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HALF OF US

TURNOUT PATTERNS AT THE
2024 GENERAL ELECTION

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Viktor Valgarðsson

July 2024

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Registered charity no: 800065 (England and Wales),
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This paper was first published in July 2024. © IPPR 2024

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been funded by the UK Democracy Fund, a pooled fund hosted by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. The material presented here represents the views of the author(s), not necessarily those of JRRT or other UK Democracy Fund contributors.

The authors would also like to thank Bhargav Srinivasa Desikan, Richard Maclean, Liam Evans, Harry Quilter-Pinner, Henry Parkes and David Wastell at IPPR for their contributions to this paper.

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If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is:

Patel P and Valgarðsson V (2024) *Half of us: Turnout patterns at the 2024 general election*, IPPR.

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SUMMARY

One-half of adults in this country voted at the 2024 general election. This is the lowest share of the population to vote since universal suffrage. Even among registered voters, only three in every five cast a ballot. If non-voters were a party, they would have been the largest party by some distance.

Constituencies where a large share of the population are older people, wealthy homeowners and white had much higher turnout rates than constituencies where a smaller share of people come from those communities. Comparing the top and bottom deciles, we find:

- turnout was 11 per cent higher in constituencies with the highest proportion of over 64-year-olds compared to the lowest
- turnout was 13 per cent higher in constituencies with the highest proportion of homeowners compared to the lowest
- turnout was 7 per cent lower in constituencies with the highest proportion of people from minority ethnic backgrounds compared to the lowest
- turnout was 10 per cent lower in constituencies with the highest proportion of Muslim people compared to the lowest.

TABLE S.1

Voter turnout rates at the constituency level by the sociodemographic distribution of the local population

	Turnout among registered voters			Turnout among voting age population		
	Top decile	Bottom decile	Turnout gap	Top decile	Bottom decile	Turnout gap
Over 64	65	54	11	61	43	18
Homeowners	67	54	13	63	42	21
Ethnic minorities	54	61	7	43	57	14
Muslim	53	63	10	43	59	16

Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

Put simply, the 'haves' speak much louder than the 'have-nots' in British democracy. Those who stand to benefit most from democratic policymaking are those with the weakest voices in the room.

This is one way to make sense of policy puzzles in the heart of our democracy. Why have we allowed housing to become so unaffordable? Why have we tolerated income and wealth inequality to rise and remain high? Why have we protected pensions but not social security for working people?

The new government has the chance to break out of the democratic doom loop between political participation and policy responsiveness.

There are two democratic futures for the UK. The low road promises to exacerbate and entrench policy bias, deepening inequality between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The high road is a more politically equal country, where policy is more equally responsive to the different communities in this country, young or old, rich or poor, white or black.

The new government should pick the high road. It should introduce a **modernising elections bill** as a legislative priority, making a public commitment to legislate in the 2024 King's Speech. This bill should introduce policies and electoral reforms that aim to raise turnout and reduce inequalities at elections, including automatic or assisted voter registration, extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds and strengthening the rules around donations to political parties.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 election is a moment that has changed the future of this country. The world's most successful political party was reduced to the worst result in their 190-year history. The Labour party won the second largest majority in British political history, just five years after suffering its worst election result since 1935. The two main parties in British politics, the Labour party and the Conservative party, received the lowest combined vote share in at least a century.

It is a future changed by just one-half of adults in the UK.¹ If democracy is collective self-rule, what about the other half? In that group, we can expect young people, the less wealthy and those from minority ethnic backgrounds to be concentrated.

Elections are the essential guarantor of human agency; it matters who participates. The 'haves' are increasingly louder than the 'have-nots' at UK general elections. A recent analysis of every election since the 1960s shows a stark rise in the turnout gap based on age, income, education, class, home ownership and ethnicity (Patel 2023). It has grown especially quickly since the turn of this century.

This is one reason public policy is more responsive to the 'haves' than 'have-nots' (Rosset and Stecker 2019, Schakel and Van Der Pas 2021, Elsässer and Schäfer 2023, Mathisen 2023). Political inequality is at the heart of understanding most policy puzzles in British democracy. Why have we allowed housing to become so unaffordable? Why have we tolerated income and wealth inequality to rise and remain high? Why have we protected pensions but not social security for working-age people?

