It was also due to cover local and PCC elections in May 2020.<sup>184</sup>

Answering a Parliamentary Question in February 2020, Victoria Atkins said:

For the 2019 English Local elections the Fund received 46 applications, with 41 grants approved for disabled candidates.<sup>185</sup>

Like the Access to Elected Office Fund, the EnAble Fund was operated under contract to ensure independence from Government. The contractor was Disability Rights UK.

However, the fund was closed in March 2020. The UK Government has no plans to make the EnAble fund more permanent, saying:

We have been clear that the responsibility for supporting disabled candidates sits with political parties and that the EnAble Fund was an interim measure to give parties time to put their own support in place.<sup>186</sup>

The Government did, however, provide funding to the Local Government Association for a bespoke national campaign to encourage disabled people to find out more about becoming a councillor.<sup>187</sup> The LGA's new guide: [Improving access to local government elected office for disabled people](#) (PDF), was published in June 2022, along with [an easy read version](#) (PDF).

Both devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales made funds available in similar schemes.

The [Access To Elected Office Fund Scotland](#) initially ran as a pilot from August 2016 to 2017 for the local government elections in Scotland in May 2017. The 2017 Evaluation found that 100% of candidates surveyed felt “very supported” by the Inclusion Scotland team. 8% of candidates surveyed said that the Fund “completely” removed the barriers they faced. 58% said “mostly”, and 34% said “some”.<sup>188</sup>

Following the 2017 evaluation it was announced that the Fund would remain open to cover the Scottish Parliament elections scheduled to take place in May 2022.<sup>189</sup> Like the English schemes, it was run at arms-length from government by [Inclusion Scotland](#).

The Welsh government has announced a pilot [Access to Elected Office Fund Wales](#). It consulted on a pilot scheme in November 2020.<sup>190</sup> The aim was for a

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<sup>183</sup> [WPQ 198797 \[EnAble Fund for Elected Office\]](#), 11 December 2018

<sup>184</sup> [WPQ 21957 \[EnAble Fund for Elected Office\]](#), 5 March 2020

<sup>185</sup> [WPQ 13485 \[EnAble Fund for Elected Office: Applications\]](#), 11 February 2020

<sup>186</sup> WPQ 59302 [[Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund and EnAble Fund for Elected Office](#)], October 2022

<sup>187</sup> LGA, [Improving access to local government elected office for disabled people](#)

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p20

<sup>189</sup> [Inclusion Scotland, Press Release: Successful Access to Elected Office Fund reopens](#), May 2018

<sup>190</sup> Welsh Government, [Arrangements for the Access to Elected Office fund Consultation on the introduction of a fund to assist disabled people to stand for elected office in Wales](#),

fund to support candidates in the 2021 Senedd elections and local government elections due in Wales in May 2022.

The Fund was approved by the Welsh government. As in England and Scotland, the Fund operated independently of government, by Disability Wales. The Fund opened to applications from 15 February 2021.<sup>191</sup>

The next scheduled elections to the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments are May 2026 and local elections in both countries are scheduled for 2027.

## Intimidation of candidates and representatives

After the 2017 General Election the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, asked the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) to conduct a short review of the issue of intimidation experienced by electoral candidates.<sup>192</sup>

The CSPL reported in December 2017. In his introduction to the report, Chair of the Committee, Lord Bew, said:

Intimidatory behaviour is already affecting the way in which MPs are relating to their constituents, has put off candidates who want to serve their communities from standing for public offices, and threatens to damage the vibrancy and diversity of our public life. However, the Committee believes that our political culture can be protected from further damage if action is taken now.<sup>193</sup>

The Committee found the overwhelming view of Parliamentary candidates who provided evidence was that intimidation is already discouraging individuals from standing for public offices

A clear finding of our review is that intimidation is disproportionately likely to be directed towards women, those from ethnic and religious minorities, and LGBT candidates. A failure to tackle such abuse will perpetuate inequalities in Britain's public life and restrict the diversity of those representing the public.<sup>194</sup>

The report included many recommendations aimed at political parties and social media companies. The CSPL called on the Government to consult on a new electoral offence of intimidating candidates and party campaigners, and to change the law so candidates in elections no longer needed to disclose their home address on ballot papers.

The law has now been changed so that home addresses no longer appear on ballot papers for Parliamentary or local elections.

Research into the delivery of local elections in England in May 2022 by the Electoral Commission found that of candidates who responded to a survey:

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<sup>191</sup> Disability Wales, [Access to Elected Office Fund Wales](#)

<sup>192</sup> Cabinet Office, [Review into abuse and intimidation in elections](#), press release 12 July 2017.

