

Written evidence submitted by the UK Democracy Fund [MEL 008]

About the UK Democracy Fund

1. The [UK Democracy Fund](#) (the Fund) is a pooled fund set up by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT) in 2019 and supported by a group of committed funders, including a number of charitable trusts. The UK Democracy Fund is now hosted by the [JRSST Charitable Trust](#). Independent and non-partisan, the Fund is helping build a healthy democracy – one in which everyone can participate and where political power is shared fairly.
2. Between the 2019 and the 2024 general elections, the UK Democracy Fund supported civil society organisations to deliver campaigns to register people from low-voting demographics. Our interventions led to an estimated 750,000 voter registrations in time for the 2024 General Election. We have played a leading role in developing [the evidence base](#) around what works to engage voters, as well as the benefits of and implementation guidance for both Votes at 16 and an automated voter registration system.

What is the current state of electoral democracy in the UK today?

3. A healthy democracy depends on people voting – yet in the last UK-wide election, [only half of adults voted](#). These are long term trends which contribute to democratic inequality – an unequal ability to contribute and influence. [The IPPR argue](#) that this inequality is one of the reasons for the “widely felt but unequally spread sense that democracy-as-usual is not working”. Our democracy cannot thrive when so many people do not have influence on the policies and laws that affect them.
4. Those who do not vote are more likely to be young, from communities experiencing racial inequity, born overseas, rent their homes or live on low incomes. Our [extensive experience](#) supporting voter registration campaigns demonstrates that these initiatives on their own will not be able to fill the registration gap of [up to 8 million](#) people either incorrectly registered or not on the register at all. An automated system must be developed and introduced in time for the next UK wide election.

How effective is the Government’s proposal to lower the voting age likely to be at increasing electoral engagement?

“a voting age lower than 18 is commonly associated with increased electoral turnout among those young people who benefit from it” - [Dr Christine Huebner, University of Sheffield and Dr Jan Eichhorn, University of Edinburgh](#)

5. Votes at 16 is an exciting opportunity to enfranchise 1.7m young people still largely in an educational setting where they can access support. A young person’s first vote is critical, as [research shows](#) it can be habit forming, meaning they are more likely to continue voting in the future. Enfranchising young people while most are still at school or college means they can be supported for their first

vote. Dr Christine Huebner, University of Sheffield and Dr Jan Eichhorn, University of Edinburgh looked at [international evidence](#) regarding lowering the voting age to 16 and found that voting age reform does not have negative outcomes for society or the young people it affects, that voting age reform is unlikely to change the outcomes of elections, and that “young people are able to select who they vote for in the same way as other voters, with the same standard of decision making as older adults.”

How well placed are young people to participate in UK elections and what could the Government do to improve this?

“The vast majority of teachers feel responsible for developing young people’s political literacy, but only 1% feel fully prepared to do so” - [Dr James Weinberg](#) for Shout Out UK and the APPG on Political Literacy

6. Schools play an essential role in unlocking this benefit. [Huebner and Eichhorn](#) found that democratic education can increase the likelihood of a young person voting over time. Research in Scotland found that “young adults who remembered taking classes in school in which political issues were discussed, were more likely to turn out in elections throughout their 20s”. Broadly voting age reform works best for young people when steps are taken to address “multiple dimensions of young people’s inclusion in democracy”. Huebner and Eichhorn note that this requires “cooperative and cross-departmental engagement over the medium term”.
7. However, currently too few young people are accessing the quality or quantity of democratic education they need. This has been [set out clearly by Dr James Weinberg](#) for the [APPG on Political Literacy](#) in 2021, including “Democratic education is a peripheral feature of secondary education in English schools. There are also inequalities in provision that favour students in fee-paying schools or maintained secondary schools serving affluent communities”.
8. The Electoral Commission’s [research](#) shows that young people are more or less likely to be interested in politics depending on whether they discuss politics at home. Therefore, good quality democratic education alongside Votes at 16 can be a powerful tool in undercutting democratic inequality. Conversely, without this support, Votes at 16 is likely to perpetuate existing inequalities in our democracy for a new generation. The Electoral Commission said “Unequal access to political learning risks widening gaps in who takes part in democracy over time. Schools and colleges are one of the few places where all young people could develop political knowledge and confidence regardless of background.”
9. To best support the introduction of Votes at 16, Government will need to do two things. First, it **must ensure that young people are supported by Automatic Voter Registration in time for their first vote** or we will continue to see extremely low registration rates for young people (Electoral Commission data shows [an 80% difference](#) between registration rates of the oldest and youngest on the register).

10. Second, Government **must also ensure that all young people receive the kind of good quality democratic education** that they need to take part in democracy with confidence, that teachers are supported with quality neutrality guidance and training, and that this happens in time for early cohorts of young voters. Democratic education must be in the national curriculum, fully resourced and properly assessed by Ofsted. A full list of recommendations agreed by 40 organisations and leading academics in democratic education and participation can be found in the [Roadmap to Votes at 16](#).