This has led to a widely felt but unequally spread sense that democracy-as-usual is not working. The bottom third of earners are twice as likely to think people like them have 'no say in what government does' compared to the top third (Ansell and Gingrich 2022), while renters are more than twice as likely to say 'it's not worth voting' than homeowners (Patel 2023). This kind of inequality is the underlying logic of populism, which pits 'the people' against 'an elite' to challenge not the principle of democracy but the way it is practised.

For democracy to thrive, elections need to be less tilted. This report takes a first look at who spoke in the 2024 UK general election. By linking election turnout results to demographic data from the 2021 census, we document patterns of turnout by age distribution, housing tenure, ethnic background and religion at the constituency level.² We consider the implications this might have on policy and politics in the years ahead and put forward policy recommendations to improve electoral participation.

1 We estimate 52.8 per cent of the voting age population (and 59.9 per cent of registered voters) cast a ballot at the 2024 general election. By comparison, we estimate 57.7 per cent of the voting age population (and 59.4 per cent of registered voters) cast a ballot at the 2001 general election, the only other election with comparably low turnout since the end of the first world war.

2 Reliable data at the individual level, to avoid risk of ecological fallacy, would be preferable for this analysis. Unfortunately, it is not available at the time of writing. It will not become available until the British Election Study releases its data on the 2024 election, which is not expected before September 2024. Polling data is not an accurate source of voter turnout because people who do not vote are also less likely to respond to a poll.

2.

TURNOUT PATTERNS AT THE 2024 ELECTION

Three in every five registered voters cast a ballot at the 2024 general election. This drops to down to one in every two people if we include those who are eligible but not registered to vote. It is the lowest share of the population to vote since universal suffrage.

Either way, if non-voters were a party, they would have been the largest party by some distance. Turnout at the 2024 general election was both exceptionally low and highly unequal with regard to age, housing tenure, ethnicity and county of birth.

AGE

Constituencies where a large proportion of the local population are older had a considerably higher turnout rate than those where the local population is younger (figure 2.1).

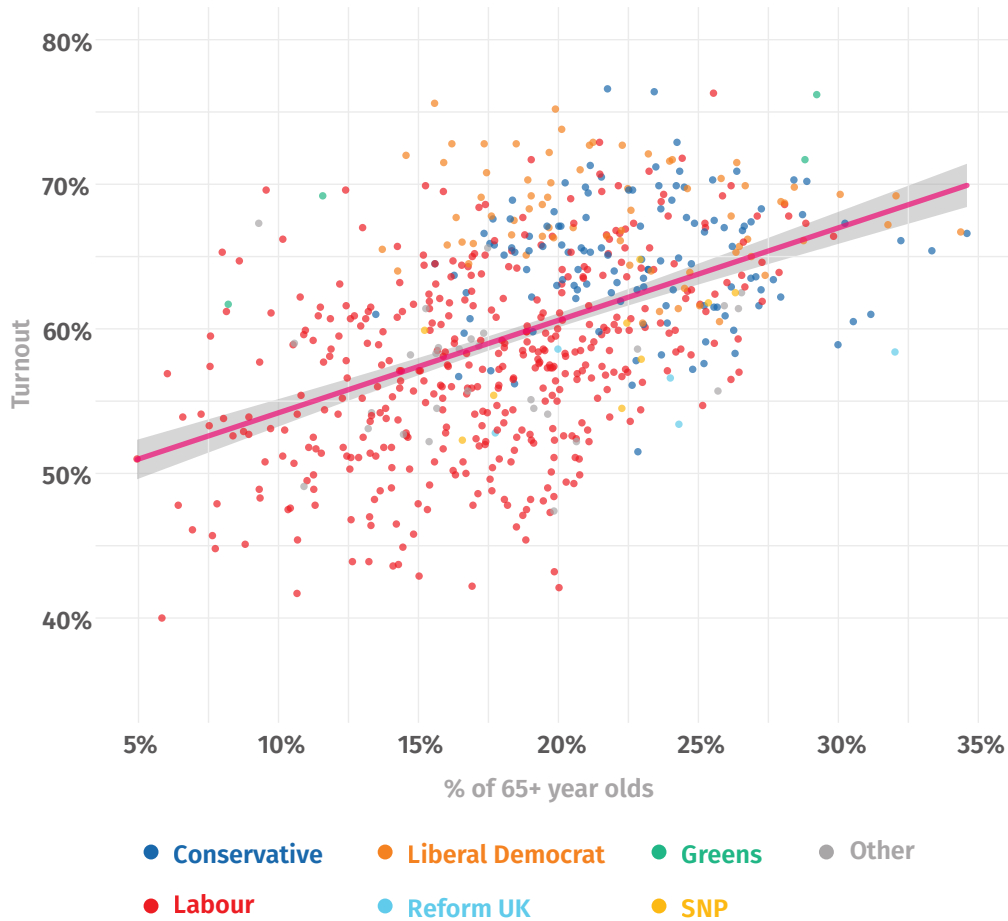
Among registered voters, the turnout rate was 64 per cent in constituencies where one-quarter of the population is over 64 years old, compared to only 54 per cent in constituencies where one-tenth of the local population is over 64 years old. Those turnout estimates fall to 60 per cent and 43 per cent if one considers the voting age population rather than the number of registered voters (figure A.1, see appendix).³

