



BRIEFING PAPER

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Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?

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1. Summary

People are politically disengaged if they do not know, value or participate in the democratic process. In the UK, political disengagement takes different forms and is more prevalent among certain groups than others. This paper considers characteristics associated with several indicators of political disengagement: selected political attitudes; levels of participation in political activities; electoral registration; voting; and elected councillors, candidates and MPs.

Age: young people are less likely to register to vote, vote and be elected, and to participate in selected political activities, but **older people** tend to have more negative attitudes about politics. The average age of councillors, candidates and MPs is over 50.

Ethnicity: people from minority ethnic groups were less likely to be registered to vote, vote and be elected. **People from white groups** were more likely to have negative attitudes to politics and participate less in political activities.

Social grade: unskilled workers and the long-term unemployed were more politically disengaged than people from other occupational backgrounds, as measured against all the indicators included in this paper. 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.

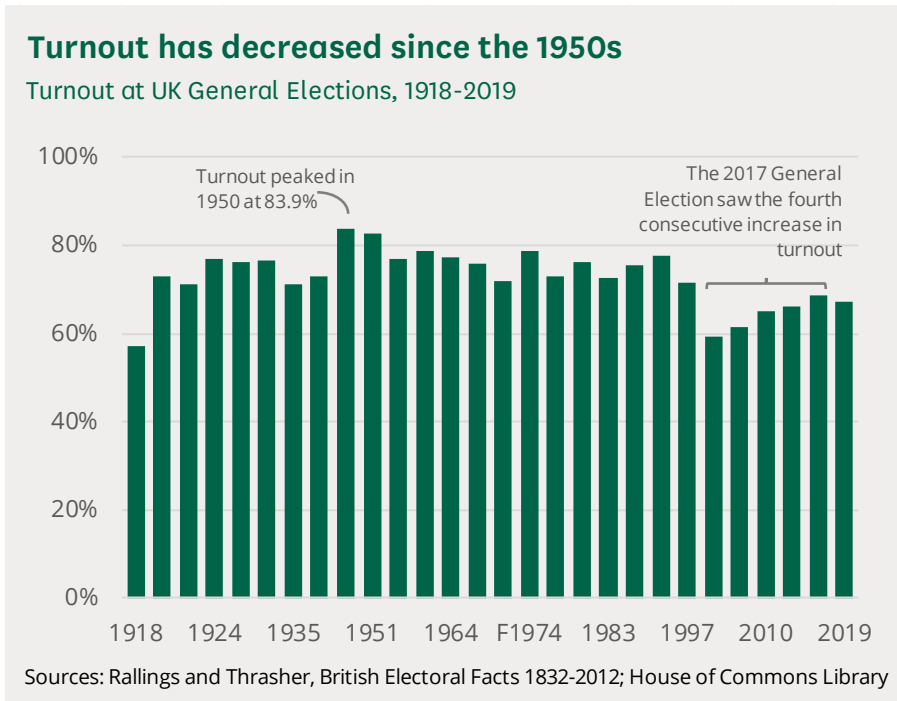
Gender: women tend to have more negative attitudes to politics than men, and to be less likely to participate in political activities. Men and women are equally likely to register to vote and – usually – to vote, although women were less likely to vote at the 2019 General Election. Women are underrepresented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

Research suggests while some people are unhappy with the way democracy functions and would like to have more opportunities to participate, others share their unhappiness but not their appetite for more involvement.

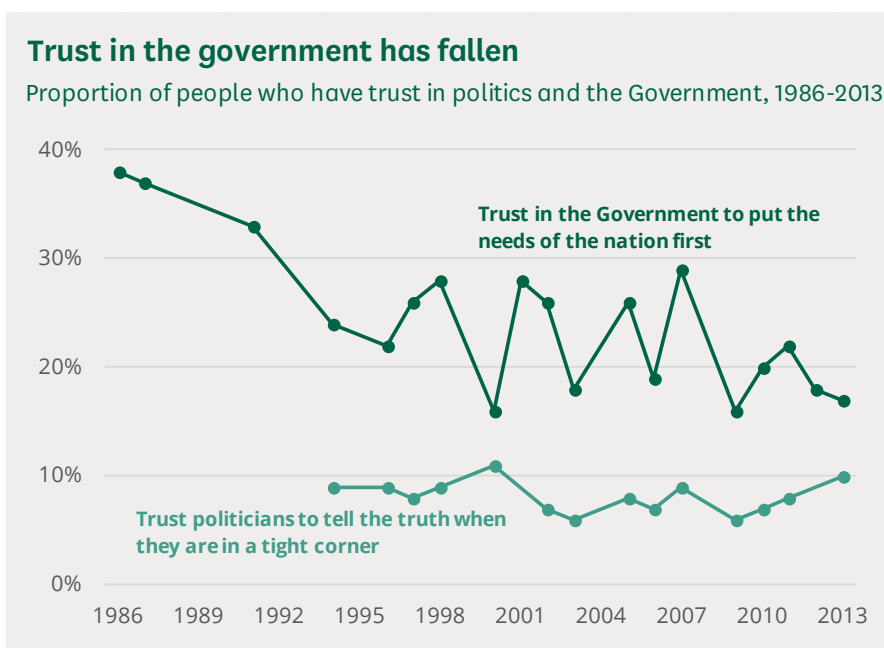
The Government has used a variety of measures to address different forms of political disengagement in the UK.

2. Political disengagement

Falling levels of voter turnout and trust in governments across Western democracies have raised concerns about political disengagement. In the UK, voter turnout has not returned to the levels seen in the 1950s, 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 decreased from 38% in 1986 to 17% in 2013. Trust in politicians has been fluctuating around 9%.



Source: [British Social Attitudes data](#)

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.¹

2.1 Defining political (dis)engagement

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

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

An individual (group) can be considered democratically [politically] engaged to the extent that he/she (it) is positively engaged behaviourally and psychologically with the political system and associated democratic norms.²

Positive engagement does not mean approval: it can take the forms of (non-violent) 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 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.

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 are thought to affect the legitimacy of a government, its policies and the wider political system.

2.2 Types of disengagement

Political disengagement can take different forms, shaped by different factors. Political scientist Paul Webb argues that 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;

¹ Miranda Philips and Ian Simpson, 'Politics', British Social Attitudes Survey, 32, 2013.

² David Sanders, Stephen Fisher, Anthony Heath and Maria Sobolewska, 'The democratic engagement of Britain's ethnic minorities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2014, 37:1, p. 123

- 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.³

Academics Jennings, Stoker and 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.⁴

Variation between groups

There is disagreement about how to interpret the fact that political engagement varies among groups in society. Some cast political disengagement as a failure of individual citizens to live up to their democratic obligations.⁵ Many experts, however, highlight how socioeconomic structures in society may prevent certain people from participating in democracy fully and on an equal basis:⁶ people in different groups may not have the same opportunities and resources to get involved in political activities.⁷

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.⁸

There is also a risk unequal engagement creates a vicious circle where 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.⁹

³ 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, pp. 135-141

⁴ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker & Joe Twyman, '[The Dimensions and Impact of Political Discontent in Britain](#)', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2016, 69:4, 876-900

⁵ See for example: William Galston, '[Civic education and political participation](#)', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 2004, 37:2, 263-6

⁶ 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

⁷ See Phil Parvin, '[Democracy without participation: a new politics for a disengaged era](#)', *Res Publica*, 2018, 24, 31-52

⁸ Matthew Lawrence, '[Political inequality](#)', Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), April 2015

⁹ Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, '[Divided Democracy](#)', IPPR, November 2013, p. 4-5

2.3 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. This paper therefore focuses on a range of indicators, described in the next section.

The paper identifies characteristics that are associated with low levels of political engagement: people with these characteristics are more likely to be politically disengaged. 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 an ethnic minority 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 that 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 some examples of other characteristics potentially associated with political disengagement.

Characteristics not covered in this paper: examples

Disabilities

People with disabilities face additional obstacles to political participation: for example, wheelchair users may find it more difficult to get to a polling station or access buildings to attend events (which makes it difficult to stand for office), and people with learning disabilities may find it difficult to register to vote. Disabled election candidates also perceived the UK's political culture as ableist and unwilling to adapt to disabled people.¹⁰ [Reportedly](#), there are five MPs with a disability in the House of Commons, compared with [19% of the working-age population](#).

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.¹¹ 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.¹² However, others have found increased levels of political participation (though not necessarily voting) among people from minority ethnic groups who regularly attended religious services, especially among Muslims and Sikhs.¹³ There is no data on the religious beliefs of MPs, but after the 2019 General Election there were reportedly [18 Muslim MPs](#).

¹⁰ Mencap, '[People with a learning disability's passion for politics thwarted by system that excludes them](#)', October 2014; Elizabeth Evans & Stephanie Reher, '[Disability and political representation: analysing the obstacles to elected office in the UK](#)', International Political Science Review, October 2020

¹¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, '[2015 Protected characteristics factsheets: religion](#)', December 2016

¹² Nicole Martin, '[Are British Muslims alienated from mainstream politics by Islamophobia and British foreign policy?](#)', Ethnicities, 2017, 17:3, 350-370

¹³ 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

Sexual orientation

There is little research on the association between sexual orientation and political participation. Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people across Europe were found to be more likely to support political parties on the left.¹⁴ LGB & Transsexual people were found to feel inadequately represented and concerns about discrimination and abuse were a barrier to standing for office.¹⁵ [After the 2019 General Election](#), there were at least 45 MPs who were openly gay, lesbian or bisexual.

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

Overview of main sources of statistics on political engagement

Turnout at elections

Data for voter turnout is conventionally measured by comparing the number of valid votes at an election with the numbers registered to vote. The House of Commons Library paper [UK Election Statistics](#) provides turnout data for all elections in the UK.

