
Turnout

One of the Electoral Commission's key aims is to 'foster public confidence and participation in the democratic process within the United Kingdom'. Recent turnouts at elections in the UK have been a cause of concern for the Commission, politicians and other electoral stakeholders.

In its Corporate Plan the Commission recognised that tackling voter apathy will 'require sustained effort'. Through its research and review programmes the Commission aims to understand what is motivating people to vote - or not vote. This, in turn, informs our media campaigns, our policy reviews and our corporate decision-making.

How is turnout calculated?

Turnout is the number of people casting a vote as a percentage of registered electors.

In order for a person to vote at an election their name must be included on the register of electors to be used for that election. The reported turnout rates do not usually take account of those people who are not registered to vote. As a result, turnout figures cannot give a completely accurate guide to the number of non-voters in the UK.

The numbers of unregistered people may be as high as 15% of the eligible electorate in some constituencies, and higher within certain social groups and among people living in certain areas. The Commission is working with others to conduct definitive analysis of the extent of non-registration in the UK.

An alternative way of looking at turnout is to calculate it as the number of people casting a vote as a percentage of the voting age population.

Historically, most turnout figures are adjusted which means that they do not include invalid votes such as unmarked/void for uncertainty, spoiled papers, or invalid/missing declarations of identity for postal voting. The Commission is also interested in unadjusted turnout, particularly for electoral pilot schemes, given that this figure better reflects the number of people who attempted to vote.

Who votes and who does not?

Academic and survey research consistently suggests that certain types of people are more likely to vote than others. Of course, given the secrecy of the ballot in the UK, turnout figures for particular sub-groups can only ever be estimates.

Turnout has been shown to vary by area, age, gender, ethnicity, social class and education. In general, older, affluent and more educated middle classes are more likely to register and to vote.

Research has also shown that

levels of non-registration are higher among younger age groups and among the black African and black Caribbean population (registration rates for some Asian communities are above average).

Explaining turnout

There have been a number of explanations of what determines whether or not people turn out to vote:

- how close the contest is
- age and other socioeconomic factors
- how strongly they identify with any particular party
- habit and whether they have voted in the past
- interest in the campaign;
- whether voting is seen as a 'civic duty'
- whether the parties are seen as being different and distinctive
- whether an election/the institution is seen as being relevant
- awareness and information
- 'apathy'
- attitudes towards politics and politicians
- the (in)convenience of voting (non-voting for this reason is sometimes referred to as 'circumstantial non-voting').

Research suggests that unless voters feel that the election is

relevant to them and that their vote matters, they are unlikely to participate.

Looking ahead

In order to encourage turnout, the task for all political parties and candidates is to re-engage with the electorate. Such issues do not fall to the Commission to address.

However, the Commission does have a critical role to play in the following areas:

- delivering voter education and public awareness advertising campaigns, within the terms of section 13 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000
- participating in the electoral modernisation agenda and evaluation of electoral pilot schemes
- reviewing electoral law and practice

More information

For more information about turnout and participation see www.electoralcommission.org.uk/about-us/researchpub.cfm.

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We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process. For more information see: www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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