The turnout rate among registered voters was 50 per cent in constituencies where one quarter of the population is between 25 and 34 years old, compared to 63 per cent in constituencies where one-tenth of the population is within that age bracket (figure A.2, see appendix). Those turnout estimates fall to 35 per cent and 59 per cent if one considers the voting age population rather than the number of registered voters (figure A.3, see appendix).

³ We calculate the voting age population as the estimated population aged 18 years or older within a constituency. We impute this from 2021 Census data, ONS age profile distributions and ONS population growth projections between 2021 and 2024.

FIGURE 2.1

Constituencies where a large share of the population is older had a higher turnout rate
Turnout among registered voters in each constituency by percentage of voters aged 65 and over



Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

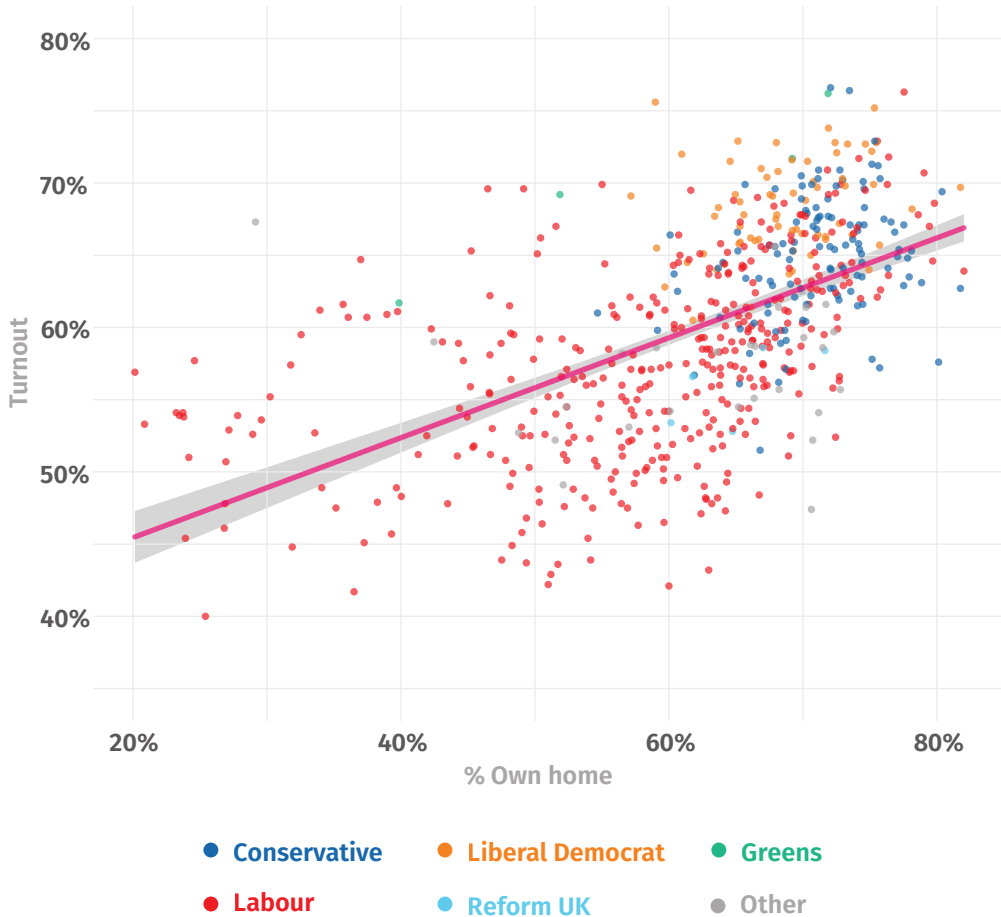
HOUSING TENURE

Constituencies with high rates of homeownership had much higher turnout rates than areas where renting is more common (figure 2.2). Turnout among registered voters was 65 per cent in constituencies where three-quarters of local residents owned their own home (out right or with a mortgage), compared to only 50 per cent in constituencies where one third of people owned their home. If we denominate over the voting age population, rather than registered voters, those turnout figures drop to 61 per cent and 37 per cent respectively (figure A.4, see appendix).

FIGURE 2.2

Constituencies where a large share of the population are homeowners had a higher turnout rate

Turnout among registered voters in each constituency by percentage of voters who own their own home



Note: Scottish constituencies are excluded because we lack relevant sociodemographic data.

Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

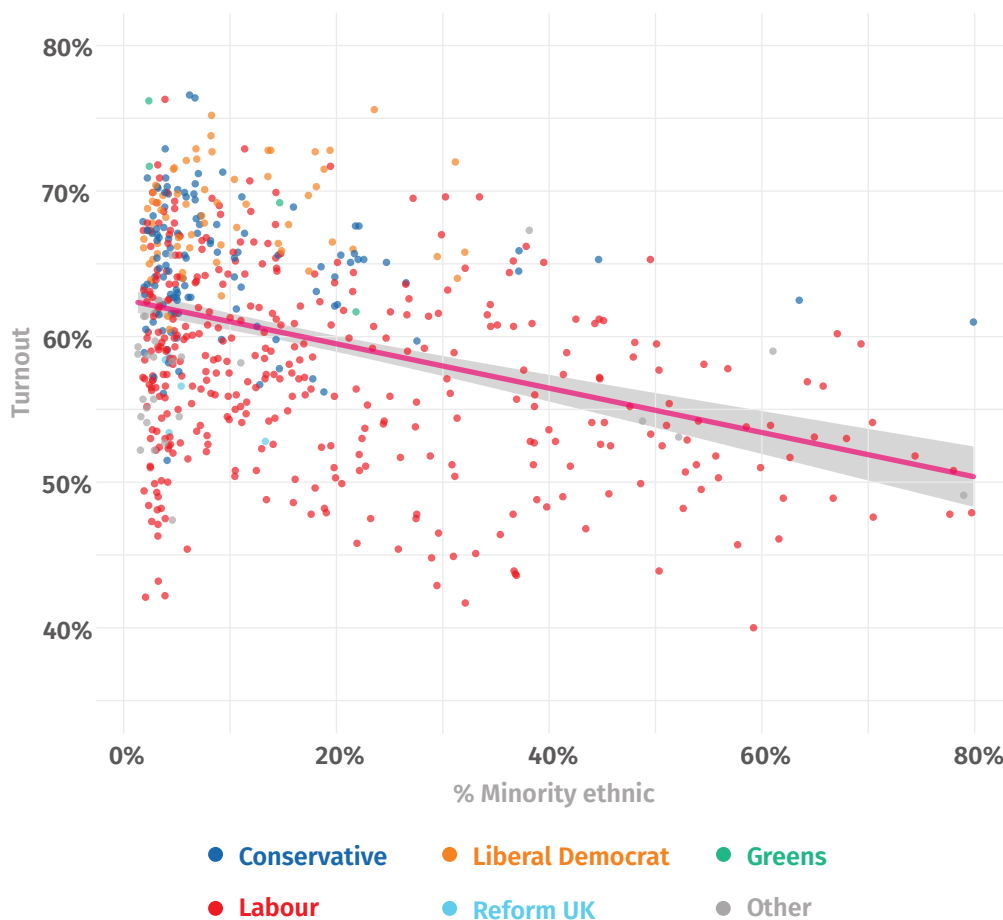
ETHNICITY

Constituencies with a high proportion of people from minority ethnic backgrounds had a lower turnout rate than areas with small minority ethnic populations (figure 2.3). Turnout among registered voters was 54 per cent in constituencies where three in every five people is from a minority ethnic background, compared to 61 per cent in constituencies where just one in ten people is from a minority ethnic background. These turnout estimates fall to 41 per cent and 57 per cent respectively if we consider turnout among the voting age population, rather than among registered voters (figure A.5, see appendix).

FIGURE 2.3

Constituencies where a large share of the population are from minority ethnic backgrounds had a lower turnout rate

Turnout among registered voters in each constituency by percentage of ethnic minority voters