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

British Social Attitudes (BSA) is an annual survey from 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 - <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/>

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

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. For example, the margin of error for the 2019 Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement was $\pm 3.6\%$ (at the 95% confidence level). Error margins will be larger for smaller subsets of the sample, such as age groups.

2.4 Indicators of political disengagement

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 that the proportion of people who believe they have a duty to vote has decreased from 76% in 1987 to 66% in 2015.¹⁶

¹⁴ 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

¹⁵ 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

¹⁶ John Curtice, [British Social Attitudes: Politics](#), 33, 2015

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But some attitudes can be understood as a manifestation of political engagement in themselves: for example, a lack of faith in the responsiveness of the democratic system to one's interests, or a lack of interest in politics.

The Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement (APE) surveys several political attitudes each year. This paper covers three of the 'core indicators':

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

This paper also covers a further question from the APE:

- To what extent would you like to be involved in decision making in the country as a whole?

Lower scores on these indicators suggest lower levels of engagement.

Political activities

The APE asks respondents if they have participated in one or more of the following activities in the last 12 months, and if they would do so if they cared strongly about an issue:

- Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation
- Voted in an election
- Created or signed a paper petition
- Created or signed an e-petition
- Contacted a local councillor or MP/MSP/Welsh Assembly Member
- Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons
- Taken an active part in a campaign
- Contributed to a discussion or campaign online or on social media
- Taken part in a public consultation
- Contacted the media
- Attended political meetings
- Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party
- Taken part in a demonstration, picket, or march

This range includes both 'traditional' political activities such as voting and contacting elected representatives, and newer types of activities, such as online campaigning and signing e-petitions.

Electoral registration

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

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

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.”¹⁷

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

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 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 because turnout tends to be overreported. The British Election Study checks if people who say they voted actually did so.¹⁸

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).¹⁹ 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, so that there could be a vicious circle where people respond to (apparent) political indifference to their interests by not voting, reducing the incentive for political parties to address their interests.²⁰

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

¹⁷ Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

¹⁸ Although this has not yet been done for the 2019 data, because of the pandemic. Other estimates can be scaled to actual figures

¹⁹ Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, [The 2015 general election: aspects of participation and administration](#), Electoral Commission, August 2015, p. 6

²⁰ Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, [Divided Democracy](#), IPPR, November 2013, p. 4-5

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be more likely to be politically engaged if they see themselves (or people 'like them') represented in elected bodies: studies have found that women are more likely to be politically engaged if they can vote for female candidates.²¹

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

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

In recent years, the number and proportion of female and minority ethnic MPs has increased, while the number and proportion of MPs with a manual labour background has decreased.

²¹ See for example Lonna Rae Atkeson, '[Not all cues are created equal: the conditional impact of female candidates on political engagement](#)', The Journal of Politics, 2003, 65:4, p. 1040-61

3. Age

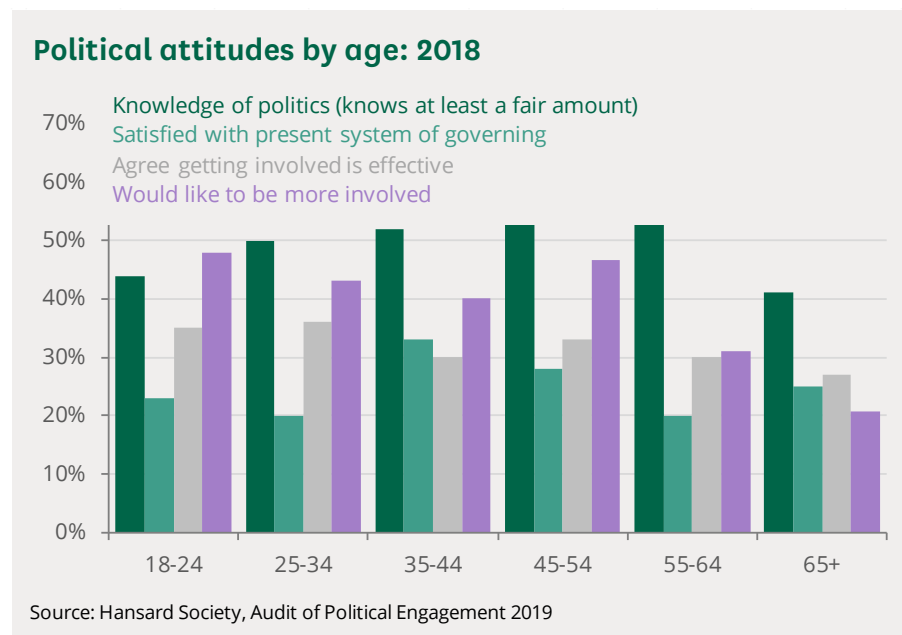
Political disengagement among young people has been well-documented, with studies showing that while young people participate less in traditional, formal politics (e.g. voting and party membership), they do engage in other forms of participation in political life.²²

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

3.1 Attitudes

The chart below shows that whilst 18-24-year olds report relatively low levels of knowledge about politics (second behind people aged 65+), they do not necessarily hold more negative attitudes towards the political system overall. They are more likely than other age groups to say they would like to be more involved in decision-making.

Note that error margins for the APE data shown here and below are fairly large (about ± 7 percentage points).



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

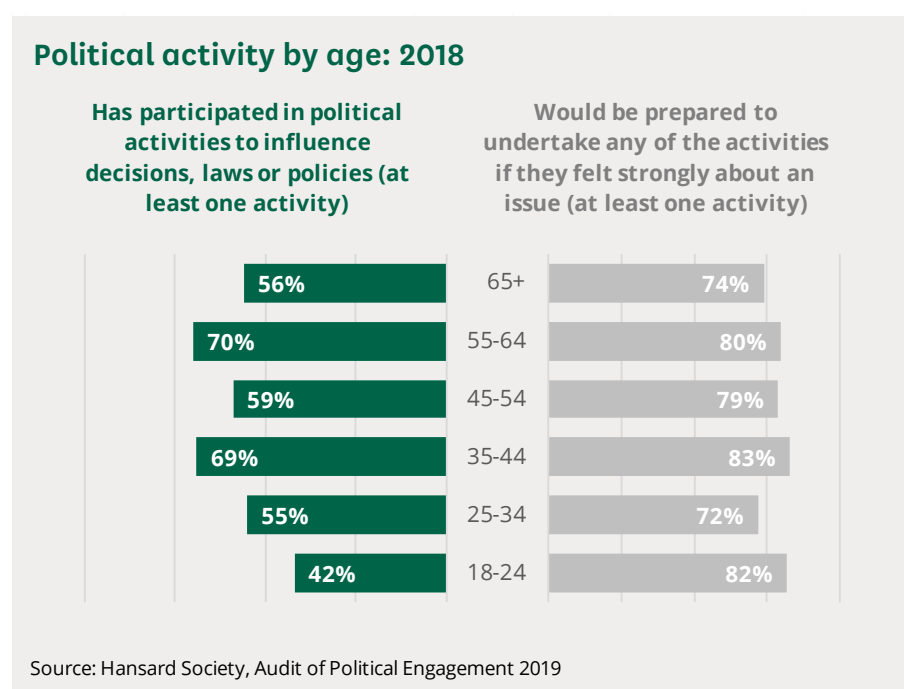
²² E.g. Ana Isabel Pontes, Matt Henn & Mark D Griffiths, '[Youth political \(dis\)engagement and the need for citizenship education](#)', in Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 2017, 14:1, 3-21

“successive governments and periodic social and economic crises, political scandal and failures in policy delivery.”²³

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.²⁴

3.2 Political activities

The above shows that people aged 25-34 and 18-24 were the most likely groups to feel getting involved is effective. Nevertheless, 18-24-year olds were the least likely to say they have participated in political activities.



Some argue that young people participate in different ways, which may not be captured in the activities measured above.²⁵ 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.²⁶

3.3 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)

²³ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, ‘[The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain](#)’, Parliamentary Affairs, 2016, 876-900

²⁴ Maria Sobolewska & Rob Ford, *Brexitland*, 2020, Cambridge University Press, pp. 135-141

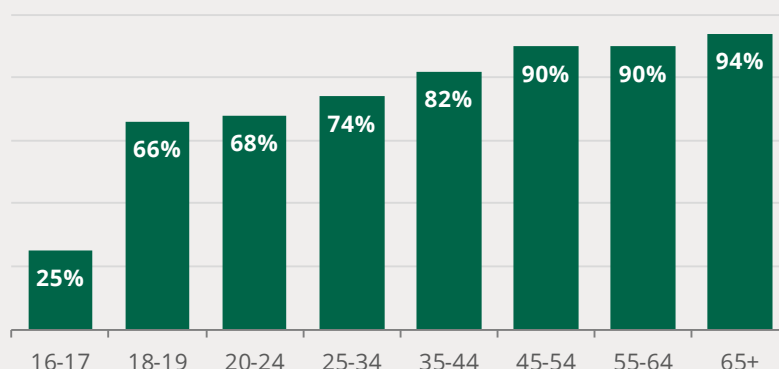
²⁵ See Matt Henn and Nick Foard, ‘[Young people, political participation and trust in Britain](#)’, Parliamentary Affairs, 2021, 65:1, 47-67

²⁶ 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

were least likely to be registered. In 2015, 45% of them were registered, falling to 25% in 2018.²⁷

Electoral registration by age

Completeness of the December 2018 local government electoral registers



Source: Electoral Commission, 2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain, October 2019

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

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 a degree level were estimated to be on the electoral register in December 2015, compared with 57% of those with no qualification.²⁸

