

UK Democracy Fund - Theory of Change

The problem

Our democracy matters - and it needs reform. Trust in government and in politicians has been at an all-time low in recent years.ⁱ Public discontent with the political class has become evident, and younger people are increasingly sceptical about the value of living in a liberal democracy.ⁱⁱ

Voting in elections is fundamental to participation in democracy. Fair and equal access to the franchise is a vital part of a healthy democracy. 'One person one vote' has been a slogan for many citizens' struggles to access the vote; these campaigns contributed to successive reform acts expanding the franchise towards greater political equality. A central democratic ideal is that "all citizens, regardless of status, should be given equal consideration in and opportunity to influence collective decision-making".ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet certain groups remain unable to access the franchise. Young people under 18 are currently denied the vote; EU citizens who have 'settled status' in the UK will soon lose the voting rights they have.

At the same time, there is widespread political inequality. Some groups in society are more likely to participate – and so influence political decisions – than others.^{iv} Elected representatives are sensitive to who is most likely to vote in elections and respond to voting pressures by targeting policies to benefit groups more likely to participate.

At the General Election in 2017, despite record-breaking rises in registration and turnout, six in ten under 25s did not vote.^v Research has shown how intergenerational inequality – the rising threats to younger generations' living standards – will not be addressed until younger voters turn out in sufficient numbers to make their voices heard.^{vi} People with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds are significantly less likely to be registered, less likely to vote, and less likely to engage in political activities such as contacting an MP than the general population^{vii} - and are significantly under-represented as political candidates or politicians.^{viii} People in the DE band are least likely to vote when social grades are compared;^{ix} almost two-thirds of those surveyed felt that democracy addresses their interests 'badly'.^x

Recent years have seen a gradual rise in the number of people not registered to vote – currently up to 8 million citizens or around 16% of the adult population.^{xi} As under-registration is not equally distributed across the population, this fuels political inequality. There has been a long-term failure to address the under-representation of young people, people with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, EU nationals, people with a long-standing condition or disability, lower socio-economic groups and people who are homeless. The variable impact of individual votes as a

result of often tiny electoral margins^{xii} means that under-representation profoundly undermines the legitimacy of elections.

The Fund's goals

The UK Democracy Fund (the Fund) is working for a healthy democracy in which everyone can participate and where political power is shared fairly. Our focus is on voting, and we have three broad goals:

1. Enabling everyone to vote. We will support reforms to ensure a simple, seamless and accessible voting system fit for the 21st Century.
2. Restoring and extending the franchise. Advocacy in support of expanding the franchise, specifically for 16- and 17-year olds and settled European citizens.
3. Increasing participation of everyone in our elections. Efforts to raise the turnout of low propensity voters to improve fairness in our democracy.

Understanding change

The causes of political inequality are multiple and complex. Whilst we know that certain demographic groups are less likely to register or vote, there remain gaps in evidence on the specific barriers faced by different groups, and what could be done to overcome them.^{xiii} We need to address a number of factors beyond having the right to vote, if we are going to successfully reduce political inequality and build a democracy that can everyone can participate in.

There are many reasons why people do not vote: dissatisfaction and disconnection with democracy, erosion of trust, lack of information as to what is at stake and a sense that votes do not count. The practical process of registering and voting also plays an important and often decisive role in whether millions of voters participate in elections.

- A. **An unwieldy system for registration and voting** makes it harder for some people to participate in elections and in the democratic system. People who have moved to a new house recently are much less likely to be registered to vote.^{xiv} Research suggests some people misunderstand the voting system, assuming that they are registered if engaged with other government services and not understanding the need to re-register.^{xv}
- B. Some **members of particular demographic groups have limited capacity or are less motivated** to engage in the democratic system. Students are less likely to re-register after moving house than other voters; whilst 'attainers' (those who are turning 18) have lower level of registration than other young age groups.^{xvi} There is evidence that those who face discrimination are less likely to participate in democracy,^{xvii} and people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)

backgrounds remain less likely to be registered.^{xviii} People who live in areas of high social deprivation are likely to be under-registered.^{xix}

- C. There is a **'vicious cycle' of disengagement**: the more that groups disengage from politics, the less influence and political power they are seen to have, and less their voices are heard by politicians. Correlation between voter motivation and reported turnout,^{xx} suggests that lower voter power risks fuelling further disengagement. Attitudes to voting are a big predictor of voting behaviour,^{xxi} but there is currently limited understanding of the impact of reported threats to democracy (such as dark money and micro-targeting) on voter turnout.
- D. **Limited effective pressure for change**. Whilst there is recognition across the political spectrum of the need for changes to how elections are run, the government's agenda for reform has stalled, although the devolved nations have been more open to reform. Few citizens' campaigns have been able to challenge effectively the inertia or obstacles to reform in the current political system. Reform efforts are fractured, and exchanges of knowledge and learning is limited.
- E. **There is a lack of resources** to address political inequality and mobilise higher levels of participation in elections. Party political funding has tended to target high propensity voters in marginal constituencies. Charitable funders often provide funding to demographic groups underrepresented in election turnout, but rarely fund activity to improve participation in the electoral system. The government has so far failed to address under-representation and political inequality on a sufficient scale.

