

Universal Suffrage?

The problem of low and unequal turnout and
the case for compulsory voting

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Executive summary

British democracy is blighted by low and unequal turnout. The last general election saw overall turnout of registered voters fall to 59.8%, and this number masks stark disparities in turnout rates on the basis of class, race, age, and housing tenure.

These disparities in electoral turnout are creating warped incentives for governments, which are pushed to prioritise the interests of higher-turnout demographics over those of the public at large. The consequences of these warped incentives are policies that contribute to high inequality and low economic growth.

As a result, the problem of low and unequal turnout in elections risks trapping British politics in a spiral of stagnation and discontent, ultimately threatening the long-term health of our democracy.

This report therefore makes the case for the introduction of “Australian-style” compulsory voting for UK general elections, to be enforced by the penalty of a small fine.

The argument is structured as follows:

Part I set outs the problem of low and unequal turnout in the UK. It highlights the secular decline in turnout over time, and the growing disparities in turnout on the basis of class, race, age, and housing tenure. Overall, it concludes that we are now faced with the problem not only of low participation, but of an **unrepresentative electorate**.

Part II offers an analysis of the downstream impact of the UK’s unrepresentative electorate. It firstly highlights the warped electoral incentives that currently face our politicians and our governments. It then presents evidence to suggest that this is driving policy choices that contribute not only to **high inequality**, but also to **low levels of economic growth**. We thus risk being trapped in a vicious cycle of stagnation, disillusionment, and democratic decay.

Part III introduces the idea of compulsory voting, and makes the case for its introduction in the UK. It presents a wide range of international evidence demonstrating that compulsory voting can produce an immediate and sustained boost to turnout levels, and a dramatic reduction in turnout inequalities. This in turn generates improved incentives for politicians, better socio-economic outcomes, and greater democratic health over the long-term.

Part IV addresses common criticisms of compulsory voting. It refutes claims that compulsory voting would be unpopular, undemocratic, or illiberal, or that it would undermine the quality of electoral participation. It also emphasises the far greater effectiveness of compulsory voting relative to alternative, more commonly-proposed reforms also designed to increase turnout.

Part V considers what measures should accompany the introduction of compulsory voting. It highlights in particular the need for voter registration reform, for government and civil society initiatives designed to inculcate a culture of voting, and for the inclusion of a “None of the Above” option on the ballot paper.



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Foreword



We are in a new era of democratic emergency. The global elections of 2024 revealed a world of democratic backsliding, rising nationalist authoritarianism and, in a series of concerted ejections of incumbents, there was a key message: voters are not just turning against political actors, but the democratic system they occupy.

At the heart of this democratic emergency is the loss of trust in politicians, government and institutions to govern honestly and effectively, and to deliver the socio-economic outcomes voters need. This crisis has been brewing over many years of economic stagnation and political dysfunction. This loss of faith in our democratic system is intensifying in younger generations, who have not seen it prove its worth.

Indeed, as this new Constitution Society report highlights, low and unequal turnout can no longer be seen as merely a symptom of democratic malaise, but must now be understood as a contributing factor – one that warps the incentives of the political class, and contributes to skewed, inequitable and ineffectual policy-making, thus further undermining political trust.

These issues have been worried about for years - decades even. But the trends around the world suggest this has reached a new tipping point into emergency and demands a different, more ambitious and urgent response to renew democracy and prove its value to a sceptical citizenry. We need to question our preconceptions and think more expansively about the change this will require.

That's why we at Demos welcome this thoughtful study of compulsory voting, and the new campaign it is part of. We need bold new ideas to take on the challenge of renewing democracy, and a willingness to debate them.

To be clear: in ordinary times we would not be considering proposals to mandate voting. In ordinary times we would be imagining a world in which democratic actors, institutions and systems earn their mandate at the polls because people see the value of voting and appreciate the choice presented to them at the polls. These are not ordinary times. Trust is easily lost and very slow and difficult to win back. Compulsory voting could help jumpstart that process.

The underpinnings of our representative democracy is right, but the way it is practiced everyday needs an urgent upgrade to match both the scale of the policy making challenges ahead and to start to rebuild trust.

We must disrupt and upgrade democracy in order to convince people of its merits. We must invent a radical, brave and optimistic democracy as an alternative to the lazy and divisive forces currently at play. This paper is an important contribution to this debate, and offers a path to democratic disruption as an alternative to populism and authoritarianism.



Polly Curtis
CEO, Demos

Introduction: democracy and electoral incentives

Representative democracy operates through the mechanism of elections. Universal suffrage is meant to ensure that these elections provide both *political equality* (since every adult citizen has an equal say in choosing the government of their country), and *political accountability* (since governments can be either re-elected or voted out on the basis of decisions they have made). Together, this is meant to produce responsive government that serves the needs and preferences of the public as a whole. As the democratic theorist Robert Dahl famously put it, “A key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (Dahl 1971).

Crucially, elections work as a mechanism for responsive government on the basis of the incentives they create. As Joseph Schumpeter put it, “The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter 1942). Elections held under universal suffrage are meant to create a political competition in which the rival parties compete for the votes of all adult citizens. Within this competition, parties will be incentivised to try to appeal to as broad a section of society as possible. Most importantly, the need to secure re-election will incentivise politicians in power to pursue policies that serve the interests of a majority of the public.

In practice however, these incentives can be undermined by the increasingly widespread phenomena of low and unequal turnout in elections. When a large number of citizens choose not to vote, it creates disparities in whose voices are heard in the political process, and means that electoral majorities often represent relatively small minorities of the overall population. This creates bad incentives for politicians, who are pushed to prioritise the interests and preferences of the kinds of citizens who are more likely to vote. As the political scientist V.O. Key Jr. put it, “The blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote” (Key 1949).

Crucially, by undermining responsive government, these bad incentives risk warping policy, potentially leading to damaging socio-economic outcomes. This in turn risks producing widespread disillusionment with and distrust in democratic politics amongst underrepresented and underserved groups, and thus ultimately further declines and greater disparities in turnout.

Today, we can see this problem unfolding within UK politics. Turnout has fallen to historic lows, with increasing disparities in participation between young and old, between rich and poor, between homeowners and renters, and between majority and minority ethnic groups.

In addition to representing a hollowing-out of democratic citizenship, these turnout disparities – and the warped incentives they have created for politicians – are crucial context for many of the disturbing trends that we have seen in UK politics over recent years. In recent decades disparate turnout has repeatedly helped governments to secure re-election, despite failing to deliver economic growth, and despite pursuing policies that favoured the interests of wealthy older homeowners over those of the public as a whole. That these failures were allowed to accumulate has contributed to the growing well of dissatisfaction with democratic politics, from which right-wing populists appear increasingly able to draw strength.

These turnout disparities also pose a significant continuing obstacle to efforts to rebuild trust in politics and to restore economic growth. Mainstream politicians who attempt to cater to the needs of those alienated from the system risk being penalised by higher-turnout groups. Moreover, the electoral predominance of the wealthy and elderly intensifies the challenge of what Gavin Kelly and Nick Pearce have described as “the perpetually uphill struggle of building broad support for a long-termist social investment agenda” (Kelly and Pearce 2024). Today, it risks making it difficult for governments of any party to reap electoral benefits from the pursuit of pro-growth policies.

Urgent action is therefore needed to break the vicious cycle of bad electoral incentives, continued stagnation, and ever greater democratic distrust. This report will set out the extent of the problem, and make the case for compulsory voting as the most comprehensive and effective solution. ◆

Part I

Low and unequal turnout

Declining turnout

Electoral turnout is declining in democracies across the globe: since the 1940s, average turnouts have fallen from the mid-80s to the high 60s (Kostelka and Blais 2021).

The UK is no exception to this trend: since 1950, turnout has been steadily declining, with the steepest drops occurring in the 1990s. In the second half of the last century, turnout averaged 76%; so far this century, turnout has averaged 64%. Most recently, the July 2024 general election saw turnout amongst registered voters fall to 59.8% – the second lowest on record, and the lowest since 2001.

These figures become even worse when one takes into account the proportion of eligible voters who are not currently registered, which the Electoral Commission estimates at around 15% (Electoral Commission 2023). The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has therefore calculated that the “real” level of turnout amongst eligible voters at the 2024 general election was around 53% (Patel and Valgarðsson 2024).

This number is disastrously low. With barely half of the population voting, political participation has demonstrably lost its centrality to the practice of democratic citizenship. In these circumstances, it is increasingly difficult to see elections as genuine reflections of public sentiment, or as an effective means of ensuring that government and elected representatives are serving the interests of the whole population.

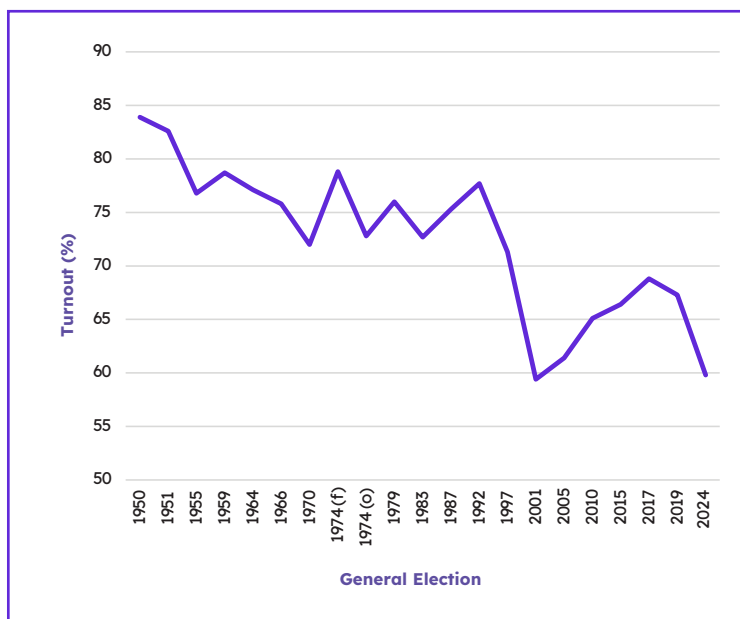


Figure 1. UK general election turnout (1950-2024)

Data source: House of Commons Library (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/CBP-7529/>)

Disparities in turnout

The growing tendency towards non-voting is not equally widespread across the population. Rather, it is concentrated amongst specific demographics. Numerous recent studies have found growing disparities in UK general election turnout on the basis of class, income, wealth, homeownership, age, race, and education (Birch, Gottfried and Lodge 2013; Ansell and Gingrich 2022; Patel 2023; Aref-Adib and Hale 2024).

Published data from Ipsos's UK Knowledge Panel (n = 17,394 GB adults) allows us to directly compare turnout rates at the July 2024 general election by class, age, ethnicity and housing tenure:

From this data, we can see that turnout at the 2024 general election was:

- ▣ 13 points higher amongst white people than amongst ethnic minorities
- ▣ 22 points higher amongst social grades AB than amongst social grades DE
- ▣ 34 points higher amongst those aged 65+ than amongst those aged 18-24
- ▣ 36 points higher amongst outright homeowners than amongst private and social renters



Figure 2. GE 2024 turnout by class, age, housing tenure and ethnic group

Data source: Ipsos
(<https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election>)

These turnout disparities all represent an exacerbation of pre-existing trends, visible in previous elections:

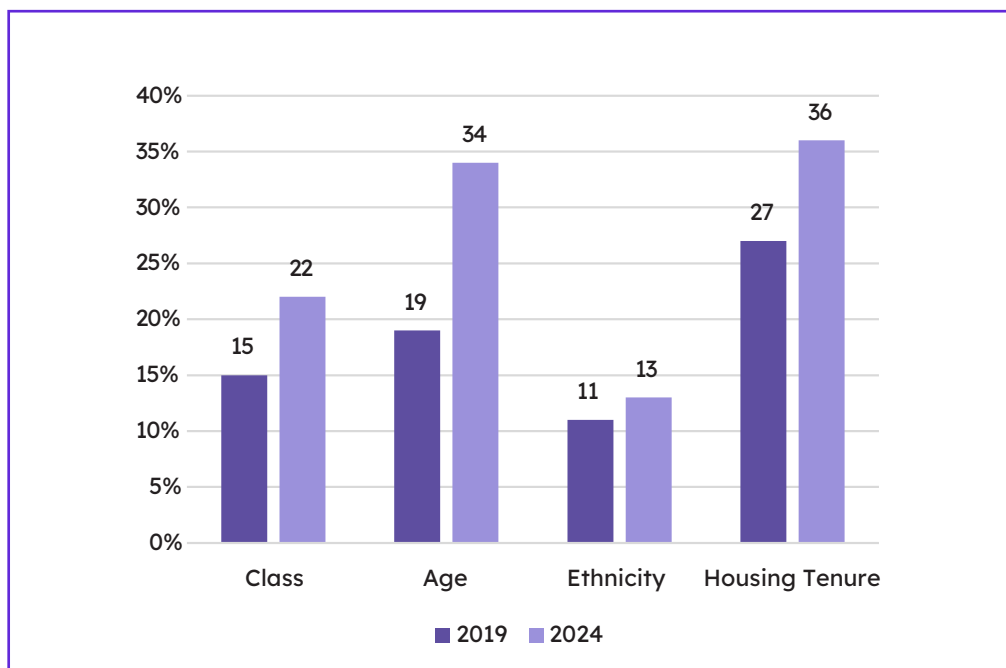


Figure 3. Turnout gaps at the 2019 and 2024 UK general elections

Data source: Ipsos (<https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election>)

[Class = percentage point difference in turnout between members of the AB and DE groups; Age = percentage point difference in turnout between those aged 18-24 and those aged 65+; Ethnicity = percentage point difference in turnout between white and non-white groups; Housing tenure = percentage point difference in turnout between owners and private renters]

Such patterns also fit with what has been observed across the rest of the developed world: falling levels of overall turnout sees increasing disparities develop in turnout rates between rich and poor, between young and old, and between the secure and the socially marginalised (Dalton 2022).

Social inequalities on the basis of age, class, race, and housing tenure are thus increasingly reflected in a growing *political inequality* between whose voices are heard at elections.

The result of these growing disparities is we now have an *unrepresentative electorate* – one that is older, richer, whiter, and more secure than the UK public at large.

The next section of this report will set out the downstream political and economic consequences of such an unrepresentative electorate.



Part II

The political economy of low and unequal turnout

Warped political incentives

The central problem with disparate turnout is that it produces warped political incentives for politicians: they are incentivised to pay more attention to those groups that have high turnout, and less to those that have low turnout.