The Electoral Commission notes that in part, lower levels of registration among young people are explained by the fact that young people move to a new house more often, and this has a strong impact on registration. However, the Commission found that housing alone does not explain the phenomenon: “lower levels of engagement with politics and voting are also relevant factors”.²⁹

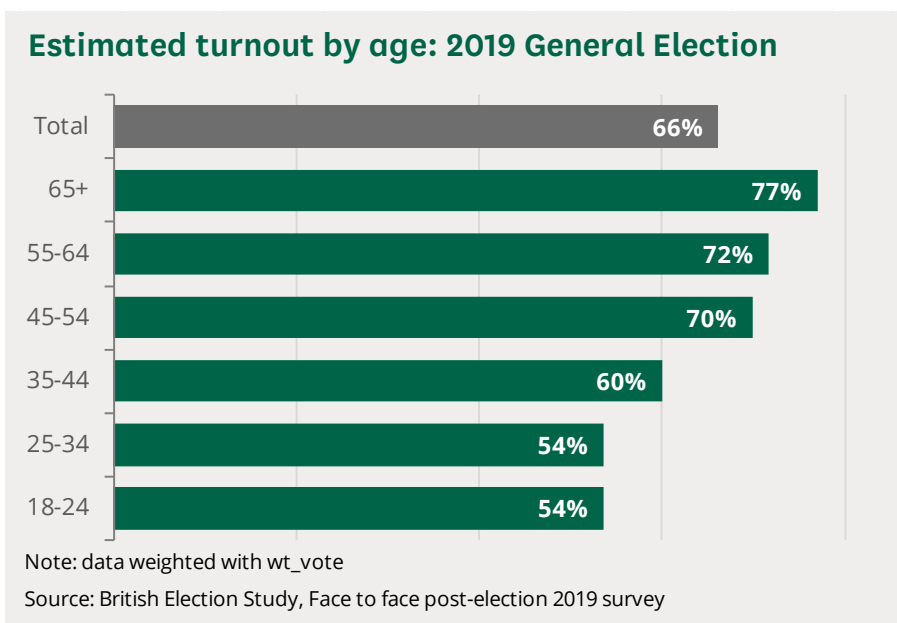
3.4 Voting

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 $\pm 4\%$). 54% of 18-24-year olds turned out to vote, compared with 77% of people over 65.

²⁷ Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

²⁸ Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016, p. 45-47

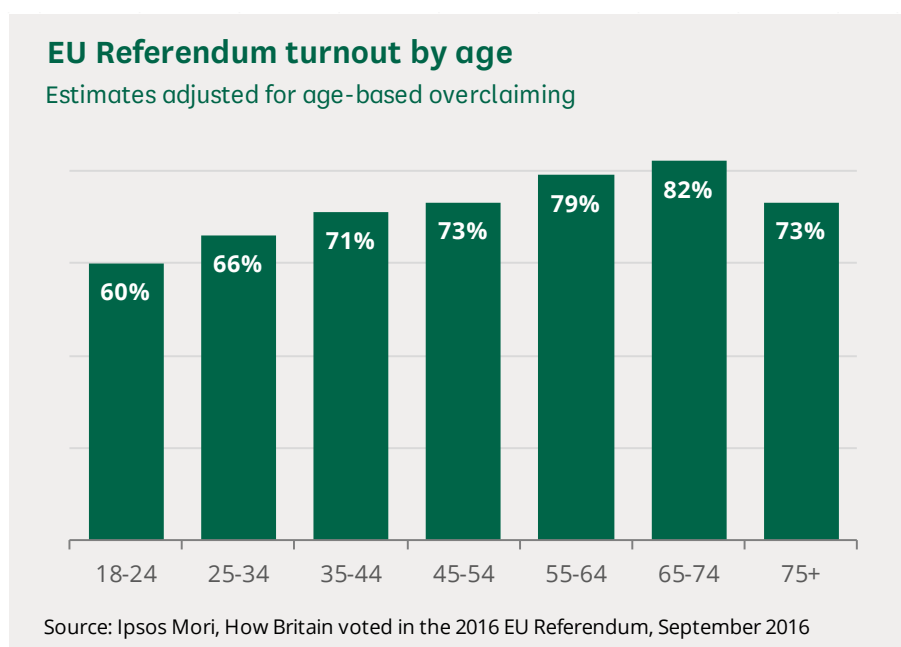
²⁹ Ibid



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.³⁰

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.



Ipsos Mori have also provided estimates of the proportion of the overall population (rather than the people on the electoral register) who turned

³⁰ Joe Chrisp & Nick Pearce, '[The rise of the grey vote](#)', IPR blog (University of Bath), 21 May 2019 [accessed 16 February 2021]

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.³¹

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%).

3.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

In 2012, the average age of councillors, MPs and party members was over 50 years.³²

Councillors

The [2018 Census of Local Authority Councillors](#) noted that the average age of councillors was 59 years in 2018, and that 15% were aged under 45 and 43% were 65 or over.³³

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 [diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#). The authors found that based on a sample of 907 out of 3,195 candidates (28%), "56% of all the candidates standing for the main parties were over 50, compared with 48% of the general population."³⁴

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 (Years)	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Not specified	Total
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	14	102	190	197	114	28	5	650
2019	51.0	21	109	182	194	105	21	18	650

Note: Age at the time of general election □

Source: House of Commons Library MP database and public sources where not found on MP database

³¹ IPSOS Mori, [How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum](#), 5 September 2016.

³² Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, 'The party politics of youth citizenship and democratic engagement', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 65:1, p. 144

³³ [Census of Local Authority Councillors 2018](#), LGA research report, March 2019

³⁴ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#), March 2019, p17

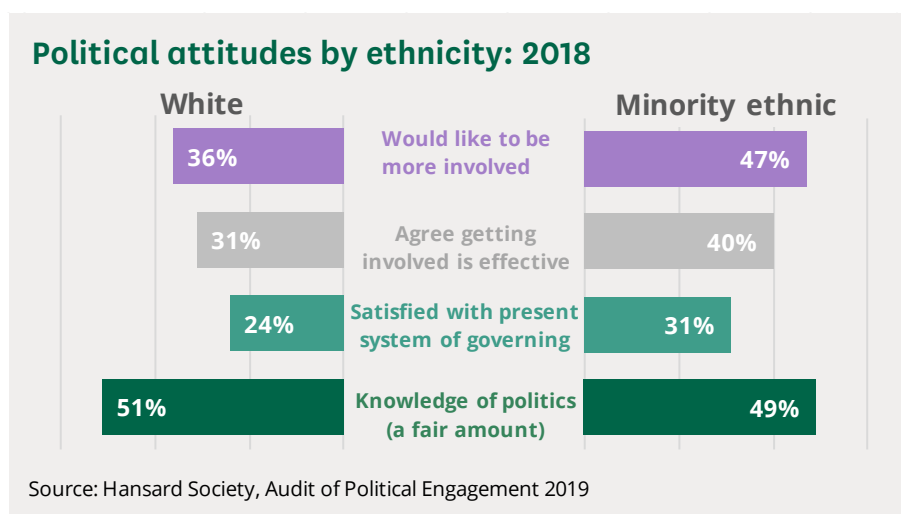
4. Ethnicity

Research discussed here usually 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. They were more likely to have positive attitudes to politics and participate more in political activities.

4.1 Attitudes

The chart below shows political attitudes among people from white groups and minority ethnic groups in Britain, as measured in the 2019 APE.³⁵ Minority ethnic groups appear more engaged than white groups, although there is substantial uncertainty around these estimates (the error margin for the minority ethnic group is about ± 7 percentage points and for the white group ± 3 percentage points).



Research suggests that young people from minority ethnic groups are more likely to develop attachments to political parties than their white peers;³⁶ and that political disengagement has been especially pronounced among young white people with lower levels of formal education.³⁷

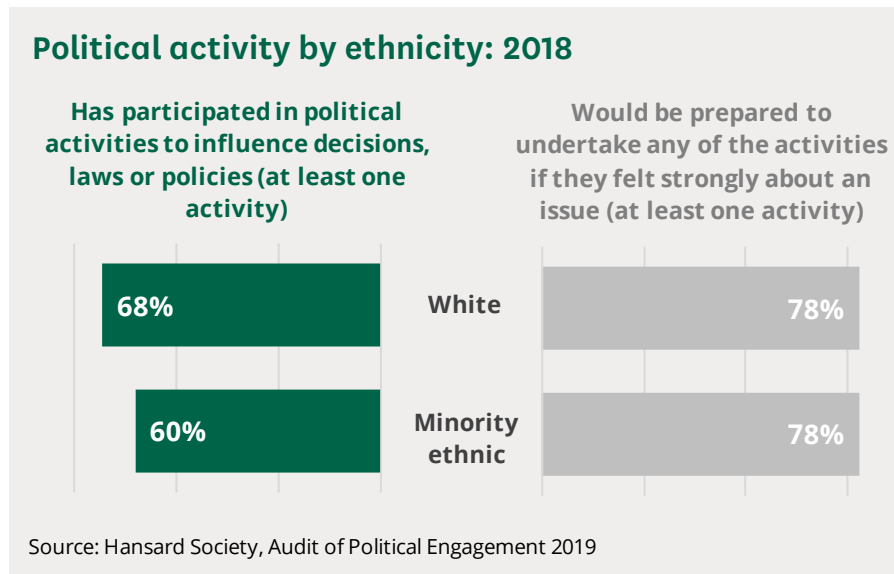
³⁵ White includes all survey respondents who categorise themselves as white (e.g. White British, White Gypsy/Traveller); people selecting any other categories (including mixed origins) are counted as minority ethnic groups

³⁶ 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

³⁷ Maria Sobolewska & Rob Ford, *Brexitland*, 2020, Cambridge University Press, pp. 135-141

4.2 Political activities

The chart below shows data from the 2019 APE, showing that people from minority ethnic and white groups were equally likely to say they would participate in one or more of a range of political activities if they felt strongly about an issue. People from minority ethnic groups were more likely than people from white groups to report they had participated in political activities, although this finding needs to be read with caution due to uncertainty around the estimates mentioned above.