<sup>193</sup> CSPL, [Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life](#), 13 December 2017

<sup>194</sup> As above, p79

- two-fifths of respondents (40%) said they experienced some kind of problem, rating this as a 2 or above on a scale from 1 to 5
- just under one in 10 (8%) reported having a serious problem (rated 4 or 5 out of 5)
- nearly a fifth (18%) witnessed threats, abuse or intimidation towards those campaigning on their behalf.<sup>195</sup>

Local Government Association research found councillors and candidates with protected characteristics were more likely to receive personalised abuse. Misogyny, racism and homophobia were particularly highlighted in the responses. It also found the abuse can impact councillors' willingness to stand for re-election or deter others from considering standing for public office.<sup>196</sup>

The Elections Act 2022 also introduced a new electoral sanction aimed at deterring intimidation and punishing those that take part in it. Someone found guilty of intimidating a candidate during an election period could be disqualified from being nominated for election, being elected to or holding certain elective offices for five years.<sup>197</sup>

This provision had cross-party support. The provision is not yet in force, and is likely to be activated in 2023.

Harassment and intimidation of elected representatives at other times is not specifically covered by the new electoral sanction. Incidences must be dealt with by the police and courts. There have been several recent convictions of people stalking, harassing or threatening MPs.<sup>198</sup>

## 7.4

### Trust in politics

Trust in politicians and parties has been in decline for some time. The Power Inquiry of 2006 found “main political parties are widely held in contempt”, were seen as offering no real choice to citizens and “lacking in principle”.<sup>199</sup>

Political parties face contradictions in attempting to win people's trust. A Hansard Society report from 2010, [What's Trust Got To Do With It?](#), published in the wake of the MP expenses scandal of 2008-09 found the public held MPs to a higher ethical standard than they hold themselves, which, the report

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<sup>195</sup> Commission, [Report on the May 2022 local elections in England](#), September 2022

<sup>196</sup> LGA, [Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy](#), June 2022

<sup>197</sup> Library briefing, [Elections Bill 2021-22](#)

<sup>198</sup> For example, Guardian, [Woman jailed for death threats to Bradford MP Naz Shah](#), January 2022; Crown Prosecution Service, [Man who harassed Vauxhall MP sentenced](#), June 2021; Northamptonshire Telegraph, [Prison for harasser who forced Kettering MP to hide in woods](#), March 2022; Independent, [Far-right Brexiteer who was 'obsessed' with former MP Anna Soubry jailed for harassment](#), December 2019

<sup>199</sup> [Power to the People](#), The Power Inquiry, February 2006, p28-9

suggests, is not consistent with the view that politicians should also be 'ordinary people'. The public also wanted more independently-minded MPs willing to vote against the party line, but they recoil from any party that is perceived to be split. It also found the public lack proper understanding of what an MP does and no consensus about what the role and function of MPs should be.<sup>200</sup>

More recent surveys continue to show distrust of politics and politicians and lack of faith in the ability to change things by voting.

The Trust in Government survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics found that 20% of the UK population reported trust in the political parties.<sup>201</sup> An Ipsos poll published in August 2022 found 30% of those surveyed trust their own MP, but this fell to 19% when asked about MPs in general. The same poll found that when asked whether then Prime Minister told the truth, 61% said never or not very often. The corresponding figure for Leader of the Opposition Keir Starmer was 33%.<sup>202</sup>

A 2019 Demos report argues the disconnection in modern life, for example increased division, and more information online and less trust in it, and the political systems failure to keep pace are feeding the decline in trust. Online campaigning, particular social media, it says, has led to campaigning that is opaque and nearly impossible to track. Increased tribalism in parties, where membership is more ideologically extreme than both elected representatives and the wider public, makes finding common ground harder. The parties themselves remain detached from the electorate. The report argues that parties who remain the gatekeepers of political participation have also failed to open themselves up to the wider public.<sup>203</sup>

The Electoral Commission's regular survey work shows that voters still have confidence in the way elections and electoral registration are run by their local councils. However, there are negative views on the transparency of party funding and election spending.<sup>204</sup>

The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) published its latest report on the regulation of campaign finance in July 2021.<sup>205</sup> It recommends increasing voter access to information about how money is spent at elections and referendums in the age of digital campaigning and tightening the rules around the rules on the sources of donations to political parties. The Government is considering the report and has said it will look in detail at the

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<sup>200</sup> Hansard Society, [What's Trust Got To Do With It? Public Trust in and Expectations of Politicians and Parliament](#), 2010

<sup>201</sup> ONS, [Trust in government, UK: 2022](#), July 2022

<sup>202</sup> IPSOS, [6 in 10 do not trust Boris Johnson to tell the truth, nearly twice as many as Keir Starmer](#), August 2022

<sup>203</sup> Demos, [Bringing Britain Together: A manifesto for consensus politics](#), November 2019

<sup>204</sup> Electoral Commission, [Public Opinion Tracker 2022](#),

<sup>205</sup> CSPL, [Regulating Election Finance: report](#), July 2021

recommendations and “consider the implications and practicalities” of the recommendations.<sup>206</sup>

Voters are also mistrustful of campaigning by parties. Just under half (48%) disagree that the information available online about politics is trustworthy and 46% say they think political campaigning online is untrue or misleading.<sup>207</sup>

In July 2019 the UK Government announced a Defending Democracy Programme, which is a cross-government programme, led by the Cabinet Office, to “protect democratic processes; strengthen the integrity of elections; encourage respect for open and safe democratic participation; and promote open, fact-based discourse.”<sup>208</sup>

The Government’s Online Safety Bill includes protections to protect freedom of speech and allow users to engage in robust debate online. It will also, according to the Government’s factsheet on the Bill:

consider how to tackle wider harms to democracy caused by false information (the legislation will establish an expert advisory committee on mis- and disinformation which could include consideration of this — Ofcom will also be able to establish bespoke advisory committees to build understanding of emerging societal harms that would not be addressed by the duty of care alone).<sup>209</sup>

## Citizen involvement

Some argue that greater citizen engagement is part of the solution.