Politicians are often upfront about this: in January 2015, future Mayor of London Sadiq Khan (then Labour's Shadow Justice Secretary) told *The Independent*:

“If you speak candidly to a campaign manager of any of the mainstream parties they will say that they concentrate their energies disproportionately on those they know are going to vote... If you've got a candidate with an hour spare and a choice to go to an old people's home or a sixth-form college, 99 per cent of campaign managers will say you've got to go to an old people's home. That's because 94 per cent of them are on the register and 77 per cent of them will vote. That is not true of the younger generation.” (Duff and Wright 2015).

Crucially, such warped incentives do not only apply to campaigns and electioneering: they also apply to government policymaking. Governments pursue policies designed to ensure their re-election, which means catering to the interests of those groups likely to vote. The result of unequal turnout is that some demographic groups' interests and preferences are prioritised more than others. As the American political scientist V.O. Key Jr. famously put it, “The blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote” (Key 1949).

This has been demonstrated empirically: a 2003 study found that within congressional districts in the United States, counties with higher levels of turnout received disproportionate levels of federal funding (Martin 2003); a 2005 study found that US Senators were far more responsive to the preferences of voters than non-voters (Griffin and Newman 2005). Most recently, a 2021 analysis of public attitudes and government policies in OECD countries since 1980 found that policy choices correlated with the attitudes of voters, but not with those of the public at large (Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe and Oser 2021). As André Blais, Ruth Dassonneville, and Filip Kostelka put it in a recent survey of research on turnout internationally, “it is clear that politicians care who votes and they seem to know who participates and who does not” (Blais, Dassonneville and Kostelka 2020).

In 1997, the political scientist Arend Lijphart described this phenomenon as “democracy's unresolved dilemma”: by generating unequal political influence, low and unequal turnout effectively negates the core egalitarian principles underpinning democratic politics (Lijphart 1997). Moreover, this outcome – which political scientists generally term “unequal political responsiveness” (Ansell and Gingrich 2022) – ultimately leads in turn to suboptimal and inequalitarian political and economic outcomes.

High inequality

The impact of warped electoral incentives in producing unequal political responsiveness has long been established with regard to straightforward distributional choices, in particular between rich and poor. Cross-national studies have consistently found that lower turnouts result in lower levels of redistributive social spending, and thus in higher inequality (Hicks and Swank 1992; Pontusson and Kenworthy 2005; Larcinese 2007; Mahler 2008; Pontusson and Rueda 2010; Fumagalli and Narciso 2012; Mahler, Jesuit and Paradowski 2013). This is because, as Lane Kenworthy and Jonas Pontusson argue, turnout is effectively “a proxy for the electoral mobilisation of low income workers”, and this in turn “conditions the responsiveness of government policy to market income inequality trends”. In other words: when low-income citizens vote, governments are incentivised to redirect resources towards them; when they do not, governments deprioritise their interests.

Two recent studies have specifically investigated this mechanism by examining the impact of class and income disparities in the composition of state-level electorates in the United States of America (Avery 2015; Franko, Kelly and Witko 2016). Both studies found that who votes matters: when there are high disparities in turnout between rich and poor, the result is policies that favour the rich, and long-term increases in inequality. Notably, such studies refute the idea that voting itself matters little for socio-economic outcomes: though turnout disparities are neither the only form of political inequality nor the only driver of unequal political responsiveness, they can be seen to have a major impact. There is thus good reason to believe that the unrepresentative composition of the UK’s electorate is exacerbating economic inequality.

Indeed, specific examples of turnout disparities influencing distributional choices have been identified here in the UK. In 2013, an IPPR report by Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge analysed the impact of the then-governments spending cuts on voters and non-voters respectively: they found that George Osborne’s 2010 spending review saw voters on average face cuts to services and benefits amounting to £1,850, compared to an average of £2,135 for non-voters. Since non-voters were a substantially less wealthy demographic, such cuts on average amounted to 20% of their household income, compared to 12% of average household income for the cuts experienced by voters. (Birch, Gottfried and Lodge 2013).

More recently, various studies have highlighted the differing impact of recent fiscal choices on high-turnout versus low-turnout age groups. In 2016, the Resolution Foundation highlighted turnout disparities between old and young, and noted the “correlation between generational voting blocs and the tax and benefit policies being implemented this parliament, which deliver a net benefit to those aged 55-75 set against large losses for those aged 20-40” (Gardiner, 2016). In their 2022 review of political inequalities in the UK, Ben Ansell and Jane Gingrich similarly noted that “the growing polarisation [...] by age in terms of both turnout and voting [...] aligns with the direction of policy, which has largely favoured older citizens in recent years”. They observe that though the New Labour governments of the early 2000s expanded benefits for both pensioners and working-age adults, the latter changes have since proven substantially more politically vulnerable (Ansell and Gingrich 2022). In their 2025 survey of

the evolution of the UK welfare state, Nick Pearce and Gavin Kelly likewise emphasise that “austerity and retrenchment fell on the working age welfare state, while the value of the State Pension was increased”. They also suggest this was enabled “by sharp demographic inequalities in voter registration, turnout, and partisan preference between young, middle-aged, and older voters” (Pearce and Kelly 2025).

A briefing published by the Resolution Foundation in June 2024 laid bare the extent of this distributional prioritisation of the elderly in the years since 2010: highlighting the contrast between the £44 billion real-terms increase in state pension spending with the real-terms benefit cuts for working-age households, its authors calculated that benefit changes had left non-pensioners on average £1,400 a year worse off, and pensioners over £900 better off. Moreover, their analysis of party manifestos demonstrated that at the 2024 general election, both Labour and the Conservatives had “implicitly committed to plans for tax and benefit policies that favour older households”, and which risked “entrenching the current imbalance between pensioners and non-pensioners, particularly non-pensioner households with children.” (Broome, Clegg, Hale, McCurdy and Try 2024). More recently, research from the Intergenerational Foundation found that since 2004–05, government spending per pensioner has risen by about 55% in real terms, compared to only 38% per working-age adult, and only 20% per child (Nakkan 2025).

Notably, this prioritisation of pensions over working-age-focused spending in the context of an increasingly elderly-dominated electorate reflects a wider international phenomenon: a 1997 study of OECD countries found that for each extra year on the age of the median voter, spending on pensions rises by a full 0.5% of GNP (Breyer and Craig 1997).

Low growth

However, unequal turnout does not just impact straightforward questions of inter-class or inter-generational distribution. Today, there is also reason to believe that unequal turnout – in particular between different age groups – is having a distorting impact on wider aspects of economic policy. Above all, the electoral overrepresentation of high-turnout, asset-owning, older voters risks distorting the overall objectives of economic policy, and standing in the way of policies that would promote economic growth. This in turn only exacerbates intergenerational inequality, by keeping asset prices high while slowing generational pay progression.

This has on occasion been noted by commentators. In August 2020, *The Economist* warned that then-prime minister Boris Johnson’s reliance on older voters, whose policy preferences clashed with the “drivers of prosperity in the modern liberal market economy”, risked leaving Britain a “grey and stagnant land” (*The Economist* 2020). Two years later, a similar point was made by the economics writer Duncan Weldon, who linked the preferences of these voters to their distinctive material circumstances. In his book *Two Hundred Years of Muddling Through*, Weldon argued that:

“The new development in the twenty-first century is the rise of an almost post-economic voting block: the retired and those nearing retirement who are insulated from the day to day gyrations of the economic cycle by guaranteed pensions and asset ownership. And what is more is that they are a group whose share of the population is rising and who are much more likely to vote” (Weldon 2022a).

For Weldon, the electoral power of this “post-economic voting block” of elderly asset owners, strengthened by its propensity to turn out at elections, poses a major obstacle to reviving economic growth in Britain. Weldon frets that such over-represented voters are unlikely to reward governments for successfully pursuing economic growth; rather, they are liable to punish them for attempting pro-growth measures (such as planning reform to allow more housebuilding) that could threatened the values of their assets, and from which they would themselves see little benefit (Weldon 2022b).

Support for the existence of this “post-economic voting block” has been provided by Joe Chrisp and Nick Pearce of the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Bath. Investigating the political economy of older voters within British politics, Chrisp and Pearce examined the relationship between home ownership, age, and voting. They found that “older people have distinct material interests, related to housing wealth and pensions’ income, that are visible in their political preferences”, and that these political preferences are shaped by many older voters being relatively “insulated” from economic turbulence or disadvantage. Highlighting in particular the importance of home-owners aged 55 and over (who made around 40% of the electorate at the 2017 and 2019 general elections), they argue that this group votes in line with theories of “patrimonial voting” (which treat electoral choices as downstream of asset values), and emphasise that the power of this bloc derives in large part from its disproportionately high rates of turnout (Chrisp and Pearce 2019; Chrisp and Pearce 2021).

Torsten Bell (then Chief Executive of the Resolution Foundation, now pensions minister and Labour MP for Swansea West) more recently made a wider set of claims about the economic consequences of the electoral preponderance of the elderly, and the potential mechanisms by which it could impede growth. Writing in *The Guardian* in 2023, Bell warned that a combination of demographics and voting patterns was trapping Britain in stagnation. Bell’s central argument was that:

“Older voters dish out less political punishment for weak growth, undermining one of democracy’s core economic strengths: economic accountability. Growth is more important to the living standards of workers than pensioners – it more directly affects wages and employment than pensions” (Bell 2023).

The likely consequence, in Bell’s eyes, was that electoral pressure would see the long-term investments in transport, housing, and education that are necessary for growth crowded out by short-term spending on health and pensions, in line with the interests and preferences of older voters.

Bell’s argument draws on the work of Tim Vlandas, a political scientist at the University of Oxford who has used cross-national data to explore the impact of

aging electorates on political and economic outcomes. Analysing the expressed policy preferences of older voters, Vlandas finds that they prioritise short-term spending on pensions and healthcare over growth-driving social investments in education and childcare. More importantly, Vlandas identifies the kinds of economic outcomes that older voters can be empirically shown to either electorally reward or punish: he finds that while older voters are uniquely averse to inflation, and much more likely than younger voters to punish governments for presiding over it, they are far less concerned about growth and employment. Crucially, they are far less likely than younger voters to reward governments for increasing GDP, or to punish them for presiding over unemployment (Bojar and Vlandas 2021; Vlandas 2022).

These findings are extremely significant. Firstly, given the growing preponderance of elderly voters within western European and north American electorates (as a result of both aging populations and unequal turnout rates), this distinct aversion to inflation amongst elderly voters could well account for the unprecedented global swing against incumbents that has followed the post-pandemic inflation surge of 2021-2023. More broadly, they show that not only do elderly voters have distinct material interests, but that these interests lead them to behave electorally in distinctive ways. Crucially, the consequence of these electoral behaviours is to disincentivise governments from pursuing pro-growth policies, meaning that as demographic change and differential turnout leads to increasingly elderly electorates, the political incentives in favour of economic growth will become increasingly outweighed. Thus, as the age of the median voter increases, growth is likely to fall.

Vlandas suggests three specific mechanisms through which the growing electoral preponderance of elderly voters is likely to hinder growth. Firstly, elderly voters “crowd out” necessary social, educational, and infrastructural investments by incentivising governments to prioritise short-term spending on pensions and healthcare. Secondly, elderly voters undermine aggregate demand at key junctures, by incentivising governments to disproportionately prioritise low inflation over low unemployment. (Indeed, in an earlier set of studies, Vlandas finds that in countries with a higher proportion of elderly voters, centre-left parties advocate more fiscally conservative policies; as he notes elsewhere, this has the potential to “lock in a low inflation regime, even when this is not economically desirable.” [Vlandas 2016; Vlandas 2017].) Thirdly, by failing to punish poor economic performance, elderly voters both reduce the incentive for governments to pursue pro-growth policies, and increase the likelihood of governments whose policies are antithetical to growth ultimately remaining in power (Vlandas 2023).

This account of how the voting power of the elderly influences policy chimes with the UK’s experience since 2010: in 2015, 2017, and 2019, Conservative governments succeeded in winning re-election despite historically low GDP growth and an “unprecedented stagnation in real wages” for working-age adults (Fry, Pittaway and Thwaites 2024). Notably, they did so largely on the basis of strong support from older voters, and in particular from older homeowners, in the context of continuous real-terms increases to both health and pension spending (Chrisp and Pearce 2019; Chrisp and Pearce 2021; Broome, Clegg, Hale, McCurdy and Try 2024).

Overall then, there is ample evidence to suggest that the turnout inequalities between different age groups in the UK identified in Part 1 of this report are warping the incentives confronting our politicians. The consequence of the disproportionate electoral preponderance of the old is that politicians, regardless of party or ideology, are encouraged to prioritise low inflation over high growth or employment, and short-term spending on health and pensions over long-term social or infrastructural investments. Perhaps most worryingly, turnout disparities mean that even a government focused on driving investment and growth is likely to struggle to reap electoral rewards for delivering on its goals. Indeed, such a government would in fact risk electoral punishment for failing to prioritise the short-term consumption preferences and asset values of the old. We thus run a serious risk that, if we fail to address these turnout inequalities, pro-growth governance will be limited to occasional fortuitous interludes, amidst a political system dominated by electorally-incentivised stagnation.

A vicious cycle of disillusionment and disengagement

In his classic 1960 study of American democracy, *The Semi-Sovereign People*, the American political scientist Elmer Eric Schattschneider hypothesised that the “massive self-disenfranchisement” by non-voters was the result of the failure of the political system to adequately respond to their needs (Schattschneider 1960). This hypothesis has since been validated by extensive research. Scholars have consistently found that turnout (especially amongst the poor) is depressed by high levels of economic inequality (Solt 2008; Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Jensen and Jespersen 2017; Schäfer and Schwander 2019). More recently, a study examined how turnout rates across Europe amongst different income and education groups are impacted by different beliefs about the likelihood of the political system to deliver for them, finding that “the gap in voting between the bottom and top education/income quintile would be around 15-20% smaller if those groups were equally optimistic about the workings of the system” (Mathisen and Peters 2023).

As these researchers and others have noted, this suggests the possibility of a dangerous vicious cycle of disillusionment and disengagement, in which unequal responsiveness leads underrepresented groups to lose faith in the ability of democratic politics to deliver for them, and to therefore cease participating – worsening the incentives facing politicians, and so exacerbating the very trends behind their own dissatisfaction (Solt 2008; Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Birch 2009a; Schäfer and Schwander 2019; Dalton 2022; Elsässer and Schäfer 2023; Mathisen and Peters 2023).