This finding differs from earlier research suggesting that white people were more likely to participate in political activities than people from minority ethnic groups.³⁸

4.3 Electoral registration

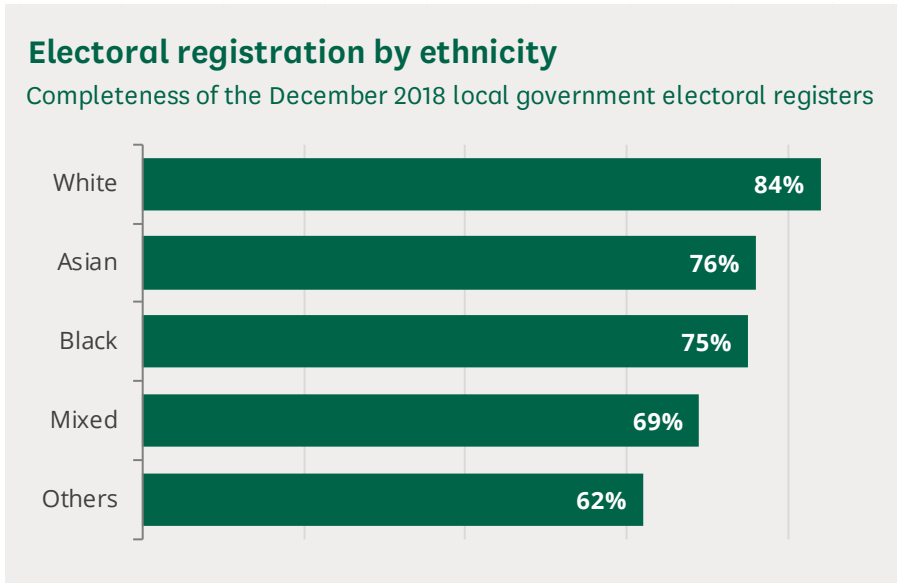
People from minority ethnic groups are less likely to be included on the electoral register than white people in Britain. Academics Anthony Heath et al found that non-registration was higher among minority ethnic groups: 25% of first generation and 20% of second generation ethnic minorities who were eligible to register to vote had not done so, compared to 10% of the white population.³⁹

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.⁴⁰

³⁸ 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

³⁹ Ibid, p. 136-7

⁴⁰ Omar Khan, ['Registration and race: achieving equal political participation'](#), in Runnymede Trust, Race and Elections, April 2015, p. 24-5



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

Academics Anthony Heath et al found that 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.⁴¹ Similarly, research commissioned by the Cabinet Office found that a range of factors, including age, tenure and socio-economic status, influence registration across ethnic groups.⁴²

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.⁴³ The 2018 study suggested that other barriers included mistrust towards politicians.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

⁴¹ 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

⁴² Cabinet Office, [Registering to vote: insights from local authorities and civil society groups on registering people from ethnic minorities](#), August 2019

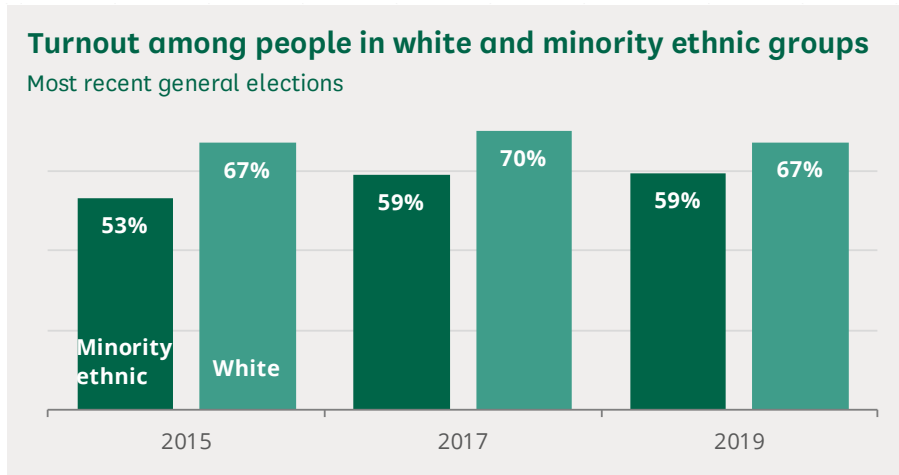
⁴³ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015, p. 47-8

⁴⁴ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? 2018](#) October 2018, p161

⁴⁵ 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

4.4 Voting

People from minority ethnic groups are generally less likely to vote than white people.⁴⁶ This was also the case at the 2015, 2017 and 2019 General Elections, as shown in the chart below.⁴⁷



Notes: data for 2015 and 2017 based on validated registration and weighted with wt_vote_valid; 2019 data weighted with wt_vote. Error margins are around ± 4 percentage points for minorities and ± 2 percentage points for white groups
Source: British Election Study, face to face survey, 2015, 2017 & 2019

Academics found that people from white and minority ethnic groups who were registered to vote at the 2010 General Election were equally likely to do so. They also found that turnout was low (53%) among first generation ethnic minorities, but higher in the second generation (63%), although it remained below the turnout among the white population (70%).⁴⁸

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 that circumstances on the day prevented had them from doing so (18%).⁴⁹

The Labour Party has historically attracted most support among minority ethnic groups.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ 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

⁴⁷ 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

⁴⁸ 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

⁴⁹ Electoral Commission, [Black and Minority Ethnic Survey](#), May-July 2005

⁵⁰ Maria Sobolewska & Rob Ford, *Brexitland*, 2020, Cambridge University Press

Brexit: turnout and vote

IPSOS Mori research found that ethnic minorities were less likely to vote in the 2016 EU referendum (57%) than white people (74%). They were also less likely to vote Leave (31%) than white people (54%).⁵¹

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%).⁵² Both these figures are well below the average of 51.8% of UK voters favouring a UK exit from the European Union.

4.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

Councillors

The [2018 Census of Local Councillors](#) in England showed that 4% came from a minority ethnic group and 96% were white. In the 2013 census, London had the highest proportion of minority ethnic councillors (16%).⁵³ It was estimated that 1.8% of candidates for the 2017 local elections in Wales were from minority ethnic groups.⁵⁴ In Scotland, 98% of local councillors responding to a survey in 2017 were white, compared with 96% of the population.⁵⁵ For comparison, it is estimated that about 14% of the UK population had a minority ethnic background in 2019.⁵⁶

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."⁵⁷

Candidates and MPs

There is no official data on the number of parliamentary candidates from minority ethnic groups. Academics provide estimates based on observation and surveys. The 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.⁵⁸

⁵¹ 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

⁵² NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

⁵³ Kelly Kettlewell and Liz Phillips, [Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013](#), LGA research report, May 2014

⁵⁴ [Local Government Candidates Survey 2017](#), Government Social Research, Welsh Government

⁵⁵ [Scotland's Councillors](#), Improvement Service

⁵⁶ Annual population survey, Jan 2019- Dec 2019 dataset

⁵⁷ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? Evidence paper series, Domain J](#), October 2015, p. 51

⁵⁸ Cowley P. & Kavanagh D., The British General Election of 2015, 7 April 2015

- At the 2017 General Election, **256** (8% of) candidates in Great Britain were from minority ethnic groups, compared with 13% of the population.⁵⁹

Minority ethnic candidates have attracted lower vote shares than white candidates standing for the same parties – which could lead to them only contesting safe seats.⁶⁰ Research also suggests that parties do not select minority ethnic candidates in seats where they perceive that citizens are less tolerant of diversity.⁶¹ The think tank British Future found that parties were more likely to select minority ethnic candidates in safe seats for the 2019 General Election.⁶²

House of Commons Library briefing paper [Ethnic diversity in politics and public life](#) shows the number of minority ethnic MPs has increased markedly since 1987. 65 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 94 minority ethnic MPs.

⁵⁹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#), March 2019

⁶⁰ 'Minority candidates face "ethnic penalty" in elections, study shows,' [The Guardian](#), 4 December 2018

⁶¹ 'BAME parliamentary candidates not picked to fight 'winnable seats' in areas with less tolerance to diversity, study suggests', University of Exeter, January 2021

⁶² British Future, [Late surge in minority candidates paves way for most diverse parliament ever](#), November 2019

5. 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.⁶³

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:

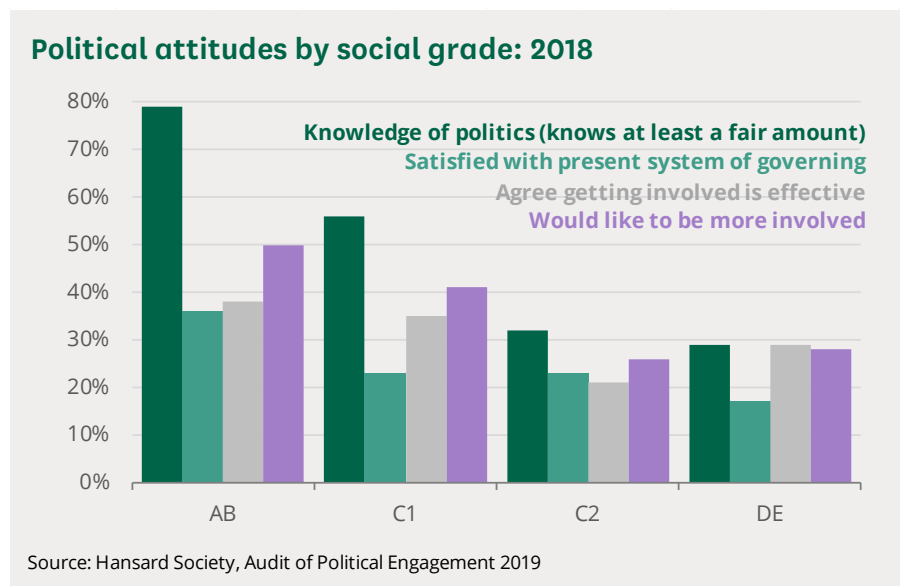
⁶³ See Electoral Commission, [Social exclusion and political engagement](#), November 2005

