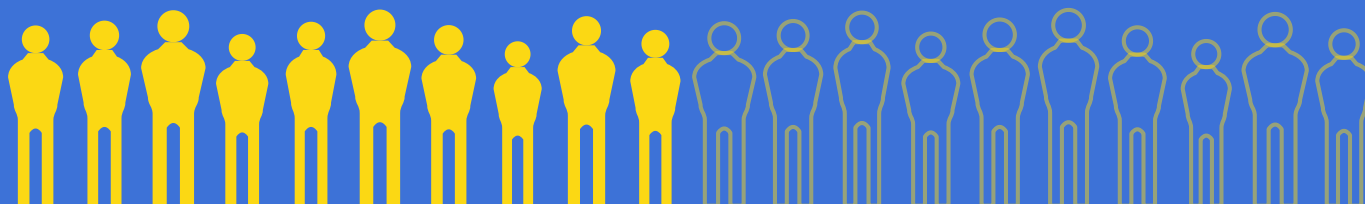


The missing half

Why electoral turnout is a fairness issue, and how to fix it



Charles White | 5 October 2026



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The online version of this report is at <https://fairnessfoundation.com/the-missing-half>

About this report

Too many people are locked out of an equal say in Britain's democracy by virtue of their economic background. Turnout is lowest where deprivation is highest, which gives politicians little reason to answer to the people with most at stake. This paper argues for a democratic 'circuit breaker': a 'None of the Above' option on ballot papers, as the quid pro quo for compulsory voting.¹

About the author

Charles White directs the Campaign for Compulsory Voting. He has worked in both Houses of Parliament and across the third sector, and was formerly a reporter for national newspapers. He holds degrees from Durham University and King's College London. The foreword is written by Polly Neate, crossbench peer and former CEO of Shelter.

About the Fairness Foundation

The Fairness Foundation works to change the debate around fairness in order to build a fairer Britain. We are a registered charity (1044174). Our vision is a Britain where everyone has the 'fair necessities' (fair essentials, fair opportunities, fair rewards, fair exchange and fair treatment). We believe that inequality is not only unfair and unpopular but is also damaging our society, economy and democracy. We work to persuade UK policymakers of the moral, the political and the policy arguments for tackling inequality.

Foreword by Polly Neate

I've always thought, give people something worth voting for, and they will. I no longer believe that. The right to vote is no longer enough, because rights are meaningless unless people can access and exercise them. Not voting is of course a choice. But people using their right to vote fuels our democracy, and when such overwhelming numbers do not, our democracy is running on empty.

The new Prime Minister wants to change politics. But he must surely fear that the changes he proposes, to devolve far more power to regional and local government, will lack legitimacy when so few people actively choose how those institutions are run.

If we are going to have Devo Max, we must have high electoral participation in local democracy. Yet according to the Institute for Government, the average turnout in Mayoral elections in 2024 and 2025 was 31%, and the figures for local council elections are similar.

Already, policies pursued by local authorities – particularly the way they outsource support for their most vulnerable citizens through procurement and commissioning – are pushing small, community-led organisations and groups to the brink of extinction. Yet these are about the only source of support that people in the greatest need still trust.

The more those who most need the support of public services lose their say in what they get and how they get it, as this report demonstrates, the more that support will disappear.

This is why the introduction of compulsory voting is gaining long-overdue momentum, and offers a powerful opportunity to reshape democracy in the interests of the majority.

Devolution is not the only way Andy Burnham wants to reshape our supposedly democratic institutions. He also – rightly, in my view – argues for a shift to a “preventive state”, where public funds are no longer thrown at crises, but are invested in stopping those crises from happening in the first place. This requires trust in public services to improve dramatically, because how else will people feel able to ask for help before

they end up with no choice over state intervention in their lives?

For trust to build, people must have a say in what local councils and mayors invest in. “Service user involvement”, where groups of people are invited to contribute to the design of the help they need, is of course important. But it should be in addition to, not a replacement for, genuine accountability and service user power at the ballot box.

As this report sets out, one of the most egregious examples of the unfairness that is further solidified with every election that passes is the systematic disinvestment in support for young and working-age people. The pensions triple lock is protected by voter power. That's how politics works, but it isn't how democracy should work, and it certainly doesn't give fairness a chance.

Now the Prime Minister has touched the third rail of British politics by daring to fix this unfairness, he needs voters on side. Compulsory voting would give Burnham the political cover and popular support to deliver. The people most likely to back reform, including younger voters, would be at the ballot box to reward a government that took on intergenerational inequality. Compulsory voting brings everyone into the decision, those directly affected and those who aren't, encouraging a more considered response to major policy choices.

Truly impactful policy change requires courage, and politicians only show courage when the space has been opened up for political action. Opening up that space is what campaigners do. They (and I was one) mobilise public opinion and opinion-formers, pulling as many levers in people's real lives and virtual lives as they can afford, to make politicians think a particular policy change will be popular. This activity is vital in a democracy.

But when so few people participate in the driver of democracy, the true legitimiser of policy – voting – the opinion shifts generated by campaigns remain untested and potentially unreal. This is as true, I have to admit, for social justice campaigns as it is for the rhetoric of the far right. There is momentum, there is traction, there

are even profound societal and political shifts, but do we even know how deep-rooted they are? We do not.

It's obvious that if everyone has to vote, voting has to be accessible to everyone. Along with compulsory voting and the "none of the above"

option, I also propose public holidays on polling days.

The Australians hold a barbie to entice voters in. That's a bit weather-dependent for us lot. Scones anyone? Jam? Cream? A nice hot cuppa? Actual democratic accountability? Yes please.