Is the current system of electoral registration fit for purpose in the modern era?

The UK has one of the hardest registration systems for the voter of any liberal democracy - [Research from Manchester University](#)

11. Our electoral register is highly inaccurate and incomplete – [up to 8 million](#) voters are either not registered or registered incorrectly. [International research](#) by the Electoral Integrity Project found that the UK is now ranked in the bottom half of countries in Europe in terms of the extent to which elections empower citizens. Our registration system is harder for the voter than in most comparable democracies and is built on Victorian registration infrastructure which no longer works for how many of us live our lives. This becomes clear when you see who is and who is not registered to vote.
12. Those who rent their home privately are [registered](#) at only 65% compared to over 88% for homeowners. Those who have lived in their home under a year are 39% registered – compared to 72% for those who have lived at an address for over a year, rising to 95% for those who have stayed put for 16 years or more. As a population we are now much more mobile. We move home frequently ([approximately 20% of us](#) now rent our homes privately, with 37% of renters moving more than once within an election cycle) and the gap between homeowners and renters influencing our democracy is [increasing](#), growing by nearly a quarter between 2017 and 2024.
13. [Generation Rent investigated](#) how the current registration system works for renters, finding that re-registering after each move was “a substantial administrative task” that must be performed at a time when home movers are already overburdened with other logistical and administrative tasks. By comparison, they reviewed how Automatic Voter Registration could work for renters and found that 91% of private renters in England and Wales were likely to interact with other public bodies (e.g. local council, HMRC, DVLA, DWP) and its very likely would therefore be added to the register automatically.
14. Beyond housing type, there are equalities implications. Black Britons are 15% less likely to be registered to vote than their white peers, according to the [Electoral Commission](#). Worryingly, instead of improving, between 2018 and 2022, the rate of registration for Black voters dropped 3% while other ethnic groups saw

a modest increase. [Research](#) for the UK Democracy Fund in 2021 by Professor Maria Sobolewska and Dr Andrew Barclay found that, “Electoral registration appears to be the main area of concern for democratic participation, as once non-White ethnic minority voters are registered, the turnout gaps are smaller.”

15. The UK Democracy Fund [published findings](#) from three voter registration pilots for the 2024 election, supporting Black voters to register. We found that: “these pilots show that when engaged in a culturally relevant way, Black voters want to take part in democracy, showing that narratives of apathy do not apply. Instead, policy makers should consider how, and through whom, they engage with these communities.” This builds on [findings](#) from Professor Maria Sobolewska and Dr Andrew Barclay in 2021 who found that: “Research consistently shows that being asked to participate can make a real difference. For ethnic minorities and immigrants, it is often the case that the usual mechanisms of political mobilisation through mainstream political parties fail.”

Is the Government’s proposal to run pilots of AVR for the next general election the most effective way of moving toward an automated system of voter registration?

16. We strongly support the introduction of Automatic Voter Registration but are concerned about the timeline of implementation. Pilots must not become a reason that voters are not added to the register in time for the next general election.
17. AVR is the most effective way to improve the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register, and to enable all eligible voters to use their right to vote. A fully Automatic Voter Registration system would be the most effective way of improving the completeness of the electoral register. AVR would enable Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to access existing Government information on voters (voters’ names, ages, addresses, nationality etc) held by government departments and public bodies (such as the Passport Office, Department of Work and Pensions or DVLA) and use it to enrol them directly on the register without an application. The ERO should then write to the registered person to inform them, providing the opportunity to correct any mistakes. Electoral administrators already use Government data to verify applicants’ information. Changing to AVR would enable them to add people to the register directly and use a wider range of data to improve the accuracy of the register. This could happen continuously, so the most accurate and up-to-date information is used, increasing the accuracy of the register and removing pressure on electoral administrators just before elections. A more detailed guide from the UK Democracy Fund and Professors Toby S. James and Paul Bernal from the UEA can be found [here](#).
18. Automatic Voter Registration is a [popular](#) technological solution to a very real administrative problem, but the overall policy aim remains the same – all those who are eligible should be registered to vote.

What are the potential democratic risks associated with rolling it out in this way?