There is reason to believe that this is what is now unfolding in the UK, where low turnout and unequal political responsiveness have been accompanied by declining satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions (Blackwell, Fowler, Fox, Mackay and Boga Mitchell 2019; Curtice, Montagu and Sivathanas 2024). Moreover, polling conducted by More in Common shortly after the 2024 general election found that lack of trust in politicians and lack of belief

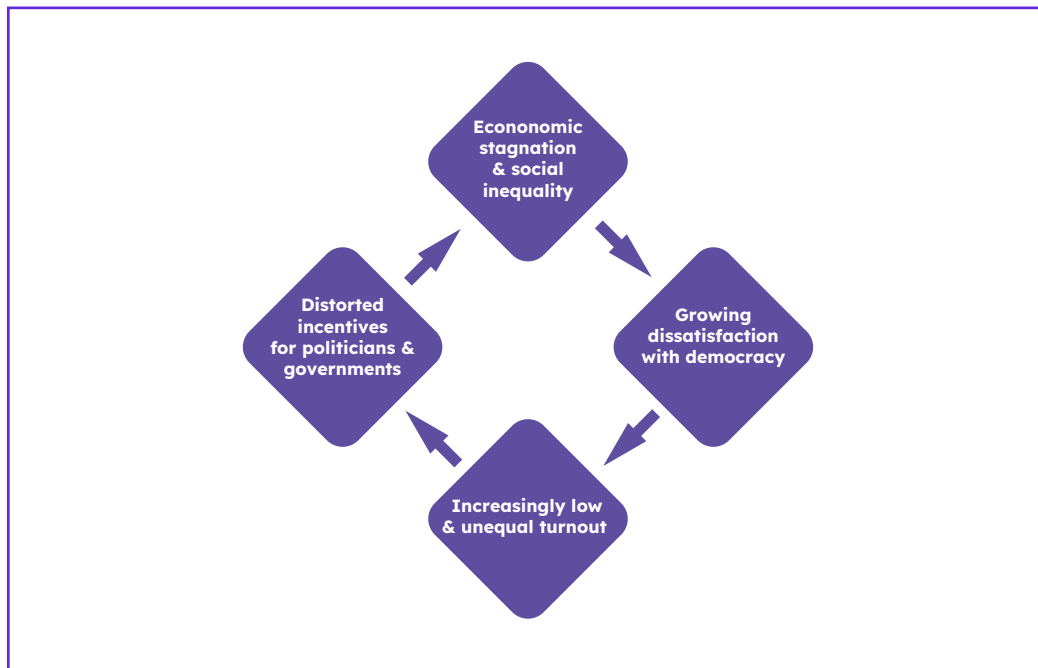


Figure 4. A vicious cycle of democratic decay

in the efficacy of voting were the top two expressed reasons for non-voting – cited by over 50% of non-voters polled (Stears and Tryl 2024).

In their 2017 study of *The New Politics of Class*, Geoff Evans and James Tilley highlighted steeply declining rates of working-class turnout in UK general elections since the early 2000s, which they linked to the Labour Party’s increasing orientation towards the middle classes. They warned of “a spiral of exclusion, in which parties do not represent certain types of people, those people do not vote, and therefore parties become even less likely to represent those nonvoting groups” (Evans and Tilley 2017). Unsurprisingly, numerous studies have found that lower income and lower class citizens are more likely to distrust politicians, feel that democracy in the UK does not serve their interests, or that doubt political participation is effective (Birch, Gottfried, and Lodge 2013; Jennings, Stoker and Twyman 2018; Blackwell, Fowler, Fox, Mackay and Boga Mitchell 2018; Blackwell, Fowler, Fox, Mackay and Boga Mitchell 2019; John Smith Centre 2021; Curtice, Montagu and Sivathasan 2024).

Today, there is also reason believe that vicious spirals of low turnout and unequal political responsiveness are driving disillusionment and disengagement most especially amongst the young, who are suffering not only from intergenerational inequality, but also from the lack of growth, housing, and opportunity. In 2021, polling conducted by YouGov for IPPR found, amidst general dissatisfaction with British democracy, that the under-50s were about half as likely as the over-65s to think that democracy in Britain served their interests well (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022). In 2022, the World Values Survey similarly found that a generational gap had opened up in the UK since the mid-2000s when it came to trust in political institutions: whereas confidence in parliament, government, and political parties has remained stable since 2005 amongst the Pre-War Generation and Baby Boomers, it has halved amongst Millennials (whose attitudes are shared by Gen Z) (The UK in the World Values Survey 2023).

These declines in democratic satisfaction and political trust are major political problems in themselves, liable to undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of public institutions. They also bring political risk: dissatisfaction with democracy correlates strongly with populist attitudes, and plays an important role in driving support for both populist and far-right parties (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2023; Favaretto and Mariani 2024; Curtice, Montagu and Sivathasan 2024). The long-term effect of low turnout and unequal political responsiveness is thus to gradually build up a pool of discontented non-voters, alienated from the political system, who could potentially be susceptible to populist appeals from anti-system or extremist parties.

Today, unscrupulous right-wing populists are attempting to make use of this opportunity. They seek to exploit dissatisfaction with democracy's failure to deliver, and to mobilise specific sections of this pool of alienated non-voters, by presenting themselves as challengers to a broken political system and an out-of-touch political elite.

Importantly however, the National Centre for Social Research has also found that low political trust in the UK has created a significantly greater openness amongst the public for political and constitutional reform (Curtice, Montagu and Sivathasan 2024). The next section of this report outlines a reform with the potential to combat some of the problems described above, and to break the vicious cycle of declining voter turnout, unequal political responsiveness, and increasing democratic discontent. ♦

Part III

The case for compulsory voting

What is compulsory voting?

Compulsory voting refers to a legal obligation for citizens to participate in a public election. As numerous of its advocates have pointed out, it is something of a misnomer: in democracies, the existence of the secret ballot means that compulsory voting rules do not compel citizens to actually vote for a party, but simply to cast a ballot (Watson and Tami 2000; Hill 2004; Keaney and Rogers 2006; Birch 2009a).

Compulsory voting is not a new idea, having been used variously in Ancient Athens, medieval Swiss Cantons, and the early north American colonies (Birch 2009a; Malkopoulou 2014; Singh 2021). In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it gained traction amidst wider processes of democratisation, and was introduced in Belgium in 1892, Spain in 1910, Argentina in 1912, the Netherlands in 1917, Czechoslovakia in 1920, Australia in 1924, and Chile in 1925 (Birch 2009a). Since then, it has at different points been advocated for by political figures as diverse as Winston Churchill, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump (Watson and Tami 2000; Singh 2021; Singh 2025).

Today, compulsory voting is used at the national level in 22 democracies, including advanced democracies comparable to the UK like Australia and Belgium.¹ Of these countries, 13 enforce penalties, whereas in the other 9 the legal obligation remains effectively symbolic.

Where compulsory voting is enforced, the penalty generally consists of a small fine – in Australia for instance, non-voters are fined AUS\$20 [about £10], unless they can present a valid excuse (International IDEA 2025; Australian Electoral Commission 2023a). In a few countries, other sanctions are imposed: in Peru for instance, proof of having voted is necessary to access some public services (International IDEA 2025). Importantly however, non-voting penalties are generally designed less as punishments than as means of establishing and maintaining strong social norms in favour of voting, and instilling a culture of democratic participation; it is in countries which such norms are most effectively instilled that compulsory voting has the greatest impact.

¹ The full list of democracies that use compulsory voting is: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Greece, Honduras, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Mexico, Nauru, Paraguay, Peru, the Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Singapore, Thailand, Turkey, and Uruguay. Of these, sanctions are enforced in Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Liechtenstein, Nauru, Peru, the Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Singapore, and Uruguay.

Compulsory voting in the UK

Compulsory voting has been advocated in the UK since the early 1920s, and sporadically debated ever since (Watson and Tami 2000; Armstrong 2015). Nonetheless, it is an idea that has only really gained traction in the UK since the turn of the twenty-first century, amidst concerns about falling turnout during the New Labour era. In 2000, two Labour politicians, Tom Watson and Mark Tami, published a pamphlet entitled *Votes for All* as part of the Fabian Society's "Second Term Thinking" series, which argued for "compulsory participation in elections" as the best solution for low and declining turnouts (Watson and Tami 2000). The next year, after a general election which saw record low turnout, the Labour MP Gareth Thomas presented a private members bill to introduce compulsory voting, supported by fellow Labour MPs Fiona Mactaggart, Paul Marsden, Peter Kilfoyle, David Winnick, Linda Perham, Tom Watson, Mark Tami, Tony Colman and Martin Linton (House of Commons Votes and Proceedings, 25 November 2001).

Following another low turnout general in 2005, the issue was taken up by the IPPR, who in 2006 published a report entitled *A Citizen's Duty: Voter inequality and the case for compulsory turnout*, setting out a detailed argument for the introduction of compulsory voting in the UK on broadly similar lines to Australia (Keaney and Rogers 2006). The idea of compulsory voting was also endorsed by a number of senior Labour politicians, including then-Cabinet ministers Peter Hain, Geoff Hoon, and David Blunkett, and in 2009 the Ministry of Justice Green Paper on *Rights and Responsibilities: Developing Our Constitutional Framework* discussed the possibility of making voting a statutory civic duty (albeit not enforced by any sanction) (Birch 2009b; Hinsliff 2009).

The idea continued to be discussed even after Labour left office in 2010: compulsory voting amendments were proposed to the *Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill* in the House of Lords in late 2010, and to the *European Union Referendum Bill* in the House of Commons in late 2013, and in early 2015, the Labour MP David Winick unsuccessfully presented a private members bill to make voting a legal obligation (Armstrong 2015). In 2013, IPPR published *Divided Democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*, which advocated compulsory voting, but only for first-time voters (Birch, Gottfried and Lodge 2013). In 2014, the House of Commons Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform conducted an inquiry into voter engagement, and recommended that "the Government report to the House setting out how a system of compulsory voting could operate in the UK, including an assessment of international experience", proposing that this "would mark the start of a public debate" (Political and Constitution Reform Committee 2014).

Since 2015, beyond being occasionally advocated by public figures and political commentators including Tim Montgomerie (Montgomerie 2015), Philip Collins (Collins 2017), Rohan Silva (Silva 2023), Alastair Campbell (Campbell 2023), and Rory Stewart (The Rest is Politics 2024), compulsory voting has not been a particular subject of discussion at the UK level. Notably however, it has remained salient at the devolved level – above all in Wales, where its introduction for Senedd elections has recently been advocated by former First

Minister Mark Drakeford (BBC 2024), former First Minister Vaughan Gething (Record of Proceedings, 07/05/2024, 208), and former Plaid Cymru Leader Adam Price, who introduced a “civic duty to vote Bill” that was debated in the Senedd in June 2023 (Record of Proceedings, 28/06/2023, 222). It has also been previously endorsed on a number of occasions by current Secretary of State for Wales Jo Stevens (BBC 2016; Khan and Barradale 2017).

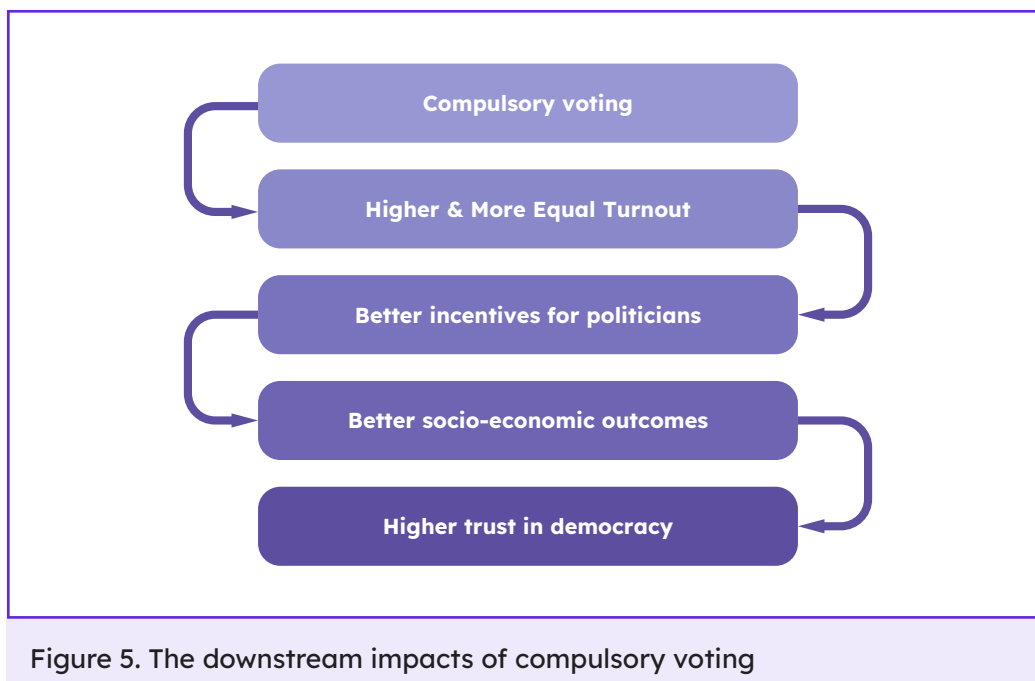
Why compulsory voting?

This report proposes the introduction of compulsory voting, enforced by a small fine, for UK general elections. While not the focus of the discussion, it would also be supportive of the introduction of compulsory voting at the devolved level.

Compulsory voting is a direct and straightforward solution to the problems of unequal voter turnout described in Part I of this report, and thus an effective response to the detrimental consequences laid out in Part II. By effectively compelling the near-universal participation of eligible voters, it drastically reduces disparities and biases in the composition of the electorate, ensuring that the electorate suitably reflects the composition of the population as a whole. In the UK context, compulsory voting is the surest way to generate an electorate that is younger, more socially, economically, and racially diverse, and in which the “median voter” is no longer so demographically distinct from the median UK adult.

Crucially, rectifying turnout inequalities will in turn improve the political incentives facing politicians. Political parties of all stripes will no longer be pushed to pay disproportionate attention to the preferences and interests of high turnout groups (in particular the elderly and financially secure); instead, they will be forced to attend to the preferences and interests of those (younger, poorer, more insecure) sections of the public who they have previously been incentivised to disregard. In particular, this should encourage governments to pursue policies designed to lower inequality, boost opportunity, and increase economic growth; certainly, it will make it easier for them to be rewarded by the electorate for delivering on these outcomes.

Ultimately, compulsory voting is the one intervention truly capable of breaking the vicious cycle of low turnout, bad incentives, stagnation, inequality, disillusionment, and disengagement that is currently blighting British politics. Furthermore, while far from a silver bullet, there is reason to hope that the introduction of compulsory voting could even initiate a virtuous cycle – one in which near-universal turnout produces better incentives for political parties, in turn leading to more responsive and egalitarian policy-making, higher economic growth, and thus ultimately to greater public trust and faith in the democratic process itself.



Compulsory voting would thus improve both the functioning and resilience of British democracy, by re-integrating alienated and apathetic non-voters into the political system, and forcing politicians to respond to their needs. Moreover, there is also a straightforwardly normative case to be made for it: compulsory voting promotes and defends the idea of voting as a moral duty, thereby generating a thick understanding of democratic citizenship – one in which legal and political rights are combined with civic obligations.