Executive summary

In Britain today, too many people are locked out of an equal say in our democracy by virtue of their economic background. The truth of our political system is that the voices of society's poorest do not count as much as the rich. Our political system has consequently rewarded the interests of those with advantages and wealth, instead of creating incentives for those furthest from the political process to become involved.

Polling suggests this sentiment is keenly felt throughout the country, with 63 per cent of people saying they have no say in what the Government does, according to ONS research. Similarly, according to Fairness Foundation polling, 75 per cent of us say the "very rich have too much influence on politics in the UK"¹, and 34 per cent think the "very rich have the most power in society".

This broken system jars with our most basic principle of representative democracy that everyone should be able to exercise equal

influence on decisions made in their name. However, economic inequality is corrupting that ideal because of chronic low and unequal turnout. This is skewing the decisions made in our country towards the interests of the richest and most powerful.

As this paper argues, this democratic deficit must be addressed and the Government should commit to ending the link between economic inequality and political inequality by introducing democratic reforms, namely compulsory voting with a "None of the Above" option on ballot papers.

As a new Prime Minister takes office, he has a golden opportunity to arrest the blight of low turnout in elections with a new agenda to restore trust and hope in our democracy and ensure that everyone has an equal voice. Andy Burnham, a politician almost uniquely energised by a desire to pursue political as well as economic reform, should seize that opportunity.

Introduction

Andy Burnham began his leadership bid with a commitment to reform politics. In Manchester's People's History Museum, Burnham used a phrase associated with the Covid-19 pandemic – a “circuit breaker.”

He said: “We need to change politics, and we need to do it now. So let me state my clear intention as I put myself forward. True to the motto of this city, I am going to do things differently. I am going to break with the more-of-the-same approach that has got us here. I am going to give Britain the circuit-breaker it needs, by building a more collaborative politics in Westminster.”²

The country has experienced democratic “circuit breakers” before which have radically transformed wider society. The expansion of the right to vote, for example, was both a symptom and a catalyst of British identity. As the former MP for Burnham's constituency, Josh Simons, noted in 2018: “Wars produce potent symbols of shared experience... After Trafalgar, Britons began to ask: if we can fight, why should we not also vote?”³ In another era, Millicent Fawcett achieved partial female voting rights, and was subsequently praised by the second female Prime Minister, Theresa May, for her “long and arduous” suffrage campaign.⁴

Yet since the heady days of expanding the electorate at the turn of the 20th century, and the later tweaks to thresholds on age, the UK's democratic systems have struggled. James Purnell, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, observed in 2010 that our democratic institutions risked appearing as a “bad master”: 16 years later little has changed.⁵ Consistent low and unequal election turnout has produced a “democratic deficit” in society. That is, turnout's decline has mirrored the decline in other indicators of a thriving and cohesive democracy.

As a Parliament briefing wrote: “Political scientists have associated trust with perceived legitimacy and willingness to adhere to laws and taxation: ‘If people do not have faith in the institution making the rules, it is less likely that people live by them.’... Public engagement methods may improve trust by increasing public understanding of Parliament, satisfaction with

democracy, and individual confidence to participate in politics.”⁶

The undercurrent of low electoral turnout, long obvious to politicians but rarely discussed in Westminster, is a phenomenon repeatedly linked with poorer economic outcomes.⁷ The Prime Minister's desire for “growth in every post code” is therefore directly correlated with turnout in every postcode, too. Considering overall turnout at 2026's English local elections, the Welsh Senedd elections, and the Scottish Holyrood elections, as well as the 2024 UK general election, low and unequal turnout blighted each and every vote. Indeed, despite earlier warnings by commentators, activists, and the general public, turnout at elections remains around or below 50 per cent.

In the 2024 general election more than a third of voters “simply decided to stay at home,” which had a material impact on electoral outcomes because non-voters in some constituencies helped produce the narrow majorities which propelled Labour into power.”⁸ Indeed, “while many non-voters said they would have voted Labour... 2019 Conservative voters made up a greater proportion of 2024 non-voters than 2019 Labour voters. Their decision to abstain was active rather than passive, unable to back another party but wanting to show their disapproval for the Conservatives' record.”⁹

Voter apathy and disillusionment do not just result in low turnout; they also translate into better results for parties that promise radical change from the political status quo. Low turnout at elections rewards parties with energised electoral bases.

Parties which have clear anti-Establishment tenets are increasingly improving their performances at elections, as turnout declines overall. Between the UK 2015 and 2024 general elections, Reform UK and the Green Party of England and Wales, benefited from greater political apathy and experienced a huge increase in votes from a combined 4,992,702 votes to 5,959,498 votes. Of course, this does not necessarily account for the entire appeal of these

parties, but it does help to explain the increasing fragmentation of the UK's politics in recent years.

If voter disdain is not expressed through voting for supposed anti-Establishment parties, it is done through opting out of the democratic process by staying at home. Therefore, many are turning to radical solutions. A consensus that we must optimise our democratic systems to depolarise our society is emerging including through compulsory voting¹⁰.

ThinkLabour and the IPPR both published reports calling for compulsory voting in the first half of 2026 and these views were echoed by the Chief Executive of Demos.¹¹¹²¹³ Indeed, several MPs spoke during the Representation of the People's Bill in favour of compulsory voting.¹⁴ These observers are right that compulsory voting is the only proven, democratic, and popular way to produce high and sustained turnout rates at elections.

However, any radical shift in our democratic processes would require a greater focus on instilling fairness into elections. It would only be fair if election systems are to be changed so radically that a popular and cost-neutral introduction of a "None of the Above" option on ballot papers is considered.