19. The [Government stated that](#): “The reforms in the Bill will be delivered during the lifetime of this Parliament and the government is aiming for these to be in place for the next UK Parliamentary general election.” However, they have not yet published a timeline for roll out of Automatic Voter Registration. We understand that Government does not intend to begin pilots until after the legislation has been passed, and we are unclear how far along in their planning process Government are and whether key data sets have been identified.
20. Evidence from Australia and Canada suggests that impact by the next General Election is possible. Despite the complexity of their respective systems, [research](#) published by the UK Democracy Fund found that both countries established the foundations for their registration systems within 18 months. This demonstrates that it is possible to establish an automated registration system in a relatively limited time frame. The [Electoral Commission’s response](#) to the introduction of the Bill shows that they believe it is possible for significant progress to be made before the next general election.
21. The Fund believes that **Government should commit to a realistic timeline which enables at least some version of AVR to be in place for the next general election** to support those least likely to be registered. While pilots can be important, they must not lead to a significant delay and yet another election marred by low voting.
22. Government should also clarify their plan for roll out of AVR including the data sets they intend to pilot. **We would encourage them to focus first on the large, national data sets that are likely to contain data on low-voting groups who are least likely to be on the register.**
23. The Bill enables the Electoral Commission to conduct evaluations into pilots, but Government have not confirmed any plans to engage representatives of communities least likely to vote. The success of AVR will depend on its ability to deliver for young people, those from racialized and minoritized communities and renters. **There should be a route for representative organisations to oversee and feed into planning, the evaluation of pilots and roll out of AVR.**
24. The Bill aims to move the deadline to register to vote from 11:59pm 12 working days before a poll, to 5pm that day. An [evaluation](#) for the UK Democracy Fund of two large-scale digital ad campaigns in 2024 delivered by Shout Out UK and My Life My Say “found that their target audiences tended to only ‘tune in’ as the election heated up and the deadline approached”. Every year registration rates significantly ramp up as we approach the deadline, leading [to hundreds of thousands of registrations on deadline day](#). The proposed change gives the voter a few hours less to register on the final day for voter registration (losing the hours after work and school), and so it is likely that many potential voters will miss the

window to register. Please note that we cannot currently see this data on the Government's [register to vote dashboard](#), and are unable to definitively say how many registrations occurred after 5pm on previous registration deadline days. A late deadline places pressure on electoral staff, and an early one will prevent voters from registering – both concerns can be mitigated by ensuring Automatic Voter Registration is in place in time.

25. Delayed pilots and roll out of AVR risk another election with historically low rates of voting, further deepening disengagement and mistrust and the sense that democracy is not working. For newly enfranchised 16-year-olds, a failure to roll out AVR in time will undercut the benefit of Votes at 16. Our democracy cannot wait, and an automated registration system must be pursued with urgency.

Which international comparators have high levels of electoral registration, engagement and security?

26. In democracies around the world, Automatic Voter Registration is the norm and has been [proven](#) to lead to more, not less, accurate electoral registers. The UK should join the 88% of European countries studied in [research into electoral registration quality](#) which use an automatic registration system, as well as countries like [Australia and Canada](#).
27. Closer to home, we have emerging evidence of how accurate AVR can be in the UK. In recent AVR pilots in Wales, [the Electoral Commission found](#) that “From the evidence available, nearly all of these additions to the register appear accurate, i.e. the register entries relate to a person living at that address. Only a small proportion (by mid-November 2025) were removed during the annual canvass, indicating that the person no longer lived at the address.” These pilots were only able to use data held in Wales. The UK Government has a much wider range of data sources at their disposal which would further improve AVR.

What other changes to the UK's body of electoral law would you like to see?

28. Currently, access to electoral information is poor and unequal. While large political parties can access it, civil society groups supporting voters and researchers seeking to understand barriers to democratic participation face resource barriers. The UK Democracy Fund has [set out](#) examples of the challenges we faced at the 2024 election. Professor Toby S. James and Professor Paul Bernal of the University of East Anglia [found](#) in “The UK's Electoral Data Democratic Deficit: A vision for digital modernisation” that better electoral data is vital to improving participation at UK elections, helping create more efficient systems for electoral administration, and promoting greater trust and transparency in elections.
29. The Representation of the People Bill could enable deeper democratic engagement by making some key changes in how data is collected and shared. The Bill currently [enables data sharing](#) “for the purpose of helping people to understand the election, referendum or recall petition process”. This is a welcome

step for increased transparency. Beyond this, the Bill should create **a statutory requirement for further electoral data to be held centrally (for example by the Electoral Commission) with clear criteria for access.** This could include anonymised and disaggregated registration and voter data of all elections. Examples of useful data include the number (and reasons for) rejected voter applications. Given that minoritised ethnicity voters and young voters are disproportionately low voting, data should be disaggregated wherever possible to allow better understanding of the barriers to voters and enable better engagement initiatives. This data should be shared in a timely, accessible, digital format to those with a reasonable need to access it, including researchers and civil society organisations with an interest in democratic engagement.

30. The Bill includes provision to make the Open Register opt-in rather than opt-out. If AVR is implemented fully it could largely end the Open Register in practice. However, given the timeline of AVR roll out is unclear, **the Government should remove the Open Register completely to improve voters' privacy.**

31. We note that an amendment has been submitted to remove the voting rights of Commonwealth citizens. The UK Democracy Fund supports the right to vote for settled UK residents. This includes both **retention of the right to vote for Commonwealth citizens resident in the UK and extension of the right to vote to other settled residents who have chosen to make their lives here in the UK.** This would bring the rest of the UK into line with Scotland and Wales, where residency-based voting rights are already in place for local elections and those for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd.

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