- '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.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵

5.1 Attitudes

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.⁶⁶ The chart below shows that they are also more likely to hold negative political attitudes.⁶⁷



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

⁶⁴ 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

⁶⁵ 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

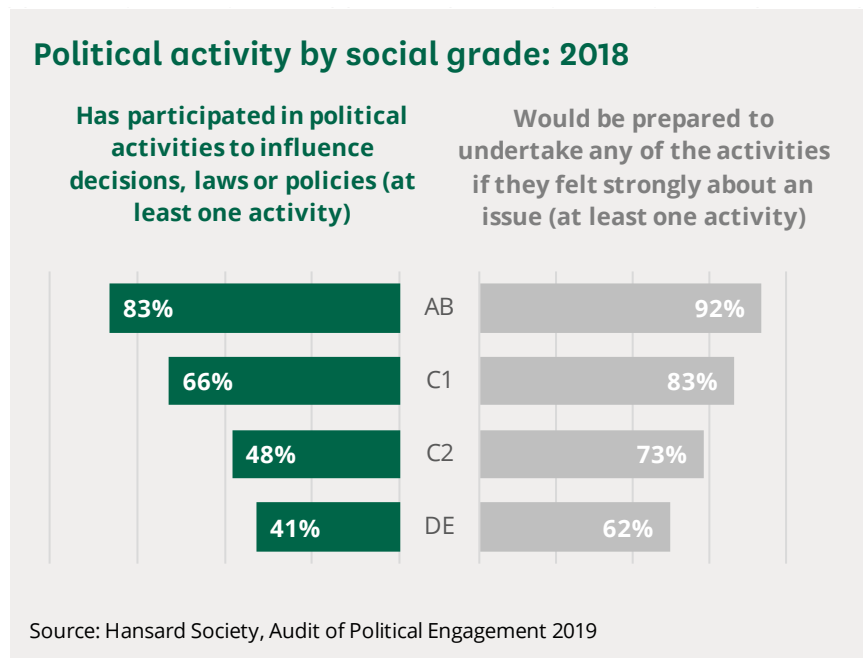
⁶⁶ Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge, '[Divided Democracy](#)', IPPR, November 2013

⁶⁷ Error margins for these estimates are around ± 5 percentage points

grades were more likely to think politicians engaged in “self-serving behaviour and working in the interests of the rich and powerful”.⁶⁸

5.2 Political activities

As the chart below shows, people from social grades DE are least likely to have participated in political activities, or to be prepared to do so if they feel strongly about an issue.⁶⁹



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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

5.3 Electoral registration

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

⁶⁸ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, ‘[The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain](#)’, Parliamentary Affairs, 2016, p. 14

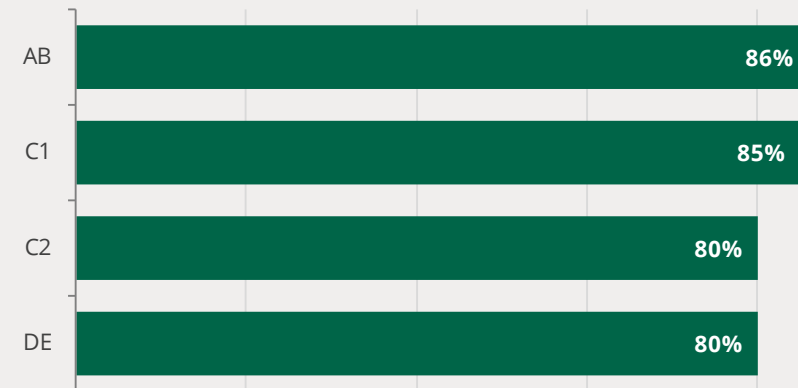
⁶⁹ See also Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Is Britain Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015](#), October 2015; p164

⁷⁰ 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

⁷¹ Phil Parvin, ‘[Democracy without participation: a new politics for a disengaged era](#)’, *Res Publica*, 2018, 24, 31-52

Electoral registration by social grade

Completeness of the December 2018 local government electoral registers



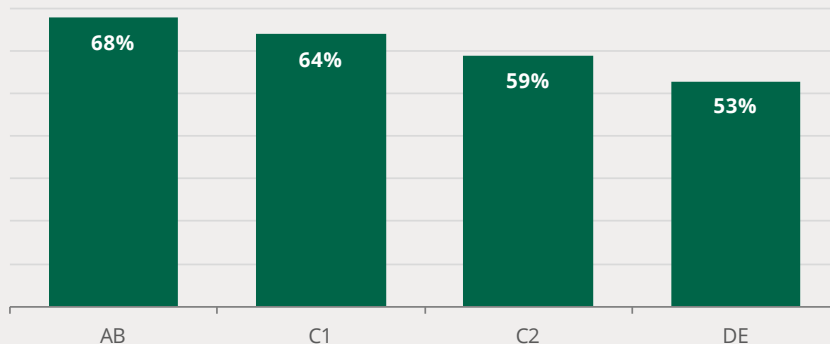
Source: Electoral Commission, [2019 report: accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

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.⁷²

5.4 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.

Turnout by social grade: 2019 General Election



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

The 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 those living in houses

⁷² The Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

belonging to 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%).⁷³

Research suggests that people in lower social grades are more likely to be attracted to populist alternatives to mainstream politics and vote for anti-establishment parties like UKIP.⁷⁴

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."⁷⁵

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 is a clear relationship between income and the Leave vote: people earning less than £1,200 p.m. were more likely to vote Leave than higher earners.⁷⁶

5.5 Councillors, candidates and MPs

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

Councillors

The [2018 Census of Local Authority Councillors](#) noted that 68% of councillors were educated to degree level (or equivalent), while 14% were educated to GCE A level (or equivalent) and 9% to GCSE level (or equivalent). 3% of councillors had no qualifications. From 2004-2008, 50% of councillors had been educated to degree level. Around 40% of the UK population as a whole had a degree level qualification in 2018.

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

⁷³ 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 ± 4 percentage points

⁷⁴ 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

⁷⁵ 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

⁷⁶ NatCen, [Understanding the Leave vote](#), December 2016

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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ 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

⁷⁸ 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

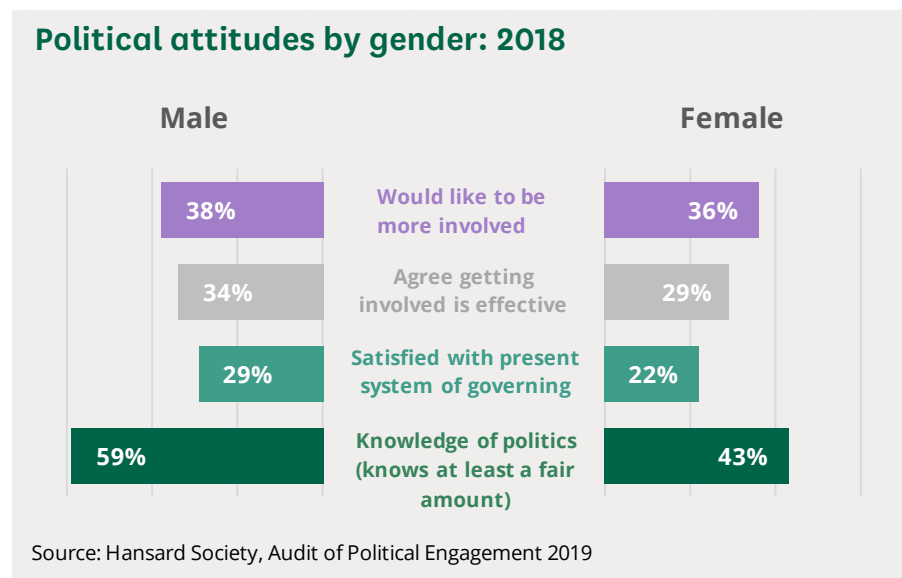
6. Gender

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. 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.⁷⁹

6.1 Attitudes

The chart below shows that women held more negative political attitudes than men (but error margins for these groups are about ± 4 percentage points).



