UK Democracy Fund

Our Funding Guide

2026

This guide sets out our approach to grant funding

Please read it carefully and in full before enquiring about funding possibilities

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JRSST Charitable Trust

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About the UK Democracy Fund

The UK Democracy Fund (the Fund) is a pooled Fund initially set up by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT) in 2019 and supported by a group of committed funders, including several charitable trusts. The 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.

We do this through funding work that seeks to reform the voting system in the UK by extending the franchise, modernising voter registration and improving democratic education. We also fund large-scale voter registration campaigns.

Why change is needed

Increasing voter registration and turnout is essential for reducing inequalities and strengthening democracy. There was a record low turnout at the 2024 UK General Election, the second lowest since universal suffrage was introduced.

As non-voters are predominantly young, from communities that experience racial inequity, born overseas, rent their homes or live on low incomes, this registration and voting gap contributes to widening inequality, as people from these groups have less influence over government decisions.

What we have done so far

The high number of citizens missing from the registers in the 2015 and 2017 general elections led to the decision to set up the Fund, which aims to strengthen democracy by increasing voter participation.

Between the 2019 and the 2024 general elections, the Fund supported civil society organisations to deliver campaigns to register people from low-voting demographics. We estimate that our interventions led to 750,000 voter registrations in time for the 2024 General Election.

We have built up learning on what works to support low-voting demographics to register and vote. We have tested new approaches, innovations and pilot campaigns, funded research reports, and attempted to scale what has worked.

What we want to fund

Our goal

The Fund is working to enable millions more people to vote by the next general election. We campaign for **system reform** to enfranchise 1.5 million young people a year and add up to 8 million voters to the register through automated registration. We are pushing for every young person to have a right to quality democratic education, helping them build a lifelong habit of voting. And we mobilise low-voting communities to use their voice on election day – ensuring we never face another election defined by dangerously low turnout.

Our funding priorities

The Fund has four funding priorities for 2025 to 2029:

- **Enabling everyone to vote:** Building support for reforms to ensure a simple, seamless and accessible voting system fit for the 21st century.
- **Extending the right to vote:** Advocating in support of expanding the franchise for 16- and 17-year-olds and settled UK residents from overseas.
- **Increasing participation of everyone in our elections:** Trying to raise the turnout of low-propensity voters to improve fairness in our democracy.
- **Securing quality democratic education for young people:** Advocating for all young people to have access to meaningful democratic education.

By low-propensity voters, we mean those people who have the right to vote but are less likely to be registered to vote or turnout to vote at elections.

In 2026, our focus will be on supporting **advocacy, campaigns and research** that:

- Push for meaningful Automatic Voter Registration to be introduced ahead of the next general election and ensure it is implemented in a way which works for low-voting groups.
- Pressure government to implement Votes at 16 by ensuring all young people (especially the first cohort of 16- and 17- year-olds eligible to vote at the next General Election) are registered to vote automatically and receive good quality democratic education.

- Build support for residency-based voting rights.
- Aim to register people who are less likely to vote at scale ahead of local elections and Northern Ireland Assembly elections in 2027 and the next general election.
- Continue to test and seek routes to scale up methods such as the use of trusted messengers to persuade people who are less likely to vote to register.
- Call for better access to data on elections and political participation.

Demographic priorities

The UK Democracy Fund is hosted by JRSST-CT, which has two demographic priorities that cut across its thematic priorities. These are:

- Young people
- People from communities that experience racial inequity

We have chosen to prioritise these groups because young people and people from communities that experience racial inequity are less likely to be registered to vote and participate in elections. Low participation may further compound the wider social and economic inequalities they experience.

Our aim is that most of our grants will support work that benefits or seeks to mobilise people from these groups. We hope that prioritising on a smaller number of demographics will enable us to focus our limited resources, generate learning and build up our expertise.

JRSST-CT recognises that people have multiple identities, so we are also interested in funding work that focuses on people from our demographic priorities who experience interconnected and overlapping forms of discrimination (e.g. young people on low incomes; women from communities that experience racial inequity).

The UK Democracy Fund will continue to support work that focuses on other low-voting groups (e.g. people in rented accommodation, on low incomes, or born overseas) as there is often a significant overlap between these groups and JRSST-CT's priority demographics.

Things to consider

When deciding whether to apply to the Fund, please bear in mind that we:

- Only fund non-partisan campaigns or research.
- Prioritise campaigns or research that deliver systems reform.
- Prefer to fund work that can deliver impact at scale.
- Are interested in work that draws on existing evidence and insights, or where these do not exist, seeks to build an evidence base or generate learning.

The Fund has a wealth of insight from research and campaigns that we have funded in the past, and we encourage applicants to review this before contacting us to discuss a potential application. In particular, the evaluation of our work between 2019 and 2024.

Who is eligible for funding

We accept applications from organisations and individuals who are hosted by an organisation (e.g. an academic or researcher working for a university).

Hosted by JRSST-CT, with much of the Fund's income from charitable sources, there are important legal duties we must follow. Your organisation does not need to be a registered charity, but all the activities you are seeking funding for need to fit within charitable purposes. Please contact the Fund if you have any questions about this.

The Fund operates on a strictly **non-partisan** basis. We support grantees to encourage people to register to vote, but not to vote for anyone or any party in particular. We will want to hear how you will ensure your planned activities are non-partisan.

JRSST-CT is a Living Wage Employer. We expect our grantees to ensure that all posts which are wholly or partially funded by us pay the real Living Wage.

The Fund particularly welcomes applications from organisations working at the intersection of our democracy priorities and racial justice.