Note: Scottish constituencies are excluded because we lack relevant sociodemographic data.

Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

RELIGIOUS FAITH

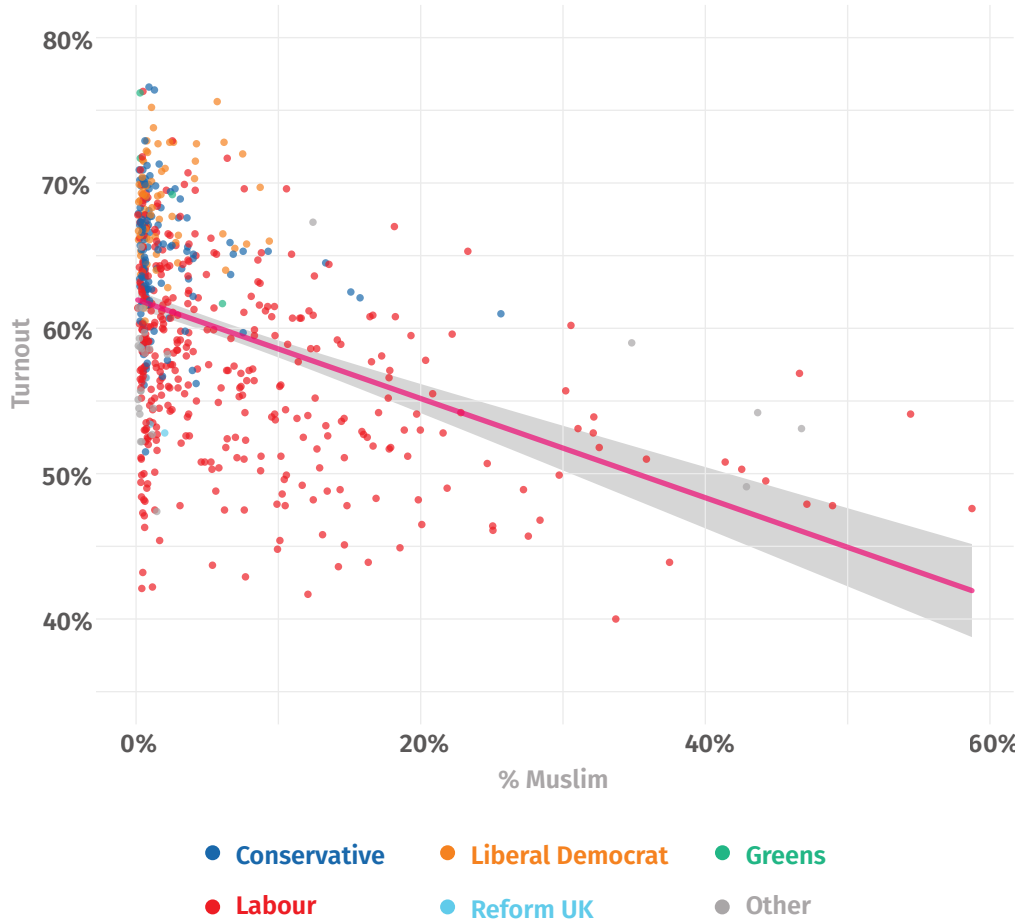
The Israel-Gaza war was an especially salient issue in the 2024 general election that fell along religious lines. To that end, it seems appropriate to analyse turnout patterns by religious faith, particular by the proportion of the local population that is Muslim.⁴

Constituencies with a high proportion of people who self-define as Muslims had a lower turnout rate than areas where the Muslim population is small (figure 2.4). Turnout among registered voters was 51 per cent in constituencies where one-third of the population is Muslim, compared to 61 per cent in places where one in 50 people are Muslim. These turnout estimates fall to 39 per cent and 55 per cent respectively if we consider turnout among the voting age population, rather than among registered voters (figure A.6, see appendix).