Research carried out by YouGov and the IPPR 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).⁸⁰

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

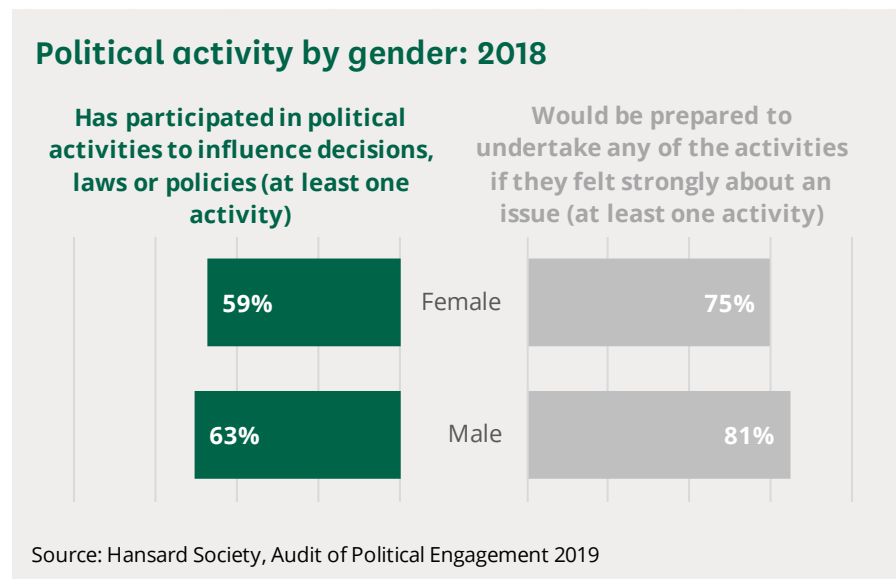
⁷⁹ E.g. Niels Spierings and Andrej Zaslove, ‘Gender, populist attitudes, and voting: explaining the gender gap in voting for populist radical right and populist radical left parties’, *West European Politics*, 2017, 40:4, 821-847. Although Paul Webb finds that women are more likely to be ‘stealth democrats’ 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

⁸⁰ YouGov/IPPR, Fieldwork 9th-11th September 2014, survey results. Weighted

leadership to tell the public the truth about decisions, and given to chasing short-term headlines. They suggest this might be explained by societal gender norms that affect what men and women expect from politicians.⁸¹

6.2 Political activities

The chart below shows that men were more likely to participate in political activities than women, and to say they would do so if they felt strongly about an issue.



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.⁸²

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.⁸³

6.3 Electoral registration

The Electoral Commission found that men and women were equally likely to be on the electoral registers in December 2018 (83%).⁸⁴

⁸¹ Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker and Joe Twyman, '[The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain](#)', Parliamentary Affairs, 2016, p. 14

⁸² 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."

⁸³ The Electoral Commission, [Gender and political participation](#), April 2004

⁸⁴ The Electoral Commission, [2019 Report: Accuracy and completeness of the 2018 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), October 2019

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).⁸⁵ This was also the case in April 2011 (87% of women compared to 85.1% of men).⁸⁶

6.4 Voting

There was no substantial difference in turnout between men and women at general elections between 2001-2017.⁸⁷ At the 2019 General Election, however, men were more likely to vote (69.9%) than women (62.5%).⁸⁸

Research from 2004 found that women were more likely to turn out to vote in constituencies represented by female MPs.⁸⁹

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.⁹⁰

6.5 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.⁹¹

⁸⁵ The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain](#), July 2016

⁸⁶ The Electoral Commission, Electoral registration in 2011, July 2014, p. 44

⁸⁷ 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

⁸⁸ British Election Study, [Face to face post election 2019 survey](#), weighted with wt_vote. Error margins were about ± 2 percentage points

⁸⁹ The Electoral Commission, [Gender and political participation](#), April 2004

⁹⁰ 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

⁹¹ Sue Maguire, [Barriers to women entering Parliament and local government](#), IPR report, 2018

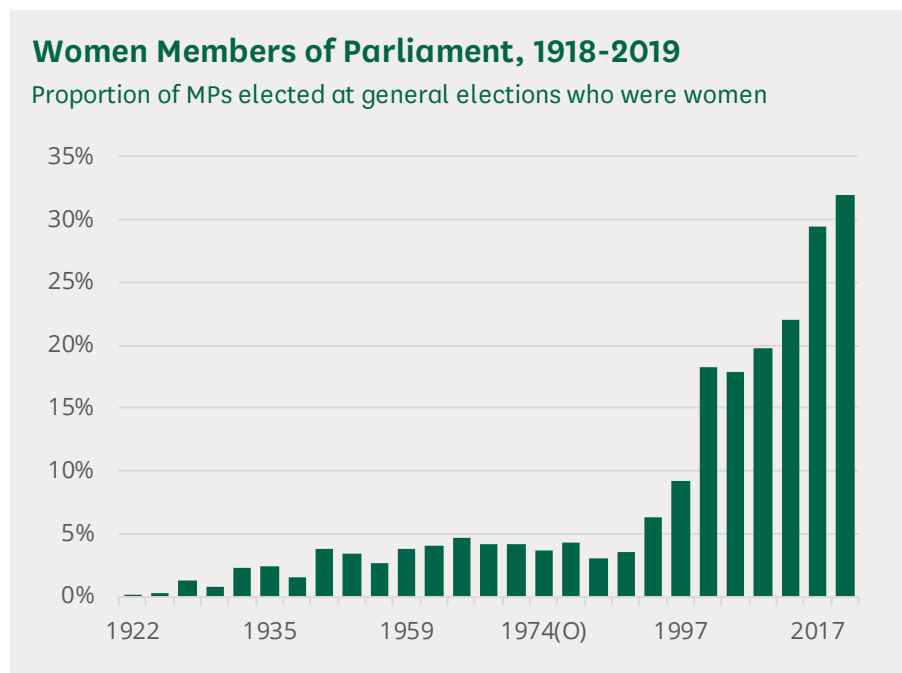
Councillors

House of Commons Library briefing paper [Women in Parliament and Government](#) notes that in 2018, 36% of local authority councillors in England were women. 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.⁹²

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

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.



⁹² Northern South Inter-Parliamentary Association, [Women in Public life](#), 27 November 2015

7. Political disengagement: policy initiatives

7.1 Overview

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

Where groups show the same form of disengagement, this may not be explained by the same drivers. As noted, certain factors impact on all groups: mobility and housing affect electoral registration, regardless of other characteristics. But there may also be group-specific factors that could explain low levels of participation: for example, academics David Sanders et al found that discrimination is associated with low levels of engagement among ethnic minorities.⁹³

As barriers to engagement vary considerably for different groups of people who are disengaged, so will the solutions to overcome those barriers. Some will be for political parties to drive and some will be for governments or others to push forward. Some measures will have wide-ranging effects, such as the *Equality Act 2010*, and others will be much more targeted and narrower in scope.

The Power Inquiry, which reported in 2006, was established to investigate disengagement from formal democratic politics in Britain in recent years. 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.⁹⁴

Although turnout has gone up in some recent elections and the EU referendum of 2016 saw the highest UK-wide turnout since 1992, the lack of faith in political parties' principles persists. A Full Fact research report on the 2019 General Election found that of the voters it surveyed 76% thought that voters were being misled by false and dishonest claims from both main parties in the 2019 election campaign. It also found that 17% agreed with the statement "I am less likely to vote

⁹³ 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

⁹⁴ [Power to the People](#), The Power Inquiry, February 2006, p17-8

because of the level of false and misleading claims in this election campaign”.⁹⁵

Political parties

Policies to combat some of those barriers to engagement will be for individual political parties. For example, encouraging members from diverse backgrounds to stand as candidates and encouraging people to vote. The Institute for Government report from 2011, *Party People*, noted:

In the United Kingdom public participation in traditional democratic politics is in decline, trust in politicians is low, and the House of Commons does not look like the diverse society it seeks to represent.

The role of political parties in addressing these problems is crucial. Political parties are central to the functioning of Parliament and they are the gatekeepers to parliamentary representation; it is through the parties that virtually all candidates progress into the House of Commons. 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.⁹⁶

However, other factors can act as a barrier to a diverse range of candidates coming forward. In recent years the intimidation of candidates standing for election has been cited as a reason for people being unwilling to put themselves forward for elections, particularly female candidates.⁹⁷

The parties themselves are responsible for some of the disengagement experienced by voters/non-voters. Barriers to registering to vote exist for some people, but if you are registered to vote but choose not to there may be many reasons for this. As noted in Section 2, political parties tend to focus their resources on marginal seats. If someone lives in a seat that has not changed party for years, they may decide that voting makes no difference.

Other organisations

Non-governmental organisations and social movements also have a part to play in driving other aspects of engagement highlighted in the Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement. For example, taking part in consultations, signing petitions, writing to elected representatives, or debating online. Organisation like [Operation Black Vote](#) seek 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”.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Full Fact, [Final Report 11th December 2019 Research into public views on truth and untruth in the 2019 General Election](#), December 2019

⁹⁶ Institute for government, [Party People: How do – and how should – British political parties select their parliamentary candidates?](#), November 2011, p9

⁹⁷ [Intimidation in Public Life A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life](#)

⁹⁸ OBV, [About us](#)

Government

There have been broader policies where the UK and devolved governments have attempted to help tackle elements of disengagement in recent years. This section focuses mainly on examples from the UK Government and Parliament. These plans often focus on enabling electoral registration and participation in elections.

In December 2017 the UK Government launched its **Democratic Engagement Plan**.⁹⁹ It is designed to be a five-year plan to encourage greater participation and involvement in democracy. In 2019 the Government published *Democratic Engagement: Respecting, Protecting and Promoting Our Democracy*,¹⁰⁰ which examined some of the activity that had taken place to date and highlighted some of the planned work.

In July 2019 the UK Government also 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.”¹⁰¹

In late 2019 the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is announced pilot schemes under its **Innovation in Democracy Programme** (liDP). This is a new programme aimed involving people in local decision-making through participatory democracy:

Participating local authorities will be piloting Citizens’ Juries to open up a decision they have to make to citizen deliberation. One of the key elements of a Citizens’ Jury is that they are made up of a random selection of the local population accounting for age, ethnicity, gender and potentially other characteristics. This means that the Jury is truly representative of the demographics of the area in which it takes place. The Local Authorities will be supported in this by a Democracy Support Contractor (to be appointed) who will assist them in designing and implementing a process that works for their context, as well as funding to cover costs.¹⁰²

The Library briefing, [Constitutional Conventions and Citizens’ Assemblies: power to the people?](#) Has more information on the use of citizens’ assemblies.

Attempts have also been made to improve the representativeness of Parliament. On 12 November 2008 the House of Commons agreed to establish a new committee, to be chaired by the Speaker and known as the Speaker’s Conference.