The Fund's role

If funders are to influence the scale of the challenges facing UK democracy, there will need to be strong partnerships; networks that share knowledge, intelligence and best practice; and a mix of funding, both large and small, charitable and non-charitable.

A variety of approaches will be needed to address problems at their root. The UK Democracy Fund can:

- fund campaigns to build pressure for change and mobilise political and public support;
- fund interventions that succeed in raising turnout;
- commission research;
- convene influential bodies to build support for change;
- convene organisations working on voter engagement to share experiences, knowledge and approaches;
- articulate the positive benefits of voter engagement in strengthening democracy;
- mobilise resources to support campaigners and organisers working on UK democracy.

We recognise that there are others working to improve the health of our democracy, and aim to contribute to an ecosystem of donors, activists and others keen to engage everyone in the voting system. This will include helping to develop a compelling narrative about why voting matters and what changes to our voting system could achieve.

The Fund operates on a strictly non-partisan basis and will not seek to influence the outcome of an election or referendum. It is committed to maintaining the transparency and integrity of our democracy and the electoral process, and takes active steps to obviate the risk of any of its activities unintentionally threatening this principle.

Priorities and pathways to change

In the first phase of the Fund, we will support a number of approaches to help achieve its overall goals:

1. Gather and share evidence on what works in voter participation (registration and get-out-the-vote) campaigns.

Understanding what works will address current gaps in evidence and allow the Fund to target its resources effectively, maximising impact for the millions of people who currently do not vote in elections. Upcoming elections provide an opportunity to test and analyse different activities to encourage people to register and turn out to vote. The Fund will:

- a. Gather evidence of what works to identify and select interventions;
- b. Fund organisations to test how their interventions succeed in raising turnout, including targeted approaches to engage low propensity voter groups, new and innovative ways of organising, and the replication or scaling of existing methods;
- c. Convene groups active in this area to share experiences and methods;
- d. Develop capacity building initiatives that will help organisations to raise turnout effectively;
- e. Bring new organisations into this work, starting with new youth campaigns that have built energy for democratic engagement since 2016;
- f. Strengthen organisations working in the field and create new alliances;
- g. Build in monitoring, evaluation and learning to generate additional evidence that can be shared.

We recognise that without a network of effective organisations able to make use of the learning in a practical way, evidence alone will not bring change. The Fund's work in this area will include targeted support for organisations that have been successful in engaging low propensity voting groups in democratic participation, to

enable these organisations to adopt effective voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns. There are a number of young people's groups where this approach could be trialled.

2. Fund campaigning to ensure that EU citizens with settled status maintain their voting rights after an exit from the European Union.

With up to 3.8 million people about to lose their voting rights, this change is both timely and important – especially for European citizens who face additional vulnerabilities. The Fund will fund campaigns that:

- a. Campaign for a bespoke pathway to citizenship for EU citizens with settled status;
- b. Build pressure on politicians to secure EU citizens' rights, including through commitments in party manifestos.

3. Fund campaigns for an extension of votes at 16 across the whole of the UK.

Recent experiences suggest that this reform could have long-last impact on young voters, whilst making the electorate more fairly balanced. We will fund campaigns that:

- a. Demonstrate the positive impact on voting habits of the introduction of votes at 16 in Scotland;
- b. Capture and share learning on the impacts of introducing votes at 16 in Wales;
- c. Strengthen political support for votes at 16 across the party spectrum, building on support in the context of Scotland and Wales.
- d. Strengthen youth organisations, including new youth campaigns that have built energy for democratic engagement since 2016.

Through its work the Fund will aim to demonstrate the positive benefits of voter engagement in strengthening democracy and addressing political inequality, whilst building an understanding of the reasons for disengagement and disconnection. We will share evaluations and learning, building connections between groups active in the field to share knowledge and expertise.