Examples of work we have funded

- In 2025, we funded a campaigning organisation over 16 months to support their campaign for the introduction of Automatic Voter Registration in the UK.
- In 2024, we funded a registered charity to support their work to ensure that 16- and 17- year-olds can vote in the 2027 Assembly and Local Government elections in Northern Ireland.
- In 2023, we funded a registered charity to run a national campaign to register and mobilise young voters at scale ahead of the 2024 General Election.
- In 2023, we funded three community organisations as part of a pilot to test approaches to register more black voters and to produce insights and learning.

A list of UK Democracy Fund grantees can be found on our website.

What we cannot fund

We cannot fund

- Partisan activities
- Work outside the UK
- Individual campaigners or researchers without a host organisation
- Work that has already taken place
- Legal fees or costs
- Personal support for individuals in need
- Educational bursaries
- General appeals

We are unlikely to fund

- Academic research without clear learning or campaign impact
- Movement building
- By-election and local election activity
- Small-scale campaigns or outreach work

We will not support by-election or local election activities or small-scale campaigns or outreach work unless they are testing something new or they seek to generate new learning on how to reach a specific audience, or clearly demonstrate how they will contribute new evidence to support our goals.

How to apply

Routes to funding

The UK Democracy Fund offers two routes to funding:

1. Applications for more than £10,000 made on a quarterly basis (larger grants).
2. Applications throughout the year for £10,000 and below (small grants).

Applications for both types of grant look identical. The difference is in the speed with which the Fund can make a decision and the processes by which decisions are made.

Application process

There are five steps to applying for funding from us, whether you are applying for a small grant or larger grant:

1. Read our guidelines to check your eligibility and fit with our funding criteria
2. Share a brief description of your idea in an email to DemocracyFund@jrsst-ct.org.uk
3. We may request to meet with you to have an initial conversation about your idea
4. If we think it's a good fit, we will ask you to submit a short outline proposal
5. We will then advise you whether to move forward to a full written application

Applications for £10,000 and below (Small grants)

Small grant applications may be submitted at any time and are processed according to the capacity of the Grants Manager and Trustees. Please be aware that our capacity to process these applications is less between the outline deadline and decision dates for larger applications.

Applications for more than £10,000 (Larger grants)

Larger grant applications are considered by the Board. The UK Democracy Fund has four funding rounds a year. If you wish your application to be considered at a particular funding round, please contact the Fund at the earliest opportunity.

Advice on structuring and writing your grant application is available here.

After submitting your full written application, some applicants may be invited to meet up to three Trustees online. The purpose of these meetings is to help the Trust to learn more about your organisation and your application. It is not a decision-making meeting. Whether or not you are invited to a meeting should not be seen an indication of the eventual outcome of your grant application.

Final decisions on all applications are made by JRSST Charitable Trust's Board of Trustees. Upcoming deadlines for applications for larger grants can be found online.

Budget preparation

Your application should be accompanied by a budget that is completed on the template you can find on our website. It must account for the following elements:

- Staffing costs including employer costs applicable (e.g. NI and pension contributions)
- Day rate posts/consultants, if applicable
- Direct support costs for the proposal (e.g. printing, venue hire, travel)
- A proportion of overheads/indirect costs (e.g. rent, insurance, IT support etc)

Reporting requirements

Reporting requirements are light touch and will be set out in your grant offer letter. There is a standard requirement for large grants and small grants, though in some instances there may be some additional requirements specific to your grant. If this is the case, they will be set out in your grant offer letter.

Our standard reporting requirement is for two sides of A4 that reflect honestly and openly against the outcomes on whether they were achieved, what worked, what didn't work, and what lessons have been learned during the lifetime of the grant.

Accessibility

Support with preparing your application is available for blind, deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people. For instance, this might be some time from a Personal Assistant, or a Sign Language Interpreter if you are asked to attend a meeting with Directors. Other appropriate assistance will be considered. You can request an Access Payment of up to £500. Please contact the Fund to discuss any special requirements.

Data on diversity, equity and inclusion

JRSST-CT and the UK Democracy Fund want to understand more about the organisations and campaigns that apply for funding. All organisations who submit a full application to the UK Democracy Fund will be asked a series of yes/no questions about the leadership of their organisation and who the work is designed to benefit. The questions we use are based on those developed by the DEI Data Standard and focus only on our demographic priorities.

When submitting your application, you will be asked if:

- The application is intended to benefit people from communities experiencing racial inequity
- The majority of the leadership of your organisation identify as people from communities experiencing racial inequity
- The application intends to benefit young people

This information will help us to understand our applicants, and it will inform our processes and strategy, but will not be used for individual funding decisions.

Transparency and 360Giving

JRSST Charitable Trust's transparency policy requires us to publish a list of grants on our website and in our Annual Report and Audited Accounts. You will be asked to agree this on our online application form. If you have any concerns relating to the disclosure of your grant, e.g. if it may expose you or those working on the project to increased personal risk, or potentially jeopardise the work, you will be encouraged to discuss this with us. We also publish details of our grants with 360Giving.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

We understand that some people will use AI to help prepare their applications. We will not take this into account when assessing your application. We do not use AI at any stage to assist in the assessment process.

About the funders

The UK Democracy Fund is a pooled fund hosted by the JRSST Charitable Trust.

The JRSST Charitable Trust was created and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT) in 1955. It is independent of JRRT and funds activity that supports its charitable purposes. Its registered activity is "undertaking or supporting work which relates specifically to supporting the development of an increasingly democratic and socially just society in the United Kingdom".

democracyfund@jrsst-ct.org.uk

Registered charity, No. 1218772

Company registered in England, No. 16786561