Indeed, there is even an argument to introduce such an option independent of compulsory voting. While some may express concern that this change would be "legitimising" disenchanted voters, this paper will show how it could, in fact, help to address dissatisfaction and apathy ahead of the next general election.

Moreover, another concern rests on hypothetical questions related to the prospect of "None of the Above" "winning" an election. However, as only individuals can win an election in the UK, the candidate with the most votes wins irrespective of the support "None of the Above" garners in the same way spoiled ballots function currently.

For some this could prompt the logical question of "why bother" introducing this effort, particularly without compulsory voting, if it would make no practical difference to the election results. However, notwithstanding this view, "None of the Above" remains highly popular amongst the electorate itself. As reported by LBC, polling suggests wide-ranging public support¹⁵.

This paper will first explore the state and scale of the democratic deficit and then consider the quid pro quo required for a true democratic "circuit breaker" which includes a 'None of the Above' option on the ballot paper and compulsory voting.

Why voter turnout is a fairness issue

The reality of the UK's low turnout is indisputable. In the most recent elections (English local authorities, the Welsh Senedd, and Scotland's Holyrood) turnout was dire.

In Scotland, turnout was down from the last election, to just 53 per cent of registered voters. The House of Commons Library wrote: "Constituency turnout was highest in Eastwood at 66 per cent and lowest in Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn at 43 per cent."¹⁶ Overall, 18 Scottish seats saw fewer than half of registered voters turnout. As the BBC notes: "This is actually fairly well in line with the sort of turnout we saw at Holyrood from 2007 through to 2016."¹⁷

In Wales, which saw a monumental shift in electoral fortunes for the Welsh Labour party, turnout was equally poor. As the House of Commons Library states: "Overall turnout in this election was 52 per cent. This was highest in Caerdydd Ffynnon Taf at 58 per cent and lowest in Afan Ogwr Rhondda at 45 per cent."¹⁸

In the six English mayoral elections held on the same day not one achieved turnout higher than 42 per cent. The lowest turnout for a mayoralty was Newham which saw just 34.6 per cent of registered voters turnout.

Turnout is also a fairness issue highly correlated with economic and social deprivation. Simply put, the impact of poverty and deprivation on voter turnout is stark which resultantly skews political incentives.¹⁹

As Scottish political observer Jonathon Shafi wrote:

You can, for instance, trace the relationship between voter turnout and life expectancy. The gap between

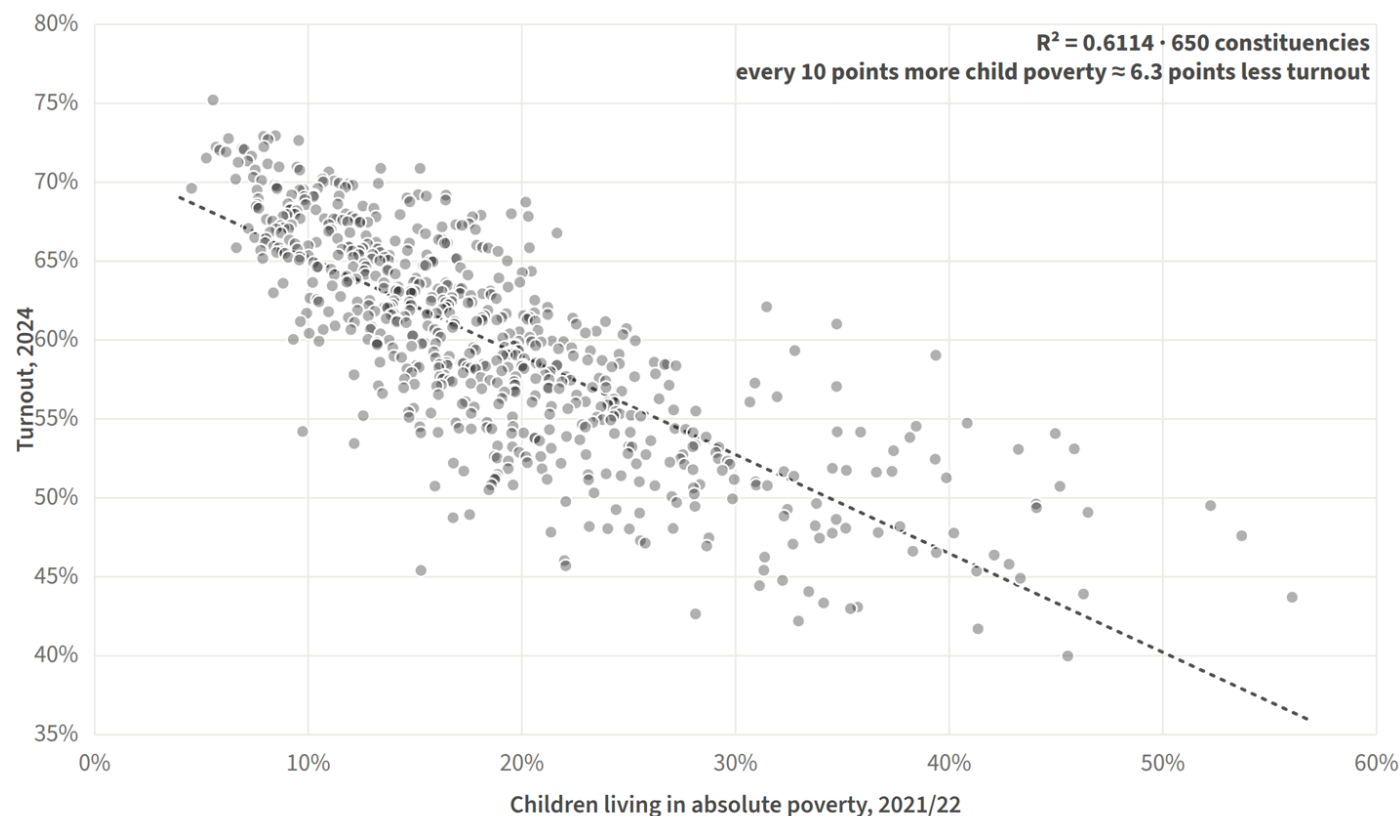
people living in the least and most deprived areas of Glasgow is around 15.4 years for males and 11.6 years for females, as reported by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health. Between 2015–19, there was an estimated 17.6-year gap between males born in Greater Govan (65.4 years) versus Pollokshields West (83 years)....