The evidence for compulsory voting

Although the relatively small number of democracies using compulsory voting makes claims about its effects difficult to conclusively prove, the above arguments are nonetheless amply empirically supported.

Firstly, the evidence is clear that compulsory voting does in fact boost turnout. When compulsory voting was introduced in Australia in 1924, turnout increased from 58.0% at the previous election to 91.3%. Since then, it has only once fallen below 90% – and then only to 89.8% (Australian Electoral Commission 2023b). Turnout in Belgium – where compulsory voting remains on the books, but has not recently been enforced – is only very slightly lower, averaging 88.9% over the last five parliamentary elections (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2025a). In Singapore, the introduction of compulsory voting in 1958 saw turnout rise from 52.7% to 90.1%, and turnout has averaged around 95% ever since (Birch

2009a). In Chile, compulsory voting kept turnout rates of registered voters in the high 80s and low 90s throughout the 1990s and early 2000s; after its abolition in 2012, turnout dropped dramatically into the 40s; after its re-introduction in 2023, turnout immediately rose back up again to 85% (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2025b).

Cross-national studies reinforce this picture: in *Full Participation* – her 2009 book-length study of compulsory voting – Kings College London professor Sarah Birch estimated that all else being equal, states which enforce compulsory voting have electoral turnout that is on average around 12 percentage points higher (Birch 2009a). More recently, a comprehensive study of 1400 elections in 116 countries between 1945 and 2017 found that the presence of enforced compulsory voting boosts voter turnout as a percentage of registered voters by an average of 14.5-18.5 points, and that the level of sanction was effectively irrelevant. Indeed, the authors found that even unenforced compulsory voting boosts turnout as a percentage of registered voters by about 7-10 points (Kostelka, Singh and Blais 2024).

Secondly, and logically following from this, compulsory voting demonstrably reduces turnout disparities – increasing the proportion of voters who are younger, poorer, less educated, and from minority backgrounds. With turnout rates so universally high, it is difficult for large gaps of the kind we currently see in the UK to emerge. This has been observed in Belgium (Aekaert and De Winter 1996; Hooghe and Pelleriaux 1998) and in Australia (Hill 2004) as well as more widely internationally. A recent cross-national survey confirmed that compulsory voting drastically reduces turnout disparities in age, income, and education, and that this effect grows stronger the more strictly it is enforced. Indeed, the paper’s model estimated that whereas in voluntary elections the average difference in predicted probability of voting between those aged 20 and aged 60 is 26%, when compulsory voting is enforced it drops to 3.1% (Boyle 2024).

We can therefore reasonably expect that the introduction of compulsory voting in the UK would drastically reduce the vast disparities in turnout that currently exist on the basis of class, income, education, race, housing situation and age, as set out in Part I of this report. Research on the downstream consequences of turnout, and on the attitudes of different voter demographics, make clear that this should in turn have a substantial impact on the political incentives facing politicians, on the policies they ultimately pursue, and on the outcomes for which they are either electorally rewarded or punished.

Specifically, the higher and more equal turnouts produced by compulsory voting would reduce the electoral importance of older voters (and in particular older homeowners), who (as shown in Part II) we know to be disproportionately electorally responsive to inflation, but unlikely to electorally reward housebuilding, social investment, low unemployment, or economic growth. By contrast, it would increase the electoral weight of low-skilled workers (who have been shown to be particularly electorally responsive to unemployment [Vlandas and Bojar 2021]), and young people (who have been shown to be particularly electorally responsive to high house prices [Vlandas 2022]), as well as working-age voters more broadly (who we know to be responsive to low growth [Vlandas 2022]). This should make it harder for politicians to allow stagnation, and easier for them to pursue growth.

At the same time, the higher and more equal turnouts produced by compulsory voting would reduce the electoral importance of homeowners and wealthier voters, who we know to be more hostile to redistribution, and increase the electoral weight of renters and lower-income voters, who we know to be more supportive (Ansell and Cansunar 2021; Ansell, Bokobza, Cansunar, Elkjær, Markgraf, and Nyrup 2022; Patel 2023). This should make it harder for politicians to avoid confronting inequality, and easier for them to pursue fighting it through progressive taxation and redistributive spending.

Incentives for politicians matter: we can and should expect a differently-composed electorate to shape the behaviour of politicians, and ultimately to result in different kinds of government policy. As shown in Part II of this report, there is extensive international evidence that politicians are responsive to who votes, and that turnout rates have an important impact on outcomes. Moreover, there is also striking evidence that bringing hitherto-non-participating groups into the electorate (as compulsory voting would) leads to dramatic increases in the extent to which their interests are served by politics.

This has been most extensively documented with regards to the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, which enfranchised African-Americans in the southern United States. In 2014, Elizabeth Cascio and Ebonya Washington found that following the passage of the VRA, state-level resources in southern states were notably re-directed towards heavily black areas, with a 6% increase in per capita transfers for each 10% share of a county's population that was black. They suggest that this is because the passage of the VRA drastically altered the incentives facing southern politicians, pushing even segregationist figures like George Wallace and Strom Thurmond to attempt to win black votes (Cascio and Washington 2014). Similarly, a 2019 paper found that the passage of the VRA reduced labour market inequality, and did so by shifting the composition of the electorate and the nature of the median voter, incentivising politicians of all races to pursue fiscal redistribution, the public sector employment of black citizens, and the enforcement of anti-discrimination policies (Aneja and Avencio-Leon 2019).

Other studies have considered the impact of increased electoral participation from other groups. Grant Miller has studied the state-by-state introduction of women's suffrage in the United States between 1869 and 1920, finding that women voting resulted in far greater local responsiveness to what were understood to be "female" concerns. He points in particular to significant increases in local public health spending designed to reduce child mortality (Miller 2008). Similarly, Thomas Fujiwara has studied the state-by-state introduction of electronic voting in Brazil in the 1990s, which functioned as a de facto enfranchisement of the country's substantial illiterate population. He finds that it led to the election of local legislators more focused on the interests of the poor, and increases in spending on health services targeted specifically at low-income families (Fujiwara 2015). Most recently, a study of the introduction of pre-registration laws for young voters in American states since the 1990s finds that as well as boosting youth turnout, they have led to increases in higher education spending – specifically, a 0.77% increase in spending for every 1% increase in youth turnout (Bertocchi, Dimico, Lancia and Russo 2017).

We therefore have strong reason to believe that the introduction of compulsory voting in the UK would lead to a significant increase in the extent to which UK politicians served the interests of hitherto non-voters, along with the wider demographic groups of which they form a substantial part.

The specific power of compulsory voting to promote the interests of otherwise neglected low-turnout groups has been demonstrated in cross-national studies of its impact on economic inequality. In line with the many studies discussed in Part II of this report that show a positive relationship between voter turnout and fiscal redistribution, Alberto Chong and Mauricio Olivera's 2008 analysis of 91 countries between 1960 and 2000 found that the enforcement of compulsory voting boosts the income share of the poorest quintile of the population, and reduces inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient (Chong and Olivera 2008); although Birch is critical of Chong and Olivera's methodology, her own cross-national analysis similarly suggested that the presence of compulsory voting reduces inequalities in wealth (Birch 2009a).

Single country studies find similar effects: Anthony Fowler's examination of the staggered introduction of compulsory voting in Australia between 1914 and 1941 finds that introducing compulsory voting dramatically increased turnout, reduced socio-economic inequalities in participation, and directly resulted in major expansions of the welfare state (Fowler, 2013). Conversely, John Carey and Yusaku Horiuchi's investigation of the abolition of compulsory voting in Venezuela in 1993 finds that removing compulsory voting had the exact opposite effect: turnout plummeted, especially amongst the poor, resulting soon afterwards in the introduction of policies that dramatically increased inequality (Carey and Horiuchi 2017). Even aside from these detailed studies, similar effects are visible elsewhere: after compulsory voting was introduced in Fiji in 1996, the three-year average in social spending increased by 0.9% of GDP; after compulsory voting was abolished by the Netherlands in 1970, the three-year average in social expenditure fell by 0.8% of GDP (Chong and Olivera 2008).

Should compulsory voting be introduced in the UK, there is good reason to believe that the same electoral logics would apply, with consequences not only for redistribution and inequality, but also for macroeconomic policy, housing policy, social investment, and growth. Indeed, a recent paper tested the converse, investigating what impact the abolition of compulsory voting in several Austrian states in 1992 had on social investment in the form of education spending at the local level: it found that where turnout decline led the electoral predominance of the elderly, education spending fell as a share of municipal budgets (Klien, Melki and Pickering 2021).

Finally, there is clear evidence that compulsory voting reduces discontent with democracy. In *Full Participation*, Birch conducted an analysis of 38 countries (including six with compulsory voting) to find that: "compulsory voting has a strong and significant impact on satisfaction with democracy" and that "the residents of mandatory electoral participation states are happier with the way democracy works in their systems than those in states where voting

is voluntary” (Birch 2009a). Similarly, in 2012, Krister Lundell used data from the World Values Survey to find that compulsory voting was associated with higher trust in governments, parliaments, and justice systems, concluding that “Compulsory electoral participation may in fact be the only way to break the detrimental cycle of disaffection, disengagement and underrepresentation among less-privileged groups” (Lundell 2012).

In the context of the UK’s increasingly low-trust political environment, this makes compulsory voting a potentially highly valuable intervention. Interestingly, there is also some evidence that compulsory voting could counteract the growing trend of political dealignment in the UK, as reflected in the declining share of citizens who identify with a political party (Fieldhouse, Green, Evans, Mellon, Prosser, Schmitt and van der Eijk 2019): a 2012 study using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems database found that compulsory voting was associated with a notable increase in both the incidence and strength of partisan attachments (Singh and Thornton 2013). ◆

Part IV

Addressing objections to compulsory voting

This section of the report addresses the major criticisms that have been levelled against the idea of instructing compulsory voting in the UK. Although it cannot hope to be comprehensive, it does refute the main arguments made by compulsory voting's opponents.

“Compulsory voting is not a silver bullet”

One argument commonly levelled against compulsory voting is that it is far from a silver bullet for democratic malaise and political inequality since it fails to address key underlying causes either of declines in turnout, or of unequal political responsiveness.

Firstly, it could be objected that while compulsory voting gets people to the polls, it fails to directly address key issues underpinning the secular declines in turnout seen across western democracies. These include, in various tellings, the collapse of associational life (Gray and Caul 2000; Heath 2007; Mair 2013), increased inequality (Solt 2008; Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Jensen and Jespersen 2017; Schäfer and Schwander 2019), the rise of cultural individualism (Blais and Rubenson 2012; Kostelka and Blais 2021), or the reduced autonomy of nation-states in the face of globalisation (Steiner 2010; Steiner and Martin 2012; Marshall and Fisher 2015).

This critique has some validity: compulsory voting cannot *directly* address all of underlying causes of low and unequal electoral turnout. However, this does not negate its utility: as Part III of this report demonstrated, compulsory voting can address many low and unequal turnout's downstream effects. Moreover, in doing so it addresses some of the causes *indirectly*, while counteracting the risk that they become exacerbated. It thus provides a powerful means of interrupting a vicious cycle.

Secondly, it can be argued that compulsory voting fails as a solution to political inequality, since unequal responsiveness – in particular with regards to wealth, class and education – is to a large extent the product of factors beyond the electoral process.

In recent years, researchers have emphasised a range of mechanisms beyond disparate turnout as key determinants of unequal political responsiveness around the world. Some highlight class and educational disparities in non-electoral forms of political participation – such as contacting legislators, attending protests, boycotting certain products, or engaging in online activism (Dalton 2017; Brookman and Skovron 2018). Others emphasise inequalities

in descriptive representation, pointing to the substantial impact of class, education, and gender biases in the demographic make-up of political elites (Carnes 2013; Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer 2021; Hemingway 2022; Alexiadou 2022; Lupu and Warner 2022; Carnes and Lupu 2023; Persson, Schakel and Sundell 2023; Curto-Grau and Gallego 2023, Mathisen 2024). Finally, some scholars focus on the role of interest group lobbying, in particular through campaign donations (Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2014; Bartels 2016; Becher and Stegmueller 2023).

The implication of each of these mechanisms of unequal responsiveness is that higher and more equal voter turnout may not in itself be sufficient to guarantee political equality. Moreover, all of these mechanisms potentially apply to the UK: studies find that non-electoral forms of political participation in the UK are heavily stratified by education levels (Patel 2023), that MPs skew richer, older, whiter, more upper class, more male, and more educated than the population at large (Ansell and Gingrich 2022), and that private political donations have significantly increased in both quantity and electoral impact (Draca, Green and Homroy 2023; Cagé and Dewitte 2024).

There is therefore some validity to this critique: disparate turnout in elections is not the only source of political inequality, and not the only cause of unequal political responsiveness. As Parth Patel usefully framed it in a recent IPPR report, the drivers of political inequality and unequal political responsiveness can be divided into the three separate questions of “Who speaks?”, “Who listens?”, and “Who amplifies?” (Patel 2023). We should be clear that compulsory voting is a reform designed to address only one of these questions (“Who speaks?”), and more specifically the narrower question of “Who speaks within the electoral process?”.

Crucially however, the existence and clear significance of non-electoral mechanisms of unequal political influence does not render elections, and the question of who votes within them, irrelevant for political responsiveness. As Parts II and III of this report makes clear, there is overwhelming evidence that “Who speaks within the electoral process?” has a major impact on outcomes. For instance, to highlight just one paper discussed above, Franko, Kelly and Witko (2016) explicitly test whether class biases in turnout are irrelevant because of non-electoral forms of influence, and finds that “Even in the face of lobbying and campaign funding by upper-income interests... expanding the participation of lower-income voters produces important changes in government, public policy, and ultimately ‘who gets what’”.

As the American political theorist Kevin Elliott argues, “money doesn’t put [politicians] into office—votes do”. As he goes on to say:

“The point here is not that money doesn’t matter in politics but that votes do too—and in fact matter more than money in determining who occupies office. So long as that’s true, universal turnout will ameliorate the problem of oligarchic domination. The effect will not be comprehensive, but it will be direct and powerful.” (Elliott 2023).

There is even reason to think compulsory voting could go some way to mitigating the non-electoral mechanisms that contribute to unequal political

responsiveness. Some political scientists have suggested that, by reducing the need for political parties to mount expensive Get-Out-the-Vote operations at election time, compulsory voting could reduce the importance of money in politics (Lijphart 1997; Galston 2011).²

Overall then, compulsory voting is not a silver bullet for all forms of political inequality, and nor can it directly address all root causes of low turnout. But those limitations do not mean that it is not a worthwhile reform, with the ability to significantly transform our politics for the better.