The Conference was asked to: “Consider, and make recommendations for rectifying, the disparity between the representation of women,

⁹⁹ Cabinet Office, [Every Voice Matters: building a democracy that works for everyone](#), December 2019

¹⁰⁰ Cabinet Office, [Democratic Engagement: Respecting, Protecting and Promoting Our Democracy](#), January 2019

¹⁰¹ [Written statement 146944 \[Social Media: Disinformation\]](#), 1 February 2021

¹⁰² [PQ 169506](#), 11 September 2018.

ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large".¹⁰³

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.

House of Commons

The Speaker's Conference report also made a number of recommendations for the House of Commons to make it more accessible, for example to those with families, to meet the needs of disabled MPs and to better monitor equalities outcomes.

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. The Women and Equalities Committee from the 2017-19 Parliament undertook an audit of progress made on the recommendations made in the Good Parliament.¹⁰⁴

Below are examples of initiatives aimed at improving engagement, particularly around elections and democracy.

7.2 Policy examples

Political parties – candidate selection

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.

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.¹⁰⁵

Parties have employed strategies to try and encourage people from more diverse backgrounds to come forward as candidates, such as mentoring programmes and training. The Institute for Government report from 2011, *Party People*, noted that all the major parties had made progress but that more could be done.¹⁰⁶

Author Isabel Hardman, writing in 2018, highlighted other barriers faced by potential candidates for the House of Commons. Some still face inappropriate questioning during the selection process even though

¹⁰³ [Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation](#)

¹⁰⁴ Women and Equalities Committee, [Gender Sensitive Parliament \(House of Commons\) inquiry](#), House of Commons Service, [Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group - written evidence](#)

¹⁰⁵ Poletti et al, [Why do only some people who support parties actually join them? Evidence from Britain](#), *Western European Politics*, October 2018

¹⁰⁶ Institute for Government, [Party People](#), November 2011

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 cost of standing for Parliament once selected faced by many candidates is borne by the candidate themselves and can be prohibitive.¹⁰⁷

The Institute for Government recommended that political parties should provide bursaries to assist a greater range of candidates to come forward.

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

All-women shortlists

In the 1990s the Labour Party attempted to increase the number of women MPs by using all-women shortlists. 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).

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

The SNP and Lib Dems have subsequently also used all-women shortlists.

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".¹⁰⁸ 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 party 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

¹⁰⁷ Isabel Hardman, *Why we get the wrong politicians*, 2018, Chapter 1: Getting in

¹⁰⁸ ConservativeHome, [Kemi Badenoch: My plan for candidates – a transparent, democratic process, for an even stronger Party](#), 22 March 2018

...

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.¹⁰⁹

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.

Other cross-party campaigns exist, such as [50:50 Parliament](#) and [Women 50:50](#) and in July 2014 the All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in Parliament published a report, [Improving Parliament. Creating a better and more representative House](#). It recognised that quotas in politics are not universally accepted but tracked progress on some of the recommendations from the Speaker's Conference.

In January 2018, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) commissioned a rapid evidence review to identify: a) barriers to women's participation in local and national government; and b) evidence of policies and practices, sometimes referred to as Positive Action Mechanisms, which have increased their levels of participation. It found that:

A considerable weight of evidence relates to working practices and to the cultures in Parliament and within local government and the need for fundamental change. The culture in both Parliament and local government is perceived to be lacking in flexibility and in the ability to recognise members' caring needs and responsibilities, partly because of the traditional masculine networks and environments which persist.¹¹⁰

The House of Commons recently passed the [Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill](#). The Bill will create a discretionary power to enable the prime minister to designate a minister wishing to take maternity leave as a 'minister on leave'. There has been some criticism that this does not address wider concerns over issues related to maternity leave for MPs.¹¹¹

Other protected characteristics

The *Equality Act 2010* allows parties to make arrangements in relation to the selection of election candidates to address the under-representation of people with particular protected characteristics in elected bodies.

Although the legislation allows for single-sex shortlists for election candidates, it does not allow for shortlists restricted to people with other protected characteristics. However, the Act makes limited provision to address under-representation in elected bodies for people with protected characteristics other than sex. In drawing up a candidate list, parties may reserve some places for BAME candidates (or for other

¹⁰⁹ Government Response to the Women and Equalities Committee Report on Women in the House of Commons, September 2017, Cm 9492

¹¹⁰ Sue Maguire IPR Honorary Professor [Barriers to Women Entering Parliament and Local Government](#), University of Bath

¹¹¹ Library briefing, [Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill 2019-2021](#)

protected characteristics) but, as noted, may not create a shortlist restricted only to people of that protected characteristic.

In 2010, the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation recommended that the provisions in place for all-women shortlists should be extended to other protected characteristics, including BAME.¹¹² 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 without being compelled. The Conservative party reported 12% of its Parliamentary candidates in 2019 were from BAME backgrounds and 31% were female.¹¹³ Figures for the 2010-2017 elections are available on the Labour Party website.¹¹⁴

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.¹¹⁵

Disabled candidates' funds

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 adjustments as a result of their disability from the spending limits on candidates.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), Final Report, 11 January 2010, HC 239-I 2009-10, paras 147-149

¹¹³ Conservative Party, [Parliamentary Candidate Diversity Data](#), 2019 General Election

¹¹⁴ Labour Party, [Building a Representative Parliament](#)

¹¹⁵ Equality and Human Rights Commission, Research report 124: [Diversity of candidates and elected officials in Great Britain](#), March 2019

¹¹⁶ The changes were implemented via various statutory instruments, but see for example the [Representation of the People \(Election Expenses Exclusion\) \(Amendment\) Order 2019](#)

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 Fund is now closed but the Scottish and Welsh equivalents are in place for candidates standing in the May 2021 election.

The funds were designed to pay for practical support to allow disabled people stand for election and election expenses rules were altered so reasonable adjustments paid for by the fund.

The UK Government's **Access to Elected Office Fund** was launched in July 2012 and was initially due to run until March 2014.¹¹⁷ 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:

[Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund 2012 to 2015 Report by: Government Equalities Office \("GEO"\) And Digital Outreach Ltd \("Convey"\)](#).

The initial written statement said that the fund had an allocation of £2.6 million. In the final evaluation, the report noted that the fund was demand-led and in the end £419,000 was allocated to 67 people.¹¹⁸ Of these, 13 were elected to principal local authorities.

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

¹¹⁷ [HC Deb 9 July 2012, c8WS](#)

¹¹⁸ [Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund 2012 to 2015 Report by: Government Equalities Office \("GEO"\) And Digital Outreach Ltd \("Convey"\)](#), p11

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.¹¹⁹

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, primarily for the English local elections in 2019.¹²⁰ It was also due to cover local and PCC elections in May 2020.¹²¹

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.¹²²

However, the fund was closed in March 2020, with the Government stating “that the responsibility for supporting disabled candidates sits with political parties”.¹²³

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.

When the local and PCC elections due in May 2020 were postponed, the contract to operate the fund was ended. The contract could have been extended for six months but not for any longer without a tender process.

Disability Rights UK issued a statement saying:

The government has postponed planned elections until 2021. Practically, this leaves potential candidates without a funding option for future elections as things stand. DR UK has released the following statement:

“We have been informed by the Government Equalities Office that as they are only able to extend a contract by six months, they cannot extend the EnAble Fund as far as May 2021. We have challenged the decision to cancel the contract and asked them to review their rules about extensions. We have asked them to pledge that they will put something in place for next year's local elections. However, they have only been able to advise us that the government is considering options for future support for disabled candidates ahead of next year's elections, in connection with the National Strategy for Disabled People. We are not satisfied with the response from the Government Equalities Office - disabled people deserve more than ‘a consideration of options’.

“Disabled people seeking elected office need a permanent fund to assist in removing the barriers they face. We have already raised this issue with the Disability Unit, who are responsible for the Strategy, and with the Minister for Disabled People.”

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p14

¹²⁰ [WPO 198797 \[EnAble Fund for Elected Office\]](#), 11 December 2018

¹²¹ [WPO 21957 \[EnAble Fund for Elected Office\]](#), 5 March 2020

¹²² [WPO 13485 \[EnAble Fund for Elected Office: Applications\]](#), 11 February 2020

¹²³ [WPO 129170 \[Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund\]](#), 11 December 2020

The National Strategy for Disabled People is currently under development and according to a Parliamentary question from September is due in Spring 2021.¹²⁴

Scotland

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. Following the 2017 evaluation, it was announced that the Fund would remain open to cover the Scottish Parliament elections scheduled to take place next May.¹²⁵ Like the English schemes, it was run at arms-length from government by [Inclusion Scotland](#).

The Fund funded 44 people in advance of the 2017 local elections, with 39 going on to become candidates. 15 were elected, representing 4 different political parties in 12 different councils. The [full breakdown of candidates](#) is available on the Inclusion Scotland website. The Fund was shortlisted by Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations for the “Pioneering Project” award for the 2017 Scottish Charity Awards.

The 44 people supported by the 2017 Fund is in the context of 1,227 council seats were up for election in Scotland using STV (single transferable vote). This was in 354 wards with 1,666 candidates in total.¹²⁶

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”.