In the long term, The Fund aims to mobilise resources to support campaigners and organisers working on UK democracy, expanding the number of trusts and foundations contributing to this area in a way that supports their aims. We hope to encourage respected funders and NGOs to be trailblazers in this area of work. We will build and publicise case studies of how funding can be effective, to grow confidence in what can be done within electoral and charity law. We will also advocate for the government to make resources available to help hard-to-register groups to be enrolled on the electoral register.

How the Fund operates

The Fund is a pooled fund set up by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT). JRRT Directors make decisions on which applications contribute most effectively to the Fund's desired outcomes.

In its first phase the Fund will invite applications against its priorities. This will be reviewed and a decision made whether to move to an open application process.

An informal advisory group has been set up to invite insights, information and ideas that support the work of the Fund.

Contributors to the Fund include both charitable and non-charitable entities. The Fund is fully committed to transparency about its work, and a full list of donors and grantees will be published on the Fund's website.

ⁱ Edelman Intelligence, 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Edelman, January 2019

https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Executive_Summary.pdf

ⁱⁱ Patrick Dunleavy, *et al*, The UK's Changing Democracy: The 2018 Democratic Audit, London: LSE Press, <https://www.psa.ac.uk/resources/uks-changing-democracy-2018-democratic-audit>
<https://press.lse.ac.uk/site/books/10.31389/book1/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew Lawrence, Political inequality, Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), April 2015, https://www.ippr.org/files/publications/pdf/political-inequality_Apr2015.pdf; as quoted in Noel Dempsey & Neil Johnston, Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 14 September 2018. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>

^{iv} Noel Dempsey & Neil Johnston, Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 14 September 2018. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>

^v The Electoral Commission, UK Parliamentary General Election, June 2017, Electoral Commission, October 2017 https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/234976/UKPGE-2017-electoral-data-report.pdf; British Election Study Face-to-face post-election 2017 survey, as highlighted in Noel Dempsey & Neil Johnston, Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 14 September 2018. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>

^{vi} Laura Gardiner, Votey McVoteFace: Understanding the growing turnout gap between the generations, Resolution Foundation, September 2016, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2016/09/Generational-voting.pdf>

^{vii} Noel Dempsey & Neil Johnston, Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 14 September 2018. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>

^{viii} Joe Mitchell, Who's Missing and Why? Democracy Club, 2018 https://democracyclub.org.uk/reports/whos_missing/

^{ix} Noel Dempsey & Neil Johnston, Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 14 September 2018. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>

^x Matthew Lawrence, Political inequality, Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), April 2015 https://www.ippr.org/files/publications/pdf/political-inequality_Apr2015.pdf

^{xi} The UK's Changing Democracy: The 2018 Democratic Audit. See Toby S James, Audit 2017: How strong is the democratic integrity of UK elections? Are turnout, candidacies and participation maximised? Democratic Audit <http://www.democraticaudit.com/2017/07/28/audit-2017-how-strong-is-the-democratic-integrity-of-uk-elections-are-turnout-candidacies-and-participation-maximised/>; and Toby S James, Are UK elections conducted with integrity, with sufficient turnout? Democratic Audit, August 2018 <http://www.democraticaudit.com/2018/08/15/audit2018-are-uk-elections-conducted-with-integrity-with-sufficient-turnout/>

^{xii} In the 2017 General Election, 52 seats were won with less than 1,000 votes, and 11 were won with less than 100 votes.

^{xiii} Every Voice Matters: Building a Democracy That Works For Everyone, Cabinet Office, December 2017 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/669130/democratic_engagement_strategy_2017.PDF

^{xiv} Every Voice Matters: Building a Democracy That Works For Everyone, Cabinet Office, December 2017 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/669130/democratic_engagement_strategy_2017.PDF

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- ^{xvii} NatCen Social Research, British Social Attitudes Survey, 2018; as referenced in Joe Mitchell, Who's Missing and Why? Democracy Club, 2018 https://democracyclub.org.uk/reports/whos_missing/
- ^{xviii} Every Voice Matters: Building a Democracy That Works For Everyone, Cabinet Office, December 2017 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/669130/democratic_engagement_strategy_2017.PDF
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- ^{xx} Marguerite Rigoglioso, Research-Backed Ways to Get Out the Vote: How lessons from behavioural science could help increase turnout, Stanford Business, 17 April 2012, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/research-backed-ways-get-out-vote> See also: Electoral Commission 2017, <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-31/democracy/does-the-current-political-system-meet-people-s-expectations.aspx>, <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>
- ^{xxi} Electoral Commission, Voting in 2017: Understanding public attitudes towards elections and voting, October 2017, https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/234893/Voting-in-2017-Final.pdf