The poorer you are, the shorter you will live, and the less likely you are to vote in elections. Research from the Fraser of Allander Institute further corroborates this pattern, concluding in a 2022 report that "health and income inequality are consistent predictors of voter turnout in Scotland"... In the 1987 UK general election, the turnout recorded for the poorest income group was 4% lower than for the wealthiest. By 2010, the gap had grown to a sobering 23 points."²⁰

This can be illustrated by mapping indicators of deprivation with turnout in elections across England. In 2024, a constituency in Manchester (Rusholme) saw the lowest turnout "at a general election since South Staffordshire in 2005 (37.2%)."²¹ It is unsurprising to see that child poverty rates in the Manchester constituency are grim with "more than half (51.3%) of all children currently living in poverty."²²

Indeed, taking data provided by the House of Commons Library on the absolute child poverty rate (that is, the percentage of children aged 0-15 living in households with income below 60 per cent of the median income in 2010/2011 with income being measured before housing costs) and mapping against turnout paints a stark picture.

Figure 1: Where children are poorest, fewest people vote — every UK constituency, 2024



Source: House of Commons Library, Poverty in the UK: statistics (CBP-10522), absolute child poverty 2021/22; constituency turnout from parliamentary election results. Least-squares trend line; $R^2 = 0.61$, 650 constituencies.

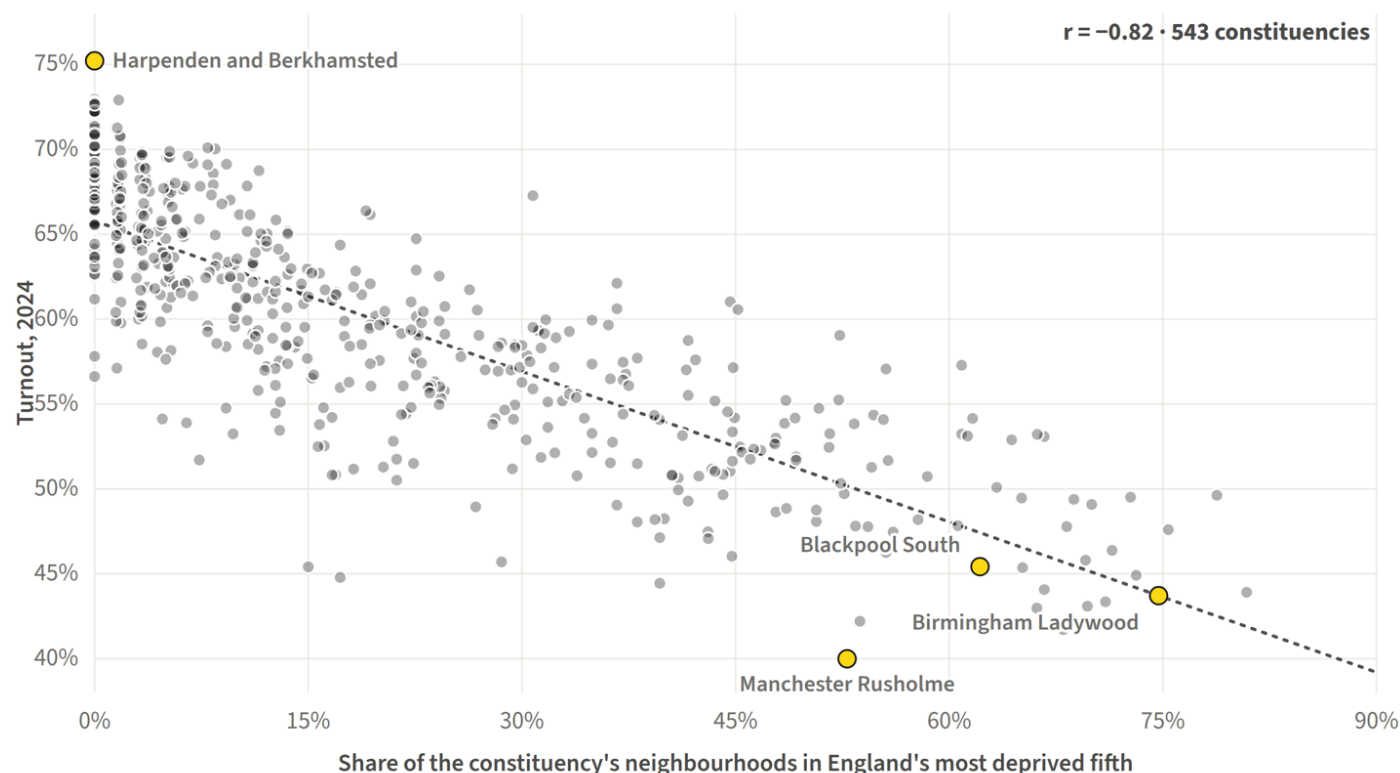
For example, Eastwood, in the most recent Scottish Parliamentary election, was the constituency with the highest turnout. The local council's child poverty action plan, states: "Child poverty rates after housing costs are the lowest in Scotland, at 12 per cent (2,842 children). This has fallen from last year at 14 per cent (3,247 children)."²³