² This argument was recently made in Parliament by the Labour peer Waheed Alli (Hansard HL Deb., 23/07/2024).

“Alternative reforms are preferable”

A related objection to compulsory voting is that alternative reforms offer preferable means of combatting the problems of low and unequal turnout. Here, different varieties of proposed reform are considered as potential alternatives to compulsory voting.

Increasing registration

The most commonly proposed reform designed to counter low turnout in the UK is the introduction of Automatic Voter Registration (AVR). It has been advocated by organisations including Unlock Democracy, the Electoral Reform Society, the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, and the IPPR (James 2023; Electoral Reform Society 2023; Association of Electoral Administrators 2025; James, Bernal and Berry 2025; Patel and Swift 2025).

This reform would involve giving local Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) the power to use data provided by other state institutions (such as the DWP, the Passport Office, or the DVLA) to register eligible voters directly, without them having to take any action themselves. In addition to ensuring a more complete and accurate register, the idea is to remove registration as a potential barrier to voting, and to ensure that all eligible individuals are in a position to vote on election day.

The introduction of AVR would be a positive reform in its own right, and one that would need to be introduced to accompany the introduction of compulsory voting (see below). On its own however, the introduction of AVR would do little to increase the numbers of people actually voting, as most non-voters are already registered. Indeed, recent comparative evidence from US states suggests that the introduction of AVR increases turnout by only around 3% (McGhee, Hill and Romero 2021).

The danger of treating registration reform as an alternative to compulsory voting can be seen from the recent example of Chile. In 2012, Chilean politicians responded to low rates of voter registration (especially amongst young people) by shifting from a voluntary system to an automatic system of voter registration. However, they combined this reform with the abolition of compulsory voting. Despite the registration reform leading to a vast increase in the number of registered voters, the combined effect of both reforms was nonetheless that the overall number of people voting fell to its lowest ever levels (Barnes and Rangel 2014). As a result, while the automatic registration system has been maintained, compulsory voting has since been reintroduced (Singh 2025).

AVR is therefore a necessary and worthwhile reform, but not one that represents a meaningful alternative to the introduction of compulsory voting.

Increasing accessibility

Other proposed reforms focus on making voting more accessible on election day itself. Options proposed have included removing or relaxing recently-introduced Voter ID requirements (Wright 2024; Patel and Swift 2025), holding elections on weekends or bank holidays instead of on Thursdays (White 2008; Patel and Swift 2025), or allowing voting on multiple days (Association of Electoral Administrators 2025).

Like AVR, these reforms would constitute positive steps: recent evidence from the UK suggests that the introduction of strict Voter ID requirements has dissuaded some voters from going to the polls and may have reduced turnout by up to 5% (Electoral Commission 2024; Barton 2025); evidence for the effect of introducing weekend voting is mixed, but analyses of European parliament elections do indicate that holding elections on weekdays does seem to lower turnout (Franklin 2002; Mattila 2003).

Like AVR however, these measures should be seen as potentially complementary to, rather than alternatives to, compulsory voting. Firstly, such measures do not conflict with compulsory voting: Australia has no voter ID requirements and holds its elections on Saturdays with the additional provision of flexible voting. Secondly, while these measures have the potential to mildly increase turnout, they have not been shown to have an effect remotely comparable to that of compulsory voting.

Expanding eligibility

Many contemporary democratic reformers argue for widening eligibility to vote in elections – in particular by lowering the vote age from 18 to 16.³ Votes at 16 has been supported by the Electoral Reform Society, the IPPR, and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, and was included in the Labour, Green, Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru, and Scottish National Party manifestos at the 2024 general election (Sandle 2025; Patel and Swift 2025; Huebner and Eichorn 2025; Johnston 2025).

³ There have also been calls to expand eligibility on the basis of nationality from UK, Irish, and Commonwealth citizens to all UK residents, most recently from the Migrant Democracy Project (James and Underwood 2025). Since the case for this does not relate to turnout rates as such, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss.

There are good reasons to support such a reform. Firstly, by enfranchising around 1.5 million additional younger voters, it could potentially go some way to correcting generational imbalances within the existing electorate. Secondly, evidence suggests that when the voting age is lower, young people are more likely to vote in the first election in which they are eligible, since both living with one's parents and being in full-time education create a socialisation effect in favour of voting (Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014; Eichhorn and Bergh 2020). Since voting is habitual, this initial participation is liable to be carried forward, and so votes at 16 can boost turnout over the long term (Franklin 2004; Eichhorn and Bergh 2021).

In Scotland, where voting eligibility has been lowered to 16 for Scottish parliamentary elections since 2014, this has been found to be the case: not only is turnout substantially higher amongst 16 and 17 year olds than amongst other younger age groups, but political scientists have identified a “follow-through effect”, in which cohorts enfranchised at 16 demonstrate slightly higher rates of turnout over the long term (Eichhorn and Huebner 2025).

Once again however, this should be seen as a potential complement, rather than an alternative, to compulsory voting. Though votes at 16 would increase the electoral weight of young people, and could also be expected to mildly boost turnout over the long-term, it would not increase turnout sufficiently to eliminate disparities in the electorate. While turnout amongst 16 and 17 year old is generally higher, without compulsory voting it remains far from universal; likewise, while the long-term “follow-through effect” of that initially elevated turnout is real and meaningful, it nonetheless amounts to only a relatively small long-term increase in turnout.

Changing the voting system

Electoral reform advocates frequently argue that non-voting is at least in part driven by dissatisfaction with the UK's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system; they suggest that we could therefore expect turnout to be significantly higher under a proportional system, in which electors could be more confident of the potential of their vote to impact the final result (Difford 2022; Hansard HC Deb., 01/30/2025).

There is some evidence for this argument: in the 1990s, a number of classic studies did indeed find that turnout is somewhat higher in elections held under more proportional systems (Blais and Carty 1990; Jackman and Miller 1995; Franklin 1996; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998). However, this evidence is highly contested. Recent meta-analyses note that only a narrow majority of studies continue to find a positive relationship between electoral system proportionality and turnout (Cancela and Geys 2016; Smith 2017; Frank and Martínez i Coma 2021). More significantly, recent single-country studies have compared turnout at the municipal level between municipalities with different electoral systems: in Poland, Jaroslaw Kantorowicz and Tobias Hlobil found that proportionality increases turnout by 4 percentage points (Kantorowicz and Hlobil 2020); in France, Andy Eggers also found that proportionality boosts turnout, but only by between 1 and 1.5 percentage points (Eggers 2014).

Overall, it seems probable that a more proportional electoral system would mildly increase turnout, but unlikely that it would do so to the extent necessary to substantially remedy turnout disparities and their negative downstream impacts. This is what was found by Brian Boyle's 2022 study of how different electoral rules have impacted turnout equalities across 45 different countries between 2001 and 2016: whereas compulsory voting significantly reduces turnout disparities on the basis of age, education and income, proportional representation has no levelling effect on turnout across income and education groups, and only a limited effect on turnout between different age groups (Boyle 2022).

This report takes no definitive stance on electoral reform: voting systems shape politics in ways that go far beyond turnout, and there are legitimate reasons for favouring a wide range of different systems (Hix, Johnston, McLean and Cummine 2010; Klemperer 2019). It is clear, however, that electoral reform cannot on its own solve our problems with turnout. Whether the UK sticks with First-Past-the-Post or shifts to a proportional system, compulsory voting will remain urgent and necessary.

Limited compulsion

Some reform advocates have accepted the basic logic of compulsory voting, but proposed only a limited application of the principle. In 2013, Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried, and Guy Lodge published an IPPR report calling for the introduction of "compulsory first-time voting" (Birch, Gottfried and Lodge 2013). While resisting the idea of full compulsory voting on the basis that it could be unpopular, they suggested that making it compulsory for newly-eligible voters to vote in their first election. Their argument was that this would significantly boost youth turnout, and that in doing so it would inculcate habits of participation amongst new voters going forward. This would essentially be a way to strengthen both the short-term and long-term effects of lowering the voting age to 16, with which they proposed to accompany their reform.

This report would not be opposed to the introduction of compulsory first-time voting, which would represent a significant step in the right direction – both in its practical effects, and its acknowledgement of electoral participation as something that can legitimately be compelled. It is clear, however, that it would only be a step: while it could be expected to boost turnout over the long-term, it could not be expected to raise turnout to the same extent as full compulsory voting; nor would it eliminate the problem of turnout disparities. Ultimately, this report sees little advantage in the advocacy of half-measures: once the principle of compulsion has been accepted, there is no good reason not to seek to apply it equally and uniformly.

Incentivised voting

A final alternative to compulsory voting that has been proposed is the idea of "incentivised voting". This is the idea that voters should be encouraged to the polls by financial incentives, such as a £5 or a £10 payment (Kellner 2019). The logic here is that such payments would generate far higher turnouts, but without resort to any formal compulsion.

Certainly, such a scheme could be expected to have a substantial effect on turnout. However, there are two important reasons for favouring compulsory over incentivised voting. Firstly, unlike compulsory voting, there are no real-world examples of countries that have implemented incentivised voting. We can therefore be far less certain about how it would play out in practice, and what unintended consequences could result. Secondly, whereas compulsory voting reflects an understanding of voting as a civic duty, incentivised voting promotes a selfish and instrumental attitude to voting, and risks legitimising the idea of electoral bribery.

“Compulsory voting would be illiberal and undemocratic”

Some of the most important arguments against compulsory voting are not practical but principled, centring on the idea that it would in some way conflict with either liberal or democratic values.

Such arguments often begin with the supposed notion of an individual “right not to vote”, on the basis that the right to vote for some reason might imply its opposite. This makes little sense: rights do not imply any corresponding right to abdicate or not exercise them. As the US Supreme Court put it in 1965, “[t]he ability to waive a constitutional right does not ordinarily carry with it the right to insist upon the opposite of that right” (Hill 2015a). While there may be a broader case for a democratic right not to be forced to express a political preference one does not believe in, this is not the issue at stake: under compulsory voting, individuals retain the right to cast blank or spoiled ballots. It is merely participation, not the expression of a preference, that is mandated.

Although cases relating to an imagined “right not to vote” have been repeatedly brought to courts in Australia, as well as to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, such a supposed right has never been upheld (Brennan and Hill 2014; Hill 2015a). Even in the US, in cases related to the management of voter rolls, federal courts have declined to grant abstention or non-voting any form of constitutional protection (Singh 2021).

Broader arguments are sometimes made that the element of compulsion involved in compulsory voting is nonetheless inherently illiberal, or out of step with democratic norms. However, these arguments ignore that compulsion is inherent to democratic government: it is already compulsory for citizens to pay tax, to educate their children, or even just to obey traffic regulations. As the Australian Public Interest Advocacy Centre put it in a submission to the Australian Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters:

“There are many things that people do not wish to do and which they would not do if they were able to exercise “individual freedoms”, but which parliament has legislated to require. The role of parliament in a parliamentary democracy includes passing laws to ensure the effectiveness of that democratic system.” (Evans 2006).

Here in the UK, we understand it to be a fundamental feature of our democratic system that criminal justice is based on trial-by-jury, with an enforceable obligation for all citizens to serve on juries when summoned. There is no compelling or coherent reason to see the same form of compulsion as suddenly illegitimate when applied to another central feature of democratic life. Likewise, it is already obligatory for all UK residents to complete the census, on the basis that it is essential for the state to have access to data about the geographic and demographic makeup of its populace. There is no compelling or coherent reason to see the same form of compulsion as illegitimate when applied to participation in elections.

In fact, some elements of our electoral system are already compulsory (albeit largely unenforced): eligible individuals can technically be fined up to £1000 if they fail to register to vote when directly requested to do so by an Electoral Registration Officer (Horne 2014).

The only question then is whether the benefits of introducing compulsory voting can justify the level of additional compulsion that would be involved. It is thus worth briefly considering what the “compulsion” in compulsory voting actually looks like, and how it might compare to other forms of civic obligation. Under the Australian model (which this report advocates), citizens are required to cast a ballot in federal elections once every three years; should they fail to do so, they will be asked either to provide a valid excuse (which can include religious objections), or to pay an “administrative penalty” of AUS\$20 (slightly under £10). It is only if they fail to provide a valid excuse or pay the fine that the criminal justice system gets involved.

Applying this to the UK, casting a ballot every four or five years would hardly be a more onerous obligation than say, paying taxes, completing the census, being potentially liable for jury duty, or having one’s vehicle regularly MOTed; moreover, the potential penalty would be less than a fifth of a typical UK parking fine, less than a tenth of what some UK local councils impose for public swearing, and barely 1% of the potential fine for failing to fill in the census (Hope 2023; Pallant 2024; Office for National Statistics 2015).

After the 2022 federal election, the Australian Electoral Commission sent out 1.3 million “apparent failure to vote” notices (Australian Electoral Commission 2023c); for context, in the same year, over 7 million parking fines were issued by local councils in the UK (Hope 2023).

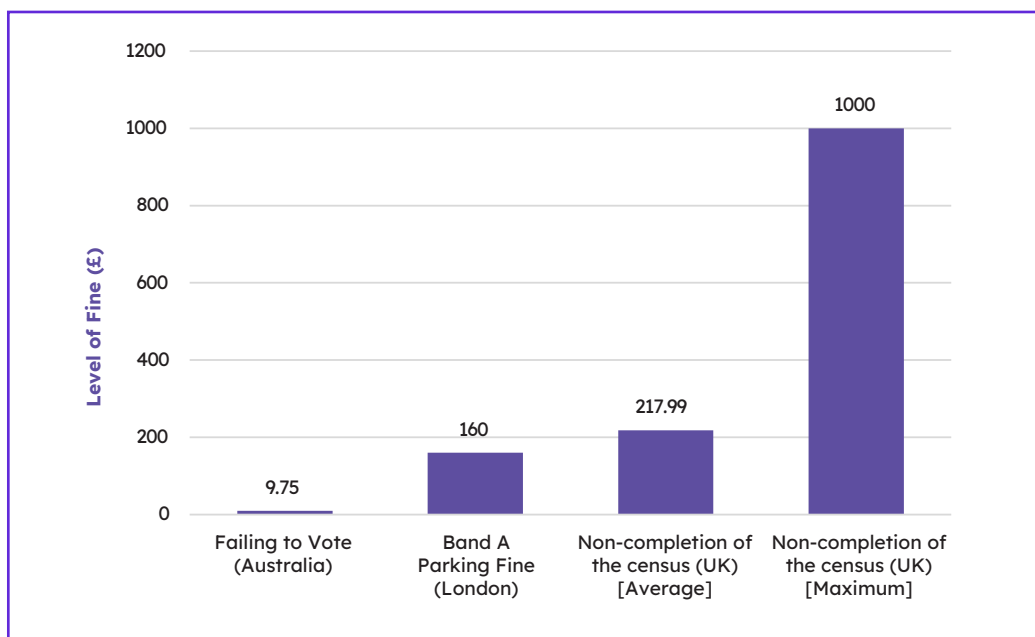


Figure 6. Non-voting penalties in context

Data sources: Australian Electoral Commission (<https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/non-voters.htm>); BBC News (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2kgjexxd98o>); Office for National Statistics (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/noncomplianceproceduresrelatingtothe2011census>)

There is thus no meaningful conflict between compulsory voting and liberal democratic principles. Rather, compulsory voting should in fact be seen as promoting a thicker conception of citizenship that more fully embodies liberal democratic ideals.