When asked how they would describe their experience of the Access to Elected Office Fund, 75% of candidates reported “very positive” and 25% reported “positive”. None of the candidates reported “neutral”, “negative”, or “very negative”.¹²⁷

The 2018 Scottish evaluation noted that there was a “clear issue in party political culture regarding the provision of reasonable adjustments”, going on to say there was a potential “for a conflict of interest to arise where potential opponents for selection may be involved in the administration of the branch, and therefore have an interest in not creating a level playing field for a challenger”.¹²⁸

Wales

The Welsh government has announced a pilot **Access to Elected Office Fund Wales**. It consulted on a pilot scheme in November 2020.¹²⁹ The aim was for a fund to support candidates in the 2021

¹²⁴ [WPO 86094, \[Disability\]](#), 10 September 2020

¹²⁵ [Inclusion Scotland. Press Release: Successful Access to Elected Office Fund reopens](#), May 2018

¹²⁶ [SLGE2017 Summary Results Data](#); Thrasher and Rallings Local Elections Handbook 2017

¹²⁷ [Access to Elected Office Fund \(Scotland\) 2016-17 Pilot Evaluation report](#), pp5-6

¹²⁸ Ibid, p20

¹²⁹ 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](#)

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 is operated independently of government, by Disability Wales. The Fund opened to applications from 15 February 2021.¹³⁰

Intimidation of candidates

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.¹³¹

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.¹³²

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 for home addresses and no longer appear on ballot papers for Parliamentary or local elections.

A consultation on a new electoral offence of intimidating candidates was undertaken in summer 2018 and the Government response was published in April 2019. Overall, the proposal was welcomed and the Government committed to create a new offence that would be developed in accordance with the right to freedom of expression protected under Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights.¹³³

The Labour Party disagreed for the need for a separate offence. The CSPL had highlighted that the existing criminal law was sufficient to cover the sorts of behaviours experienced by candidates, but had recommended a new electoral element because of threat intimidation poses to the integrity of the democratic process and of public service more widely.¹³⁴ The Government agreed with the CSPL that the aim of a specific electoral offence would be:

¹³⁰ Disability Wales, [Access to Elected Office Fund Wales](#)

¹³¹ Cabinet Office, [Review into abuse and intimidation in elections](#), press release 12 July 2017.

¹³² CSPL, [Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life](#), 13 December 2017

¹³³ Cabinet Office, [Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information. 6 May 2019: Government response](#), p18

¹³⁴ CSPL, [Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life](#), 13 December 2017, p16

both to highlight the seriousness of the threat of intimidation of candidates and campaigners to the integrity of public life and our democracy, and to provide for specific electoral sanctions to deter and punish this behaviour.¹³⁵

Accessibility of elections to voters

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

Every polling station should provide a tactile voting device to allow sight impaired voters to cast a vote without assistance if they so choose. Electoral officers are also now required to make certain information and documents about the electoral process available to electors in other formats upon request, including Braille and audio format. The RNIB has made online information available for voters with sight loss and visual impairment: [Voting and elections: what you need to know](#).

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

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.¹³⁶

The Government published its response in August 2018. In it the Government listed 17 actions that it would work with the Accessibility of Elections Group to determine how best they can be taken forward for polls reserved to the UK Government (local election administration is devolved in Scotland and Wales).

The response also took into account a report by the Electoral Commission published in November 2017, [Elections for everyone: Experiences of people with disabilities at the 8 June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election](#).

¹³⁵ Cabinet Office, [Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information, 6 May 2019: Government response](#), p18

¹³⁶ Cabinet Office, [Access to Elections: Call for Evidence](#), September 2017

The actions listed by the Government cover a number of areas aimed at making polling stations and voting more accessible to people with disabilities including sight loss, mobility problems, and learning difficulties.¹³⁷

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

Electoral registration

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.¹³⁸

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

Groups as showing a particularly high rate of non-registration, namely ethnic minorities, attainers...and those living in bed-sitters and lodging houses.¹³⁹

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

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

¹³⁷ Cabinet Office, *Call for Evidence: Access to Elections Government response*, August 2018

¹³⁸ Cabinet Office, '[Democratic engagement programme: policy paper](#)', 8 May 2015

¹³⁹ Home Affairs Select Committee, *Representation of the People Acts*, HC 32, 1982-3, p6

- [Gingerbread](#) developed a [digital voter registration toolkit](#) with tips and examples for raising online awareness with single parents about voter engagement and registering to vote.

The UK Government's **Democratic Engagement Plan** followed the 'Every Voice Matters' tour undertaken by then Minister for the Constitution, Chris Skidmore MP.¹⁴⁰

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

The plan also committed the Government to specific actions to increase electoral registration, particularly of under-registered groups.

The plan was update in January 2019. The Government published [Democratic Engagement: Respecting, Protecting and Promoting Our Democracy](#). It included information on achievements to date.

Annual canvass

Following successful pilots, the UK Government amended legislation on how electoral registration officers conduct the annual canvass of households in Great Britain. The canvass is an annual process which gathers information on potential additions to, changes to, and deletions from, the electoral register.

Legislation was passed in 2019 and the first annual canvass under the new rules was conducted in Great Britain in 2020.¹⁴¹ The aim of the change was to allow electoral registration officers more flexibility in how they approached their annual canvass activity. The pilot schemes found that a revised approach was more efficient and allowed electoral registration officers to focus their resources on reaching people less likely to register to vote.

Anonymous registration

As part of the 'Every Voice Matters' tour the Minister met with groups representing survivors of domestic abuse to discuss the barriers they face from registering to vote. Sian Hawkins, campaigns manager for the charity Women's Aid, said that for women living in a refuge it was currently "an almost insurmountable challenge" to register to vote.¹⁴²

As a result in March 2017 the Cabinet Office published, [A democracy that works for everyone: survivors of domestic abuse](#). The policy document set out the Government's approach to removing the barriers to anonymous registration following meetings with campaigners for reform. Following a consultation these proposals were implemented in July 2018.¹⁴³

Student registration

In England, in 2002, the Labour Government introduced the Citizenship Education curriculum was introduced as a statutory subject for key

¹⁴⁰ Cabinet Office, Every Voice Matters: building a democracy that works for everyone

¹⁴¹ [Representation of the People \(Annual Canvass\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2019](#)

¹⁴² [Guardian](#), [Registering to vote anonymously to be made easier](#), 7 September 2016

¹⁴³ House of Commons Library, [Anonymous electoral registration](#), September 2018

stages 3 and 4 in schools. One of the aims of the Citizenship Education curriculum was to raise political awareness and engagement among young people.¹⁴⁴

The Minister of State, Department for Education Nick Gibb responded to a Parliamentary Question on 20 October 2015, reaffirming the Conservative Government's commitment to citizenship education:

Citizenship education is in the national curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 and helps young people to prepare to play a full part in society, informed by a sound understanding of what it means to be a responsible citizen. [...] Pupils also learn about democracy, government and how laws are made and upheld. Teaching should equip pupils to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, to debate, and to make reasoned arguments. It should also prepare them to take their place in society as responsible citizens¹⁴⁵

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 to vote when they register for the start of the academic year. In the first year, 2014-15, 75% of students (14,481) joined the electoral roll and in 2015-16, that number rose to 15,352 (76% of students). This is compared with 13% students in neighbouring Sheffield Hallam University, which did not participate in the trial.

The students could not be automatically registered by the University, under individual electoral registration (IER) each person is personally responsible for registering themselves. Instead, Sheffield Council worked with the University to include a section at the end of the university's online registration process for the 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.¹⁴⁶

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 in other parts of the UK).

One of these conditions relates to student electoral registration. This provision was added to the Bill during its passage through Parliament and was initially resisted by the Government. The Department for Education, working with the Cabinet Office, has now issued its guidance to the OfS on how to facilitate the electoral registration of students by higher education providers. The guidance includes practical examples of how this can be achieved, including the Sheffield trial.

¹⁴⁴ See 'GCSE subject content for citizenship studies', Guidance, Department for Education, [GOV.UK](#), 12 February 2015

¹⁴⁵ [WQ12132](#)

¹⁴⁶ Department for Education, [Facilitating Electoral Registration Secretary of State for Education Guidance to the Office for Students \(OfS\)](#), February 2018

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

Electoral Commission

In 2000, the Electoral Commission was established. It is independent of Government and oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. part of its remit is to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity.

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

We do this by delivering effective, value for money, voter registration campaigns across the UK, targeting in particular under registered groups such as recent home movers, young people, students, Black and Minority Ethnic groups and UK citizens living overseas. We will continue working in partnership with public, private and voluntary organisations to expand our public awareness activities for voters.¹⁴⁷

This work includes analysis of electoral registration to see how accurate and complete electoral registers are. The Commission also undertakes publicity campaigns to encourage electoral registration in the run up to electoral events.

For example, in 2017, in the run up to the UK Parliamentary General Election, campaigns included TV and radio advertisements and social media campaigns. The campaigns included targeted ads to encourage some groups known to be less likely to register, 18-year-olds, students, and recent home movers. The Electoral Commission estimated that almost 1 million names were added to the electoral register during its campaigning activity, between the 8 and 22 May (*the deadline for registering for the June 2017 General Election*).¹⁴⁸

Participation during the coronavirus pandemic

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, there have been concerns about participation in the May 2021 elections. Safety concerns could have an impact on candidates, campaigning, and turnout.

The UK Government, in consultation with the electoral community, has made some adjustments to election processes for local elections in England.¹⁴⁹ Measures will include:

- Encouraging people to apply for postal votes early;
- Providing additional funding for returning officers to deal with additional costs of alternative polling station venues, sanitation and cleaning equipment and additional staffing;
- Altering proxy voting arrangements to allow people who have to self-isolate or fall ill with coronavirus to be able to appoint emergency proxies more easily;

¹⁴⁷ Electoral Commission, *Corporate Plan 2018/19 – 2022/23*, June 2018, p18

¹⁴⁸ Electoral Commission, *2017 UK general election campaign*, undated

¹⁴⁹ Cabinet Office, [May 2021 polls delivery plan](#), 5 February 2021

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- Reducing the number of voters needed to sign nomination forms to reduce contact between people;
- Changing lockdown rules to ensure voting or working on the polls is an allowable reason to leave home.

The devolved elections taking place in Scotland and Wales also have similar provisions in place.

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