This is compared with the North East of Glasgow, where the lowest turnout occurs. Here, Glasgow City Council states that while child poverty across Scotland stands at 24.5 per cent, in Glasgow it is 32 per cent. The council adds: "[this] varies by constituency within Glasgow from 32.0 per cent Glasgow North to 42.4 per cent Glasgow Central."²⁴

Between 2019 and 2024 the largest decline in voter turnout was in East Ham (falling more than 18 percentage points).²⁵ East Ham sits within the borough of Newham where 44.9 per cent of children live in poverty, compared with 10.6 per cent in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames (2024 voter turnout, 68.7 per cent). Newham is the most deprived borough in London, and between 2019 and 2024 deprivation increased, just as voter turnout decreased, according to the 2025 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).²⁶

Similar analysis of House of Commons library data finds there was a 17.1 percentage point turnout gap between the least and most deprived fifth of English seats (67.8% against 50.7%).

Figure 2: Turnout falls as deprivation rises — every English constituency, 2024



Source: MHCLG, English indices of deprivation 2025 (share of a constituency's LSOAs in the most deprived fifth of England); turnout from the House of Commons Library. Least-squares trend line; $r = -0.82$, 543 constituencies.

When measured against median wages, there was a 10.3 percentage point turnout gap in 2024 between best-paid and worst-paid fifth of seats – a gap which had increased from 7.8 percentage points in 2010. Unsurprisingly, median wages are not a usable predictor for any individual seat.

This uneven turnout creates a political disincentive for politicians to respond to the needs of those bearing the brunt of the UK's unfair distribution of wealth and income. Fraser Nelson, the former editor of right-leaning *The Spectator*, has highlighted the lack of voting among those who are in receipt of state welfare:

The people with the greatest stake in the welfare system are the least likely to have a say over it... simply having been unemployed knocks around nine points off the likelihood that someone votes, an effect that lingers long after the job has been found. Worklessness, it seems, does not just empty the wage packet. It corrodes the sense that the system is yours to shape....

Because claimants do not vote, politicians have little electoral reason to fix a system that fails them: there is no bloc to reward good reform or to punish neglect. Yet the same fact makes the welfare state

unusually easy to cut, because the people affected will not be heard from on polling day.

Democracy works on the rough assumption that those most affected by a policy will turn out to defend or change it. In welfare that assumption breaks down.²⁷

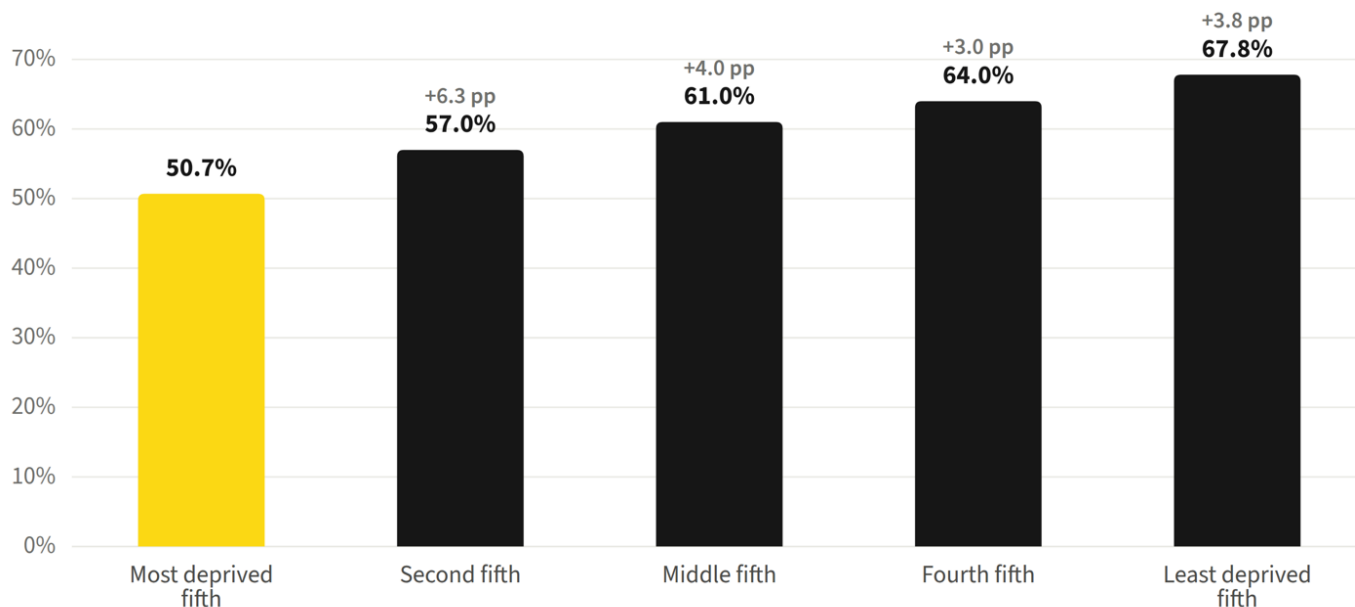
This is, of course, in dramatic contrast with the experiences of another cohort of welfare beneficiaries: pensioners. The triple lock on pensions has successfully ratcheted up the value of pensions during a period of stagnant economic growth in the UK. In fact, “the current value of the Basic State Pension (BSP) is already 11 per cent higher than it would have been with earnings-linked uprating since 2012... And pensioners are now less likely to be in poverty than the rest of the population, and half as likely as children.”²⁸

Pensioners are, unsurprisingly, overwhelmingly more likely to vote. As a voting bloc, pensioners' power was predicted by the older people's charity Age UK ahead of the 2010 general election, just three months before the triple lock was introduced. It wrote: “Electoral power lies firmly in the hands of older voters... ‘grey’ majorities are likely in 94 marginal seats where securing votes

among the over-55s could tip the balance of power between the main three parties.”²⁹ Since then wealth has been increasingly accumulated by older people while younger, less likely to vote, groups have faced a greater economic burden.