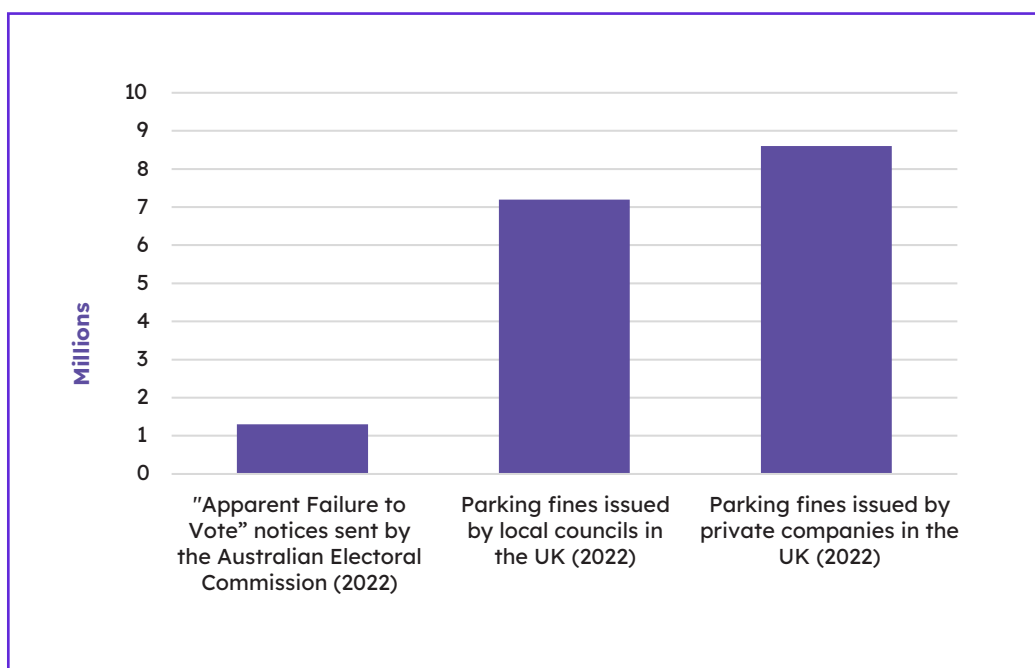


Figure 7. Non-voting enforcement in context

Data sources: Australian Electoral Commission (https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/Publications/annual-report/files/aec-annual-report-2022-23.pdf); Sky News (<https://news.sky.com/story/number-of-parking-tickets-issued-every-day-in-uk-revealed-12785572>); Sky News (<https://news.sky.com/story/drivers-handed-record-8-6-million-parking-tickets-by-private-firms-over-12-months-12644088>)

Firstly, compulsory voting actively promotes both political freedom and political equality. In terms of freedom, compulsory voting pushes citizens to play a conscious part in the central political processes that govern them. It thus instantiates a “republican” ideal of political freedom, understood in terms of “non-domination” and “self-rule” (Malkopoulou 2011; Schäfer 2011; Hill 2015b). In terms of political equality, by forcing every citizen to vote, compulsory voting seeks to ensure the equal weighting in the electoral process of all individuals, and a demographically proportionate weighting of different social groups. It is thus designed to promote the equal consideration of all citizens in political decision-making, and to prevent turnout disparities from generating unequal political responsiveness to the needs of different groups (Lijphart 1997; Birch 2018).

Secondly, compulsory voting embodies the principle of democratic solidarity. For a start, it eliminates the problem of democratic “free riding” – non-voters benefitting from the healthy functioning of a democratic system that they themselves do nothing to uphold (Wertheimer 1975; Lijphart 1997; Umbers 2020). Moreover, by treating voting as a civic duty, as well as a right, compulsory voting promotes the idea that democratic citizens have political responsibilities and mutual democratic obligations. As the political theorist Kevin Elliott recently argued, there may not be an abstract moral duty to vote, but there is “an institutional duty derived from one’s official role as a voter”. As he puts it, “Democratic citizens have a special obligation to vote when they live under electoral representative institutions because universal turnout is needed for such institutions to work properly” (Elliott 2023).

Such democratic political obligations have long been acknowledged in political theory. In 1896 the French Jurist Félix Moreau argued that voting was not a “personal prerogative” but rather “a duty that the citizen is tasked with fulfilling for society”. As he put it:

“Each person belongs to political society and receives benefits from it, perhaps against their will; they must bear the responsibility of those benefits. Democracy confers advantages and imposes duties; together they form an indivisible whole.” (Moreau 1896).

Even earlier, in his 1861 *Considerations on Representative Government*, the English liberal theorist John Stuart Mill argued that the vote was not just a right but a “trust”. For the enfranchised citizen:

“The suffrage is indeed due to him, among other reasons, as a means to his own protection, but only against treatment from which he is equally bound, so far as depends on his vote, to protect every one of his fellow-citizens. His vote is not a thing in which he has an option; it has no more to do with his personal wishes than the verdict of a jurymen. It is strictly a matter of duty; he is bound to give it according to his best and most conscientious opinion of the public good.” (Mill 1861).

By formally making voting a legal obligation, compulsory voting lends institutional weight to such principles, and helps to embed them in wider public understanding.

“Compulsory voting will lead to ‘low quality’ voting”

A key practical claim levelled against compulsory voting is that by increasing the quantity of electoral participation, it would reduce the overall *quality*, since those citizens who have to be compelled to vote are unlikely to cast informed or thoughtful ballots. In her attack on compulsory voting, the political theorist Annabelle Lever suggests that the potentially damaging impacts of non-voting are no worse than the harm caused by “careless, ignorant, and prejudiced voting” (Lever 2010), while the political scientist Richard Katz suggested that the political involvement of the “ignorant and uninterested” was unlikely to be of democratic benefit (Katz 1997).

This argument has been made at greatest length by the libertarian philosopher Jason Brennan, who in his contribution to the 2014 volume *Compulsory Voting: For and Against* argues that “The typical and median citizen who abstains (under voluntary voting) is more ignorant, misinformed, and irrational about politics than the typical and median citizen who votes”, and that “if we force everyone to vote, the electorate as a whole will then become more ignorant, misinformed, and irrational about politics”. For Brennan, introducing compulsory voting can therefore be expected to worsen political outcomes, and should be seen as morally comparable to forcing the drunk to drive (Brennan and Hill 2014).

Such elitist arguments based on the supposed political incapacity of non-voters are fundamentally anti-democratic: they reject the notion of political equality, and posit that political systems should be deliberately designed to result in some citizens having more political voice than others. In this sense, they strikingly echo the arguments historically made by conservative elites against previous expansions of the franchise to women, the uneducated, and the poor, who have all at different points been painted as dangerously politically incompetent.

Indeed, Brennan explicitly defends disparities in turnout by claiming that “being nonwhite, female, poor, and young is correlated with political and economic ignorance and misinformation” (Brennan and Hill 2014).⁴

Elitist arguments against compulsory voting are not merely normatively objectionable: they also fail empirically on their own terms. For a start, there is evidence to suggest that the very fact of being made to participate in the democratic process leads citizens who would otherwise not vote to become more informed about politics: a 2015 analysis of 133 election studies from 47 countries between 1996 and 2013 found that the enforcement of compulsory voting leads to fewer disparities in political knowledge across the population (Sheppard 2015); a 2017 study used survey data from a ten-year period in Chile to compare political engagement before and after the abolition of compulsory voting, finding levels of attention to political news were higher when compulsory voting was in force (Rangel 2017). To use Brennan’s metaphor then, compulsory voting may not so much be forcing the drunk to drive as encouraging them to sober up.

Moreover, there is little reason to believe that an increased number of low-information voters would worsen political outcomes. Certainly, a number of studies find that compulsory voting can sometimes lead to a slightly larger proportion of voters casting ballots for parties that are seemingly incongruent with their professed ideological views, thus potentially undermining what political scientists call “proximity voting” (Selb and Lachat 2009; Singh 2016; Dassonneville, Hooghe and Miller 2017; Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe, Lau and Stiers 2018). However, such studies do not find that bringing more low-information voters into the electorate in any way undermines the electorate’s sensitivity to economic outcomes – what political scientists term “accountability voting”. Rather, Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Miller’s analysis of how electorates have responded to growth and employment outcomes in 107 elections held across 41 countries between 1996 and 2016 specifically finds that “accountability mechanisms are equally strong in countries with a system of compulsory voting”. This should be unsurprising: it does not take any high degree of political knowledge for voters to answer the question so famously posed by Ronald Reagan: “are you better off now than you were four years ago?”.

Crucially, as political scientists following in the tradition of Joseph Schumpeter have argued, democracy in general is not so much an effective mechanism for voters to express complex ideological preferences as it is an effective mechanism for them to exercise political accountability – by re-electing governments that serve their interests, and voting out those that do not. It is above all through the mechanism of accountability voting, and the political incentives it creates, that we can expect democratic governments to serve the interests of their citizens (Schumpeter 1942; Key 1966; Dahl 1971; Riker 1988; Hardin 1999; Przeworski 1999). Thus, contra Brennan and other elitist opponents of broader electoral participation, what determines the quality of political outcomes is less

⁴ It should therefore be unsurprising that in his subsequent writing, Brennan has rejected democracy entirely, and called for its replacement by a system of “epistocracy” under which only those deemed sufficiently informed and intelligent should be granted the right to vote (Brennan 2016).

the political sophistication of the electorate, and more the balance of interests within it. Regardless of the (debatable) impact of compulsory voting on the former, what matters practically is its (indisputable) impact on the latter.

Beyond general elitist objections to broader electoral participation, more specific concerns are sometimes expressed that compulsory voting might lead reluctant and disengaged voters to either cast blank or invalid ballots, or (worse) to cast their ballots for protest or extremist parties.

There is evidence that compulsory voting does result in a slightly increased number of blank, spoiled, or random ballots (Reynolds and Steenbergen 2006; Power and Garand 2007; Ugglä 2008; Kouba and Lysek 2018; Singh 2019). However, as Birch points out, the overall number of invalid ballots cast in compulsory voting systems remains fairly low, and vastly lower than the number of people who would otherwise simply not turn out in the absence of compulsory voting (Birch 2009b). The risk of a small increase in the number of invalid votes is thus not a meaningful reason for opposing compulsory voting. Moreover, both national and cross-national studies also find no evidence that compulsory voting increases electoral support for extremist parties (de Winter, Dumont and Ackaert 2003; Birch 2009b, Ankudinov 2024). Rather, there is in fact evidence to suggest that compulsory voting might strengthen mainstream parties (Mackerras and McAllister 1999, Birch 2009b) and that it could even incentivise political moderation (Oprea, Martin and Brennan 2024).

Whatever risk there might nonetheless be of increases in extremist protest voting can also be countered by the introduction of a symbolic “None of the Above” (NOTA) option on the ballot paper. The introduction of such an option has commonly been part of proposals for compulsory voting in the UK (Watson and Tami 2000; Keaney and Rogers 2006; Birch, Gottfried and Lodge 2013), as well as a reform that has been proposed in its own right (King 2013; Demos 2014; Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 2014).⁵ Recent cross-national survey experiments have found that the hypothetical introduction of a NOTA option would not only likely reduce the incidence of spoiled ballots, but also sap support from extremist and protest parties – above all amongst those with low trust in the political system (Plescia, Kritzing and Singh 2023; Ambrus, Greiner and Zednik 2025). Likewise, a recent study of how the actual 2013 introduction of a NOTA option has impacted elections in India found that it serves as an alternative both to random or invalid voting, and to anti-system independent candidates (Kumar, Padmanabhan and Srikant 2023).

⁵ Such an option has generally been envisaged simply as a way for voters to pro-actively register an abstention without having to spoil their ballots (this is how the NOTA option works in India). However, there have also been proposals for a more radical form of NOTA option, in which the election result would be invalidated should NOTA win more votes than any single candidate (NOTA UK 2014).

“Compulsory voting would be unpopular”

A final argument levelled against compulsory voting is that it would be unpopular with the public, and that it would in practice face substantial resistance. Indeed, the supposed unpopularity of compulsory voting, and the imagined reluctance of the public to accept it, has been a recurring trope in discussions of the topic amongst UK politicians (Hansard HC Deb., 28/01/2003; Winnick and Heald 2011; Hansard HL Deb., 12/01/2012; Mullin 2014; Hansard HL Deb., 22/07/2021).

In reality there is little evidence to support such confident assertions, which seem to be a case of political elites projecting their own libertarian instincts onto the British public. Rather, polling consistently suggests that the public are currently roughly evenly divided on the issue, with only small minorities strongly opposed.

In April 2024, a representative survey of British adults conducted by Deltapoll for the Constitution Society found a narrow plurality in favour of compulsory voting, with only 30% of the public having strong views on either side.

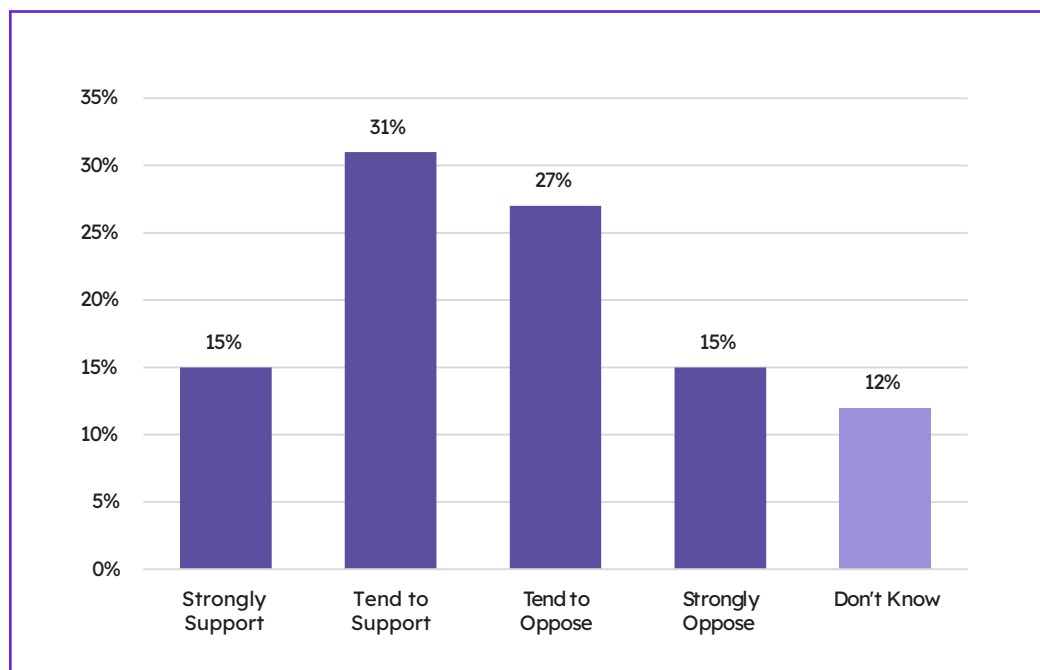


Figure 8. To what extent, if any, would you support or oppose making voting in general elections compulsory (meaning everybody legally had to vote)?