In late 2019 the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is announced pilot schemes under its Innovation in Democracy Programme (iIDP). This is a new programme aimed involving people in local decision-making through participatory democracy. This might be through citizens’ juries or assemblies, where a random selection of the local population accounting for age, ethnicity, gender and potentially other characteristics could be brought together to consider a topic.

The Irish Parliament has commissioned two citizens assemblies in recent years. The recommendations of those assemblies led to change, via referendums, to the Irish constitution on same sex marriage and abortion.<sup>210</sup> The Library briefing, [Constitutional Conventions and Citizens’ Assemblies: power to the people?](#) Has more information on the use of citizens’ assemblies.

The Local Government Association has [highlighted some recent examples](#), including Assembly North, which considered devolution in South Yorkshire.

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<sup>206</sup> Cabinet Office, [Government response to ‘Regulating Election Finance’](#), September 2021

<sup>207</sup> Electoral Commission, [Public Opinion Tracker 2022](#), June 2022

<sup>208</sup> [Written statement 146944 \[Social Media: Disinformation\]](#), 1 February 2021

<sup>209</sup> [Online Safety Bill: factsheet. What the Bill says about protections for democracy](#), April 2022

<sup>210</sup> Involve, [The citizens’ assemblies behind the Irish abortion referendum](#), May 2018

The UK Parliament also used this approach. [Climate Assembly UK](#) was the first UK-wide citizens assembly on climate change. It was commissioned by six House of Commons Select Committees and published its final report in September 2020.

## Citizenship education

Educating younger citizens is also seen as important. In Electoral Commission survey work, 79% of parents of children aged 14-18 agree that it is important that children learn the basics about politics, voting and democracy at school. More parents are dissatisfied (35%) with the information that their children aged 14 to 18 receive about politics and democracy, compared to the 26% who are satisfied.<sup>211</sup>

Citizenship is a compulsory National Curriculum subject at key stages 3 and 4 (pupils aged 11-16) and so is taught in all local authority maintained secondary schools in England. It is also part of the curriculum at some academy and free schools, and independent schools, although those schools are not required to follow the National Curriculum.

New statutory programmes of study for citizenship were introduced from September 2014. The new [programmes of study and attainment targets for citizenship at key stages 3 and 4](#) were published in September 2013, and the DfE has also published a [non-statutory programme of study for Key Stages 1 and 2](#).

The [KS 3 and 4 programme](#) sets out the aims of citizenship education:

The national curriculum for citizenship aims to ensure that all pupils:

- acquire a sound knowledge and understanding of how the United Kingdom is governed, its political system and how citizens participate actively in its democratic systems of government
- develop a sound knowledge and understanding of the role of law and the justice system in our society and how laws are shaped and enforced
- develop an interest in, and commitment to, participation in volunteering as well as other forms of responsible activity, that they will take with them into adulthood
- are equipped with the skills to think critically and debate political questions, to enable them to manage their money on a day-to-day basis, and plan for future financial needs.

Education is a devolved matter. The Scottish Curriculum for Excellence includes [resources on political literacy](#). The Welsh curriculum is changing and one of the four purposes of [the new curriculum](#) is to support learners to become “ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world.”

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<sup>211</sup> Electoral Commission, [Public Opinion Tracker 2022](#), June 2022

When the Welsh Parliament was considering reducing the voting age to 16 for devolved elections in Wales it convened an Expert Panel to consider the issue. The Expert panel concluded that 16- and 17-year-olds were most likely to engage with the democratic process if the extension of the right to vote was combined with a targeted information campaign:

As few places have reduced the minimum voting age to 16, evidence allowing these arguments to be tested remains limited. However, what evidence there is tends to support the expectation that 16- and 17-year-olds are indeed more likely to vote than 18 to 24-year-olds, if their enfranchisement is part of a package that also includes the provision of information tailored specifically for this age group.<sup>212</sup>

Welsh local council elections of May 2022 were the first time 16- and 17-year-olds could vote in local elections in Wales. The Electoral Commission partnered with [The Democracy Box](#), working with the project's young co-creators and focus group participants aged 16-26 to gain feedback on its resources for young people. Its work showed the feedback from young people was that they had:

- a lack of understanding as to how to participate in our democratic process
- a lack of motivation to engage in elections due to insufficient knowledge about candidates, parties and the process in general.

The Commission report on the elections recommended the Welsh Government should consider continuing to provide an additional resource to local authorities to increase registration rates and support participation amongst newly enfranchised and under-registered groups, building upon the work.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> National Assembly for Wales, [The report of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform](#) (PDF), December 2017, p188

<sup>213</sup> Electoral Commission, [Report on the May 2022 elections in Wales](#)

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