Unequal voter turnout is also a vicious cycle. The more disillusioned voters become, the less likely they are to vote; consequently, politicians are less likely to prioritise or focus on their needs, in turn increasing voter disillusionment and disengagement.

Figure 3: Mean turnout by fifth of English constituencies, ranked by deprivation



Source: MHCLG, English indices of deprivation 2025, with turnout from the House of Commons Library. Five equal groups of 108 or 109 seats.

However, while economic disparities highlight the unequal turnout at UK elections, it does not necessarily explain all of the factors that motivate voters, or not.

For example, one factor which is certainly present in areas of economic and social deprivation is voter disillusionment. As Frances Foley, the deputy director of Compass, wrote, “free and fair elections are not enough... In the 2024 ‘year of elections’ there was a troubling decline of faith in the fairness of electoral processes.”³⁰

Indeed, it is not simply that areas of economic or social deprivation are more likely to see lower turnout, these areas also see higher support for political parties which describe themselves within the framework of “anti-Establishment” movements. In research by More in Common, pollsters found:

Reform’s strongest support comes from places with a low skills base, poor health, and weak labour markets – areas that may feel economically “left behind”. These constituencies are defined by high

employment deprivation, health deprivation, and education, skills and training deprivation...

...the Greens perform best in urban constituencies marked by high in-work poverty, poor housing, pollution, and degraded local environments, where concerns about quality of life and living conditions are more visible. These constituencies are defined by high income deprivation and high living environment deprivation.

...While Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters overwhelmingly say that we should preserve and improve our political and social institutions, Green and Reform voters share a far greater desire for radical change. Over half of Green voters and 39 per cent of Reform voters say that we should let our institutions burn.”³¹

The deep apathy and disillusionment with politics was reflected in the 2026 elections. The low turnout was predicted in Scotland, and elsewhere, with pollsters referring to the “scunner factor.”³² This Scots word was defined by the BBC

as “a broader feeling about politics at the moment - a disenchantment.”³³

Therefore, it is little surprise support for the Reform UK party, which seeks to embody anti-establishmentism, is greatest amongst voters who are “scunnered”. In April 2026, the UK’s largest union, Unison, concluded working class voters who back Reform UK “feel let down” by politics and their “frustration is real and understandable.”³⁴

Indeed, in the largest study of Reform UK’s supporters disillusionment with the status quo is a repeated refrain.

“The party’s new voter base is united by a shared sense of political disillusionment and alienation. They are less satisfied with life than other voters, more likely to feel like strangers to those around them, and more distrustful of institutions from politicians to the media... What binds these voters together is a deep wariness of the world around them and a strong sense of political disillusionment.”³⁵

This is not new either. In 2010, Andy Burnham’s future Chief of Staff and then an MP, James Purnell, said: “[government] incumbency is now a real disadvantage. Everyone is angry about something.”³⁶ Four years later, Dr Ruth Fox, Director of the Hansard Society, told Parliament: “...voting levels are a manifestation of the bigger problem of disengagement across the board, linked to a declining sense of the efficacy of politics generally and their role in it, and a sense that the parties are all the same, the politicians are all the same, they are not like us, it does not make any difference.”³⁷

Anyone seeking to understand the current fragmentation of UK politics and the overall context of declining faith in government, must first consider trends in voter turnout. This is also found internationally. In Australia, the independent think tank the Grattan Institute

wrote in 2026: “How we feel about the economy is linked to how we feel about democracy. People who are down about the economy are more likely to feel dissatisfied with democracy and have lower trust in government.... And people who have negative economic expectations are more likely to vote for independents and minor parties.”³⁸

If a democratic “circuit breaker” is set to be a reality, recognition that voter apathy is legitimate is vital. Indeed, as the Economist’s Duncan Robinson wrote: “It has been so long since a British government could honestly say that things have improved... Practically every area of British public policy, from health care to defence, has got worse since the financial crisis... Assuming that voters will not notice improvements is a belief that swings between arrogance and insanity.”³⁹

Those disproportionately poorer voters who feel unable to vote or if they do vote turn to parties offering an anti-Establishment proposition, deserve solutions not derision. Indeed, “the principal driver [of these voters] is a feeling our political class has become unresponsive. When people vote for change, what they get is more of the same. Many Britons value their democratic rights, and want to participate, but no longer believe voting is a credible mechanism for change.”⁴⁰

Economic and democratic stagnation must be arrested if British democracy is to thrive, or indeed survive. A key, indeed central, tenet of our Parliamentary system is that change is conducted in the ballot box. Yet if economic and social change is not happening at the speed society demands it is not acceptable to think the problem is with the voters or the very concept of our Parliamentary democracy.

Instead, we must fix the parts of our democracy which has become frayed, namely election turnout.

The solution: compulsory voting

If we are to accept that there is an issue of electoral turnout, then there is only one method which has proven to be effective over a sustained time in producing high voter turnout. That is, compulsory voting.