Data source: Deltapoll for the Constitution Society. (Deltapoll survey, Sample Size: 1,944 GB Adults, Fieldwork: 12th - 15th April 2024)

Moreover, the same polling found almost two thirds of those expressing an opinion agreed compulsory voting would lead to general election results more in line with what was best for the country.

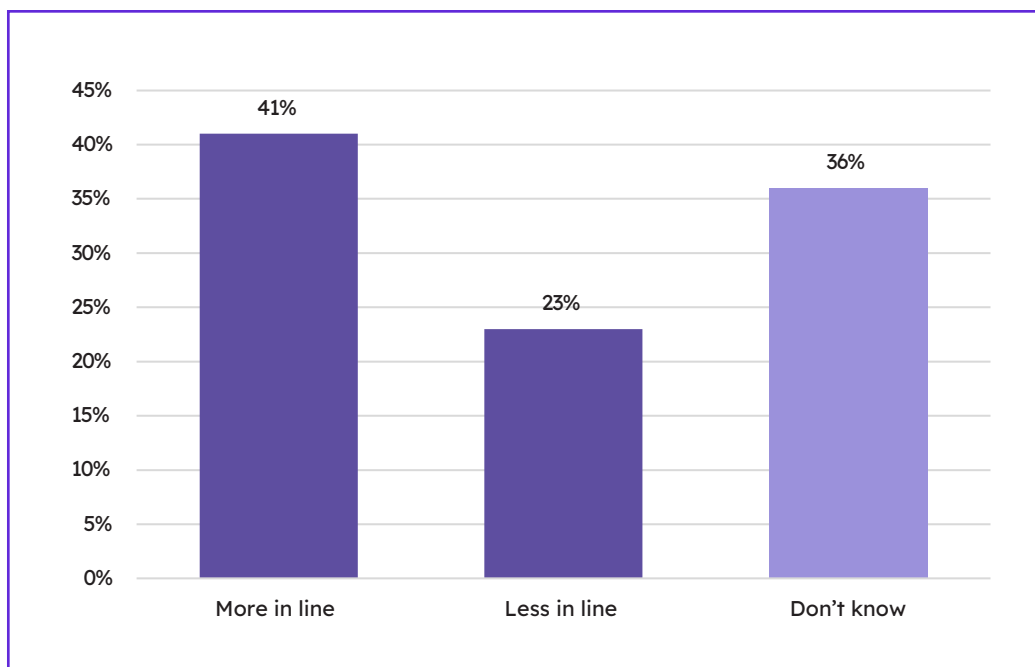


Figure 9. Generally speaking, do you think that the results of general elections would be more or less in line with what is best for the country if voting were compulsory (meaning everybody legally had to vote)?

Data source: Deltapoll for the Constitution Society. (Deltapoll survey, Sample Size: 1,944 GB Adults, Fieldwork: 12th - 15th April 2024)

More recent polling conducted by YouGov presents a similar picture: in a representative survey of British adults conducted for the Constitution Society in April 2025, they found that compulsory voting was supported by a margin of 48% to 42%, with only 21% strongly opposed.

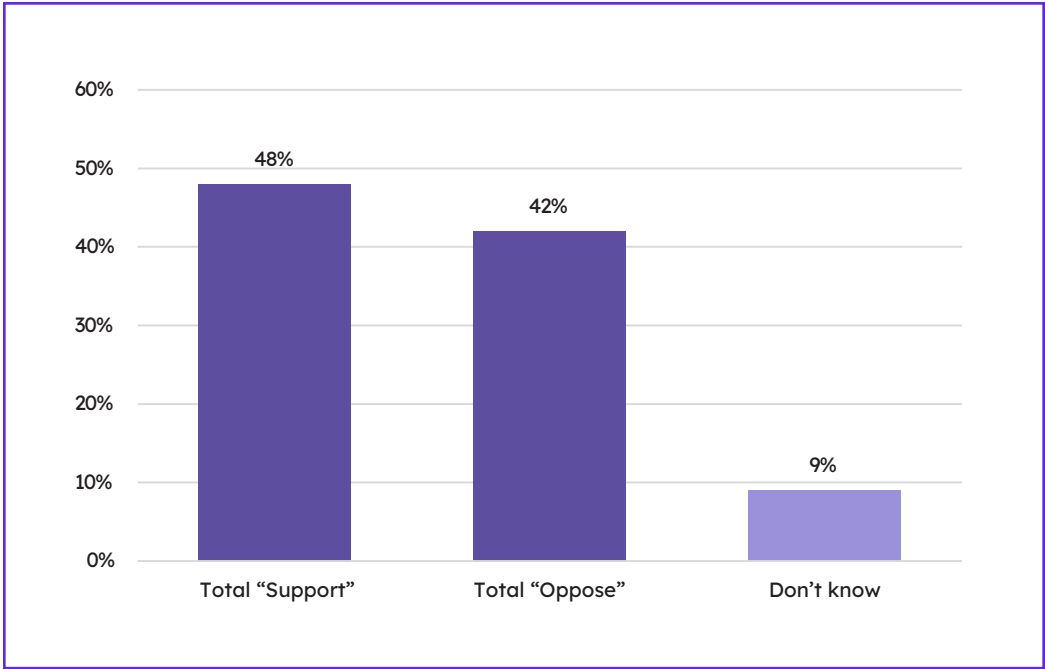


Figure 10. Would you support or oppose making it compulsory for people to vote in UK general elections?

Data source: YouGov for the Constitution Society. (YouGov Survey, Sample Size: 2007 GB adults, Fieldwork: 14th - 15th April 2025)

In terms of broader attitudes, the same polling survey found that large majorities of the public are concerned about both low turnout and unequal political responsiveness, suggesting a potential receptiveness to the key arguments in favour of compulsory voting.

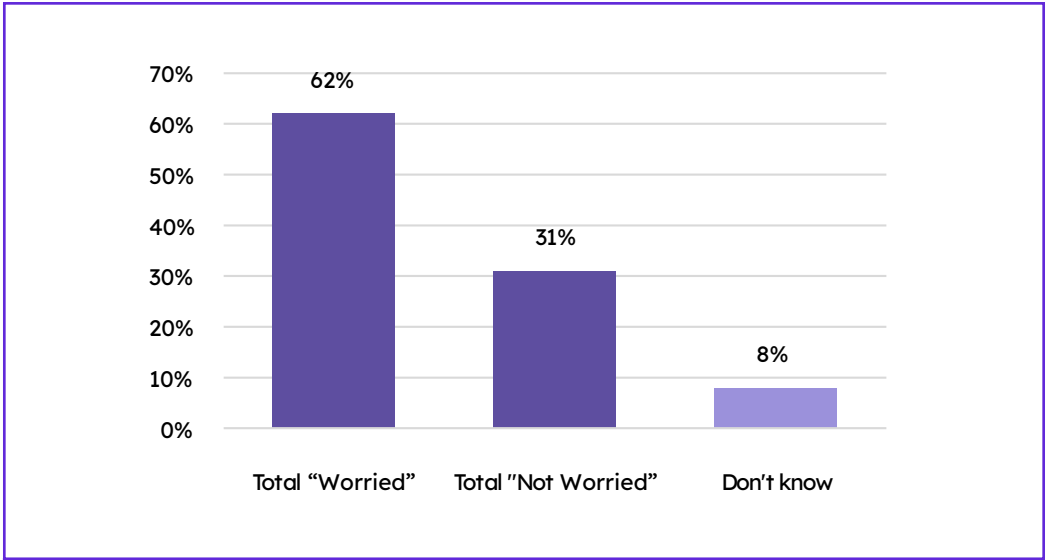


Figure 11. How worried are you about the following issues? “Low levels of turnout in UK general elections”

Data source: YouGov for the Constitution Society. (YouGov Survey, Sample Size: 2007 GB adults, Fieldwork: 14th - 15th April 2025)

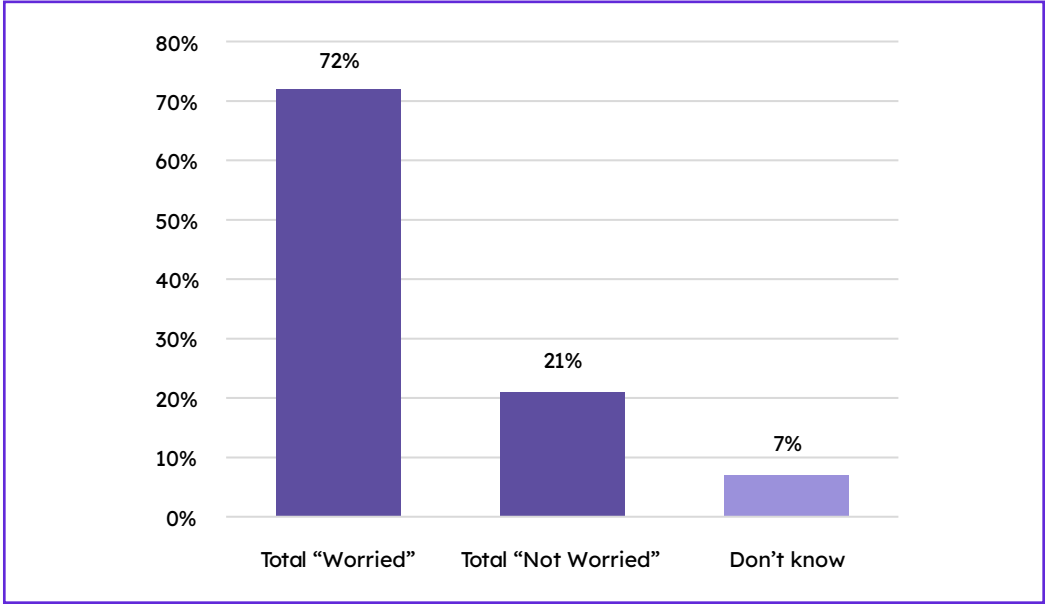


Figure 12. How worried are you about the following issues? “Politicians not paying attention to the interests of groups who are less likely to vote, such as young people or working-class people”

Data source: YouGov for the Constitution Society. (YouGov Survey, Sample Size: 2007 GB adults, Fieldwork: 14th - 15th April 2025)

YouGov also found that over two thirds of the British public consider voting to be a duty. This suggests a widespread acceptance of the basic normative principles underpinning the idea of compulsory voting.

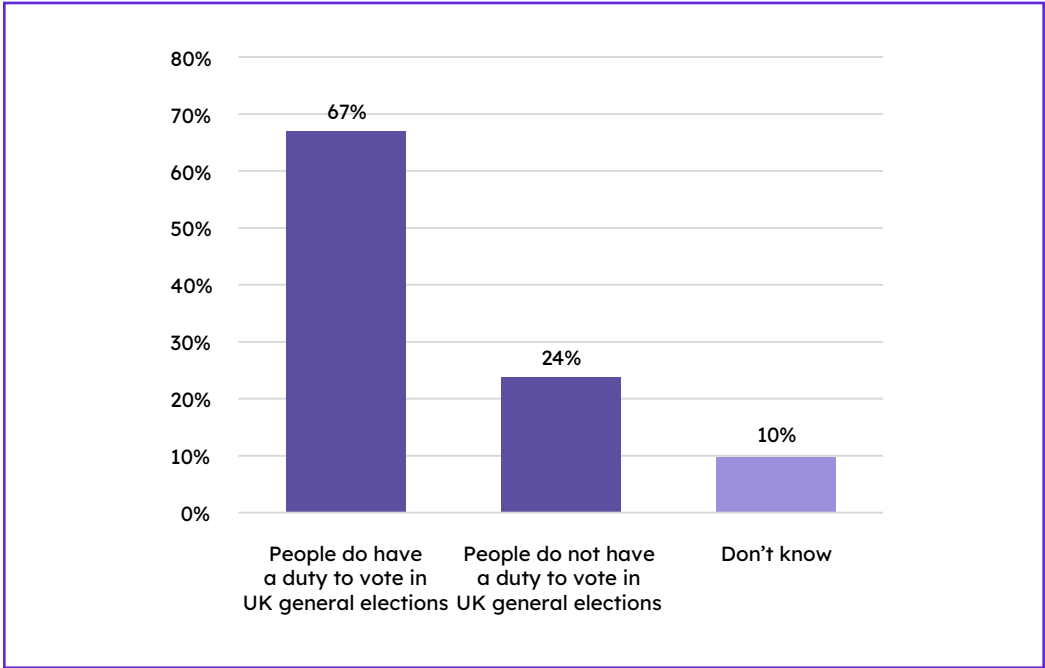


Figure 13. Would you support or oppose making it compulsory for people to vote in UK general elections?

Data source: YouGov for the Constitution Society. (YouGov Survey, Sample Size: 2007 GB adults, Fieldwork: 14th - 15th April 2025)

Moving beyond the UK, there is evidence that compulsory voting is popular where it is used – above all in Australia, where it is both most rigorously enforced, and where we have the most extensive evidence about public attitudes. Since 1967, the Australian Election Study has consistently found strong majority support for compulsory voting – generally hovering at around 70%.