The most obvious example of compulsory voting is in Australia, although more than 20 democracies around the world practice some form of compulsion. The process is described by Australia's Electoral Commission below:

“Under the Electoral Act, the actual duty of the elector is to attend a polling place, have their name marked off the certified list, receive a ballot paper and take it to an individual voting booth, mark it, fold the ballot paper and place it in the ballot box... As voting is compulsory, electors are given a number of ways to cast their vote at an election, including postal voting, pre-poll voting, absent voting, voting at Australian overseas missions and voting at mobile teams at hospitals and nursing homes and in remote localities, as well as ordinary voting at a polling place in their electorate.”⁴¹

Consequently Australia reliably has turnout rates at elections of more than 90 per cent. The last Australian election in 2025 had turnout of 90.7 per cent.⁴² Indeed, “This pattern is not limited to these Anglo-American democracies: around the world, countries with compulsory voting have relatively high turnout levels, especially where penalties for abstention are harsh and routinely enforced.... When the Netherlands abandoned compulsory voting in 1970, turnout declined sharply. In Schaffhausen, turnout tends to be highest among all Swiss cantons. In five Latin American countries with compulsory voting, the rules are not enforced among senior citizens, and turnout rates in these countries tend to drop among individuals above the age at which turnout is no longer required.”⁴³

There is regularly an argument made that high turnout rates can be achieved through wider electoral reform alone. The experiences of devolved nations (which variously use electorally reformed systems of elections) and that of our nearest neighbours does not support this conclusion. For example, turnout in Ireland's last general election was the lowest in a century and below 60 per cent.⁴⁴ In France in the 2024 snap

elections 63 per cent of voters turned out – the highest turnout in four decades.⁴⁵

It is only compulsory voting that delivers sustained high voter turnout at elections. It is also overwhelmingly popular both with the Australian public, and British people when they are asked if they would favour such a mechanism.

Indeed, compulsory voting also has an impact on the overall fairness of a nation. Overall, countries with compulsory voting have lower income inequality and reduced political corruption compared with countries which use optional voting.⁴⁶ Australia, for example, has reportedly lower levels of corruption than the UK and its Gini coefficient (a summary of income inequality between zero and 1) stood at 0.32 compared with the UK's 0.37 (after housing costs).^{47 48}

Crudely, “According to conventional wisdom, since the poor are less likely to go to the polls, elected leaders do not cater to their needs, which ends up skewing the distribution of income against them.”⁴⁹ And the evidence suggests this is correct. The use of compulsory voting correlates with governments that are “more responsive to the needs and priorities of the entire electorate, with lower levels of corruption and higher levels of citizen satisfaction and trust.”⁵⁰ Put simply, if compulsory voting is enforced, the effect is an improved distribution of income.⁵¹

Income inequality is not solved overnight with the introduction of compulsory voting but politicians are rewarded, often for the first time, to introduce economic and social policies which often benefit younger and poorer voters.

The most recent Australian budget put “intergenerational equity front and centre” and changed the tax system to cool the housing market – much to the chagrin of Australian homeowners.⁵²⁵³ As Lord Foulkes of Cumnock observed: “Imagine a Scottish party being confident enough in the electoral turnout of young renters that radical tax changes could be explored. It's hard to do. And with good reason. Turnout is stubbornly low amongst the younger generation.”⁵⁴

Chancellor John Healey has said he wants the UK to be “Growth Britain” and yet reforms to the economic system to enable this unlocking of growth can only come with changes to the

electoral system. Without broadening the electorate, any government faces the challenge of electoral incentives being stacked against growth measures.

None of the above

Yet for all its merits, compulsory voting as implemented in Australia is a political misnomer. As described above, Australians are compelled merely to turn-up rather than vote, per se. So what happens to those who remain disengaged or dismissive of what is on offer, but comply with the law and vote?

Australian elections turn out many so-called “donkey voters” who, while not spoiling their ballot, rank candidates on the ballot paper on the basis of the order they appear rather than the voters’ actual preference. This strays into the possible side effects of compulsory voting: the so-called “low-quality voter.”

Yet a way to avoid accidentally skewing the election result by virtue of ballot paper ordering, this equine voter can be avoided by adding a “None of the Above” to ballot papers.

This idea is not novel or alien. In 2022 the Le Monde newspaper reported on “None of the Above” within a global context:

In Europe, the Netherlands and Spain count the blank vote as part of the votes cast in each election and it is included in the percentages used for defining electoral thresholds. However, it is not taken into account in parliamentary elections for the distribution of seats in Parliament.

Sweden recognizes the blank vote in some elections and in referendums. Greece also counts it but reallocates it to the winner of the election. In Switzerland, the blank vote is taken into account in the first round to reach an absolute majority, but not in the second round.⁵⁵

As detailed above, turnout in UK elections averages around 50 per cent or below. In Spain’s most recent general election, 200,673 “blank” ballots were recorded, and turnout generally hovers around 60-70 per cent in recent general elections. In the Netherlands’ most recent general election, 40,128 “blank” ballots were recorded and turnout, since 1925, has been amongst the highest in the democratic world, regularly reaching 80-90 per cent (the Dutch had compulsory voting from 1917 through to 1967).

In the UK, the issue was said in 2015 to have moved “from being an interesting, though largely ignored, fringe proposal to becoming a reality... recent articles, for example from Demos, Open Democracy and the broadcaster Rick Edwards advocate for the inclusion of NOTA.”⁵⁶

Indeed, Parliamentarians publishing a 2015 report recommending a “None of the Above” option to ballot papers:

Over 70% of respondents to our consultation supported having the option of voting for “none of the above” on the ballot paper, irrespective of whether or not voting were compulsory...