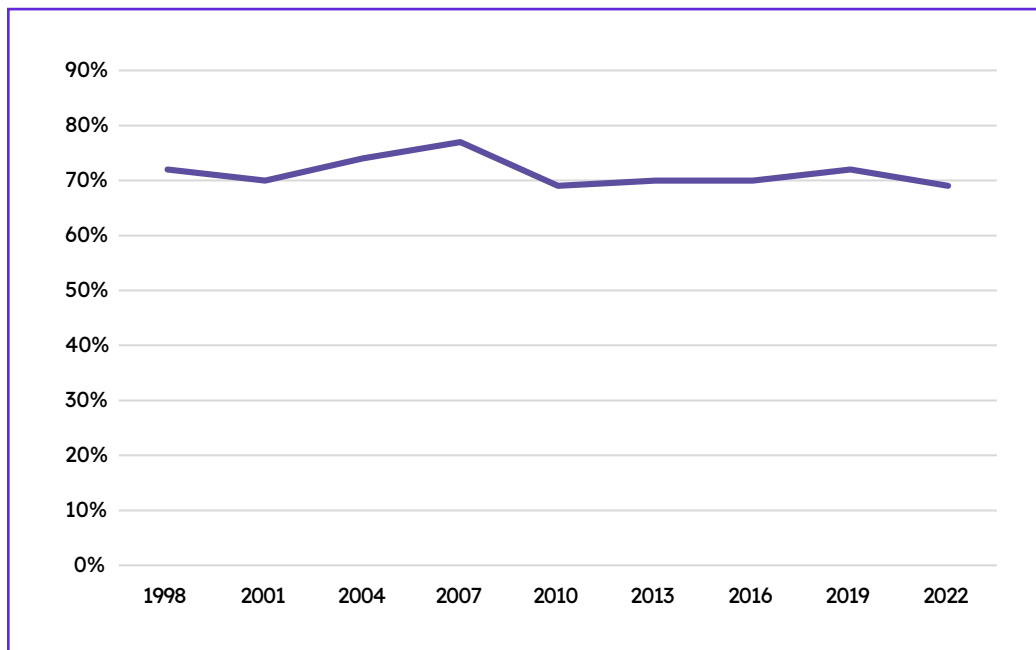


Figure 14. Support for Compulsory Voting in Australia

Data source: Australian Election Study (<https://australianelectionstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/Trends-in-Australian-Political-Opinion-Results-from-the-Australian-Election-Study-1987-2022.pdf>)

Moreover, the same studies consistently find that Australians are highly satisfied with democracy more broadly – in line with the broader evidence discussed earlier in this report that democratic satisfaction is boosted by compulsory voting.

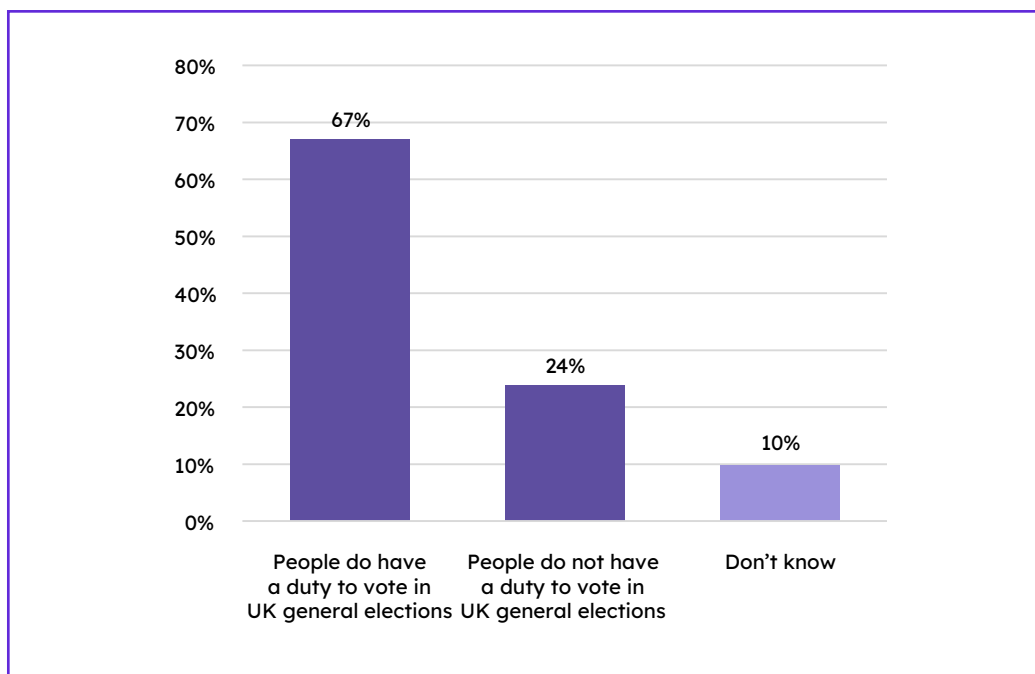


Figure 15. Satisfaction with democracy in Australia

Data source: Australian Election Study (<https://australianelectionstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/Trends-in-Australian-Political-Opinion-Results-from-the-Australian-Election-Study-1987-2022.pdf>)

Part V

Implementing compulsory voting

This report has so far set out the argument for compulsory voting to be introduced for general elections in the UK. This next section of the report offers some brief reflections on the measures that should accompany its introduction. It is beyond the scope of this report to offer a full blueprint for either the legislation or the administrative reforms that would be necessary to implement compulsory voting, or for the kind of political process that might bring it about; what follows is merely a brief discussion of some issues that ought to be addressed.

Enforcement

Across the world, democratic systems using compulsory voting vary in their level of enforcement. In Belgium, penalties for non-voting formally include criminal prosecution and a series of escalating fines. However, while non-voters are still recorded, no one has been prosecuted or fined since 2003 (Kuzelewska 2016). Although no longer enforced, the continued existence of a legal obligation to vote does nonetheless play a key role in maintaining high turnout through its continued ability to define a social norm: when compulsory voting was recently formally abolished for local elections in Flanders, turnout immediately dropped by almost thirty points (Le Soir 2024).

By contrast, compulsory voting in Australia remains rigorously enforced: after the last federal election, 1.3 million “apparent failure to vote” notices were sent to members of the public by the Australian Electoral Commission, asking them either to provide an excuse or to pay a AUS\$20 fine (Australian Electoral Commission 2023c). In general, around 95% of individuals contacted in this way provide valid excuses for their failure to vote; around 5% choose to pay the administrative penalty; only around 1% end up facing further prosecution (Mackerras and McAllister 1999).

For the introduction of a new system of compulsory voting in the UK to be meaningful, and for it to successfully generate a new norm of universal turnout, it would need – at least at the first few elections – to be reasonably well enforced. Australia thus presents the best model for what a system of enforcement could look like in the UK:

After a general election, those on the electoral register who have not been recorded as having cast a ballot (either in person, by post, or by proxy) should be identified and contacted by the Electoral Commission. Such apparent non-

voters should be asked either to provide a valid excuse for non-voting (such as illness, being abroad, or having a religious or philosophical objection), or to pay a small fixed penalty (of perhaps £10 or £20). Only in cases where those contacted repeatedly refuse either to provide a valid excuse or to pay the penalty would non-voting lead to prosecution, and potentially to larger fines down the line.

Crucially, for such enforcement to be an effective inducement to voting, it would need to be combined with an effective system of voter registration. Chile offers an example of the potential dangers in this regard: until 2012, it combined a system of enforced compulsory voting for registered voters with an entirely voluntary system of registration. This had the perverse effect of dissuading potential new voters from registering, leading to low levels of registration (and thus ultimately turnout) amongst younger citizens in particular (Barnes and Rangel 2014).¹

Australia provides a clear model of compulsory voting operating effectively in combination with an effective system of AVR: in addition to enrolment being formally compulsory, the Australian Electoral Commission uses data from other government agencies to “directly enrol” citizens onto a centralised electoral register; such citizens are then notified, and given 28 days to challenge any incorrect enrolment (Australian Electoral Commission 2025a). The result of this system is that an estimated 98.2% of eligible Australians are currently registered to vote (Australian Electoral Commission 2025b).

Such a system is potentially the optimal means of administering compulsory voting. In the UK there are frequent calls for the introduction of both AVR and the creation of a single centralised electoral register (Electoral Reform Society 2023). However, the absence of a civil population register, as well as broader weaknesses the data held by the UK government, could potentially make the creation of a single centralised electoral register difficult to implement (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2024; James, Bernal and Berry 2025).

Although a single national register should be the long-term goal, the introduction of compulsory voting in the UK might therefore in the short term be best accompanied by the use of AVR to substantially strengthen existing local electoral registers. This could be done by passing legislation to allow Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to use data provided by other state institutions (such as the DWP, the Passport Office, or the DVLA) to register eligible voters directly, without them having to take any action themselves (House of Commons 2024; James, Bernal and Berry 2025). However, it would be essential that, like in Australia, individuals directly added to the register be notified, and given time to respond to any erroneous registration.

¹ This has since been rectified: a reform implemented in 2012 abolished compulsory voting, but brought in automatic voter registration. After this successfully boosted registration but was shown to nonetheless reduce overall turnout, compulsory voting was reintroduced in 2022, and now operates more successfully alongside the system of automatic registration.

It is important to note that it is already a legal obligation in the UK to register to vote when requested to do so by an ERO, and that EROs are empowered to issue either civil or criminal penalties (including fines of up to £1000) to individuals who withhold information (Horne 2014). Should compulsory voting be introduced, it would likely be important for central government, the Electoral Commission, and EROs to re-emphasise in their public communications the legal obligation to provide registration information when requested.

Finally, it would be necessary to consider how far to apply and enforce compulsory voting for UK citizens resident abroad – especially in the context of recent reforms which have removed the previous time limit on the period for which UK citizens resident abroad remain eligible to vote (Klemperer 2024). Given both the potential size of the overseas electorate (c. 3.5 million people), and the potential difficulties of enforcement, it may make sense to limit obligations to register and to vote to UK residents only.

Access

For a system of compulsory voting to be both effective and not unnecessarily onerous, it would be essential for compulsion to be combined with measures designed to ensure easy access to voting. Here, Australia offers what Lisa Hill has described as a “best-practice regime” for compulsory voting: elections are held on Saturdays, with options for both early and absentee voting; great efforts are made to ensure every voter has easy access to a polling station, including the deployment of mobile polling stations in remote areas; no form of voter ID is needed to cast a ballot (Hill 2004).

Should compulsory voting be introduced in the UK, it would be advisable to follow the Australian model as far as possible. In practice, this would primarily mean making Voter ID requirements less onerous, either by removing them entirely, expanding the range of forms of ID considered valid, or by rolling out a universal ID system. It could also mean shifting to holding general elections on weekends (or alternatively making general election days a bank holiday).

Involvement

In countries where compulsory voting has worked most effectively (such as Belgium or Australia) it has done so through generating strong norms and habits of universal democratic participation. The development of such norms can be aided not only by ensuring the ease and accessibility of voting, but also by finding ways to include the public in the election day process itself. The functioning of compulsory voting in both Belgium and Australia benefits from just such a broader culture of public election day involvement.

In Australia, this primarily takes the form of the famous “democracy sausage” – community groups associated with schools, churches, or other local associations setting up fundraising barbecues and bake sales outside polling stations. As well as successfully raising money for local causes, these “sausage sizzles” have become an established part of the ritual of voting in Australia, creating an atmosphere of civic celebration akin to a street party, and turning a legal obligation into something almost festive (Brett 2019).

In Belgium, public election-day involvement is more formalised through the practice of election day service. Rather than relying on the recruitment of stipended volunteers to man polling stations and count ballots (as we do here in the UK), in Belgium citizens are selected randomly by lot to serve as election day poll workers. Those selected are provided with training and compensation, and can request an exemption. However, if an exemption is not granted, failure to serve results in prosecution and a substantial fine.

In addition to avoiding potential staffing shortages, the benefit of a Belgian-style system is that a diverse range of ordinary people (including those from potentially excluded and alienated groups) are brought into close contact with the workings of the electoral process, creating a sense of ownership and investment. Research on poll workers in the UK and elsewhere find that they tend to have more trust in the electoral process than other citizens (Clark and James 2017; Partheymüller, Müller, Rabitsch, Lidauer and Grohma 2022). As Sarah Birch, Ferran Martínez i Coma, and Rubén Ruiz-Rufino point out, “[t]he selection of poll workers by lot would, over time, extend this benefit to a greater number of people”, and “over the course of several election cycles, pepper communities with members from all walks of life who had a high degree of knowledge of how voting and counting work” (Birch, Martínez i Coma and Ruiz-Rufino 2023).

This report would urge lessons to be drawn from both the Belgian and the Australian experiences. As a number of other authors have recently argued, Belgian-style recruitment of poll workers by sortition would be a beneficial reform to introduce in the UK, as a way to promote civic norms around participation, to create a sense of shared ownership of the electoral process, and to enhance public trust in its legitimacy (Birch, Martínez i Coma and Ruiz-Rufino 2023; Patel and Swift 2025). However, this should also be accompanied by wider civic initiatives (on the part of the Electoral Commission, local government, and civil society) to create an Australian-style culture of election-day festivity and participation. Such a culture would boost turnout in its own right, and reduce the extent to which compulsory voting might be felt as a hostile or onerous imposition.

Voice

Finally, to ensure the legitimacy of a compulsory voting system, it would be beneficial for voters to be provided with an easy means of expressing a generalised dissatisfaction with democracy and with the choices presented to them on the ballot.

This report has already discussed some reasons why the inclusion of a “None of the Above” (NOTA) option on the ballot paper would be beneficial. In addition to those reasons, such an option would be useful for making it clear to voters that they were not mandated to express a preference for any candidate, and for ensuring that voters who wish to are able to express apathy and/or broad discontent.

This report therefore follows most previous advocacy of compulsory voting in the UK in urging it to be accompanied by the introduction of a (symbolic) NOTA option on the ballot paper, to give reluctant voters a means of pro-actively abstaining (Watson and Tami 2000; Keaney and Rogers 2006; Birch, Gottfried and Lodge 2013). ♦

Key Conclusions

The problem of low and unequal turnout:

This report has shown that:

- ❑ Turnout disparities mean the UK has an increasingly **unrepresentative electorate**
- ❑ This is producing **warped incentives** for UK politicians and government
- ❑ This in turn is contributing to **high inequality, low economic growth, and widespread dissatisfaction with democracy**

We therefore risk being trapped in a vicious cycle of unequal turnout, economic stagnation, political disillusionment, and democratic decay – a cycle that is creating the conditions in which right-wing populism can flourish.

The benefits of compulsory voting:

This report has further shown that:

- ❑ Compulsory voting is used in 22 democracies around the world
- ❑ Compulsory voting reliably increases turnout and reduces turnout disparities
- ❑ Compulsory voting significantly improves the incentives facing politicians
- ❑ No other reform is capable of increasing turnout to the same extent

Compulsory voting is therefore the most effective means of breaking the vicious cycle of unequal turnout, economic stagnation, political disillusionment, and democratic decay.

Recommendations:

This report argues that the UK should introduce “**Australian-style**” **compulsory voting**, enforced by the penalty of a small fine. It should be accompanied by:

- ❑ The introduction of **Automatic Voter Registration (AVR)**
- ❑ The inclusion of a “**None of the Above**” (**NOTA**) option on the ballot paper
- ❑ Reforms designed to make voting more accessible
- ❑ Initiatives designed to encourage a culture of democratic participation

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