Having the option to vote for “none of the above” on the ballot paper is the proposal which has had the largest support among those who have given their views to the surveys we have drawn upon. This change would enable people to participate at elections even if they did not wish to vote for any of the candidates presented. If large numbers of people did choose to cast their vote in this way it would serve as a wakeup call for candidates and parties that they needed to do more to gain the support of the electorate.

We recommend that the Government consult on including, on ballot papers for national elections, an option for voters who wish to participate but not vote for any of the candidates presented, and report to the House on this proposal.⁵⁷

In 2026, think tank ThinkLabour published a report by Dr David Klemperer which called for the introduction of a “None of the Above” option on UK ballot papers because of its potential to impact voting patterns:

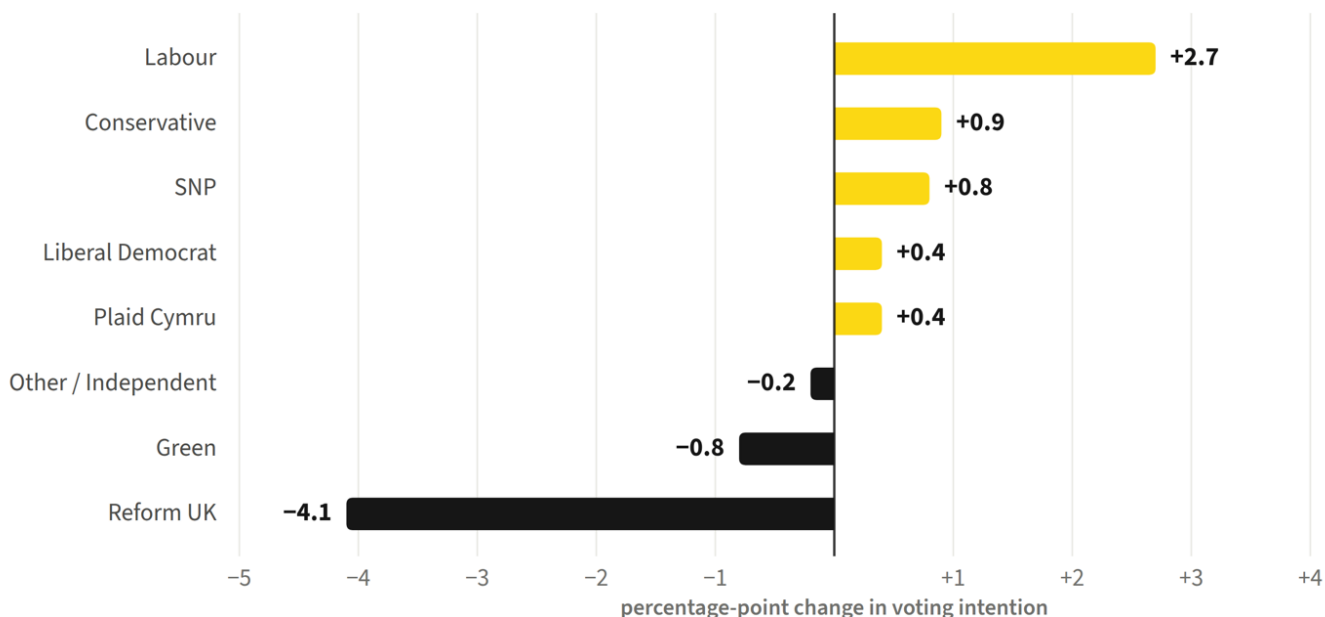
Convergent Opinion tested the potential impact of the introduction of a “None of the Above” option in the UK by dividing poll respondents into groups as part of a multi-armed randomised control trial. They showed one group a standard ballot paper, and the other group another ballot paper which included a None of the Above option. They then modelled the effect of having a None of the Above option on the ballot paper on vote choice.

In line with what we would expect based on the studies cited above, the results found that the

presence of a “None of the Above” option shifted support away from non-traditional parties, strengthening both Labour and (to a lesser degree)

the Conservatives at the expense of Reform in particular.⁵⁸

Figure 4: What a “None of the Above” option does to vote share



Source: Convergent Opinion multi-armed randomised control trial, reported in D. Klemperer, ThinkLabour (2026).

The data suggests providing a “None of the Above” option decouples irritation at the politicians from support for anti-Establishment parties. Instead of legitimising apathy, as critics

fear, “None of the Above” actively changes voter behaviour.

Conclusion

Breaking the link between economic inequality and political inequality by introducing democratic reforms is not easy. The UK demonstrably has a problem with electoral turnout correlating with lower economic prospects.

The reforms argued for, whether radical like compulsory voting, or more simple, such as “None of the Above” are, however, a step towards greater fairness in our democracy. Driving up turnout, in turn, will be a step towards greater fairness in our economy.

Obviously, economic inequality cannot be fully solved through the introduction of political reforms alone, but political reform to drive up turnout will make the issues that face these communities more salient. In essence, a fairer democracy will help build a fairer economy.

Thus even if compulsory voting is not pursued as a policy aim, a desire to increase voluntary turnout is needed. To do this we must first offer a fair and legitimate protest vote which neither skews election outcomes nor can be ignored like a spoiled ballot.

This wider democratic “circuit breaker” is one that as the K-shaped economic recovery continues and the cost-of-living pressures abound, is needed more than ever. The Government should seize the initiative and introduce measures to give every voter a say in our democracy, including through considering a model of compulsory voting and a “None of the Above” option on ballot papers.

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