⁴ The Jewish population of the UK is too small for us to be able to make any reliable conclusions of the relationship between turnout and being Jewish.

FIGURE 2.4

Constituencies where a large share of the population are Muslim had a lower turnout rate
Turnout among registered voters in each constituency by percentage people who are Muslim



Note: Scottish constituencies are excluded because we lack relevant sociodemographic data.

Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

SUMMARY

Constituencies where a large share of the population are older people, wealthy homeowners and white had much higher turnout rates than constituencies where a smaller share of people come from those communities. Table 2.1 summarises the turnout rates for the top and bottom decile of constituencies by age, homeownership, ethnicity and religious faith.

TABLE 2.1**Voter turnout rates at the constituency level by the sociodemographic distribution of the local population**

	Turnout among registered voters			Turnout among voting age population		
	Top decile	Bottom decile	Turnout gap	Top decile	Bottom decile	Turnout gap
Over 64	65	54	11	61	43	18
Homeowners	67	54	13	63	42	21
Ethnic minorities	54	61	7	43	57	14
Muslim	53	63	10	43	59	16

Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

3.

TWO DEMOCRATIC FUTURES

There are two democratic futures for the UK. The low road promises to deepen inequality between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Policy bias is exacerbated and entrenched by the hardening of unequal voting patterns. Governments cater to the needs and preferences of older and wealthier citizens better than the those of young, poor and minority ethnic communities. The negative spiral between politics and policy gives out an occasional populist roar, where many of those who do not usually turn up to vote are mobilised to support a radical populist challenger.

The high road is a more politically equal country. Policy is more equally responsive to the different communities in this country, young or old, rich or poor, white or black. Populism is contained because people sense they have influence in the collect decision-making endeavour that is democracy. They are authors of their own lives. In this future, threats to the 'rule of law' are avoided because we have better realised the 'rule of people'. Higher and more equal turnout at elections is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for this kind of Britain.

The new government has the chance to choose the future. It should choose change; it should redirect us to the high road. If we miss this exit, the negative spiral between political participation and policy responsiveness will spin around again. Each time it does, it becomes harder to break out of.

As a first step, the government should introduce a **modernising elections bill**. It should do so as a legislative priority, with a public commitment to legislate in the 2024 King's Speech. This bill should introduce policies and electoral reforms that aim to raise turnout and reduce inequalities at elections.

There are four approaches policymakers should consider.

- 1. Make the process of participation in elections easier.**
We should take down the barriers to electoral registration before election day, and barriers to arriving at the ballot box on election day.
- 2. Make the process of participation in elections more worthwhile.**
We should ensure there is a perceived 'return on voting' by increasing the influence of voters relative to other actors (eg donors) on political parties.
- 3. Modernise the eligibility criteria for who can participate in elections.**
We should enfranchise more working-age taxpayers living in the UK long-term who do not currently have a right to vote.
- 4. Cultivate norms of participating in elections.**
We should foster a stronger culture of democratic participation using the institutions of the state.

Within this policy framework are several options. Forthcoming work from IPPR will analyse the strengths and drawbacks of various policies and reforms, including implementation and delivery challenges and international comparisons. We will recommend a selection of reforms that make coherent sense as a package to be passed in a modernising elections bill.

Automatic or assisted voter registration is sure to be one of these. It is a rare kind of reform: high-impact and quick-acting. The analysis in this report illustrates the incredible extent to which the turnout gap yawns when we consider turnout in the voting age population rather than the registered voter population (table 2.1). Automatic or assisted voter registration would narrow them. The UK is an outlier in its laissez-faire approach to voter registration; automatic or assisted voter registration is the normal way to register voters in most liberal democracies (including Wales).

The government should use the modernising elections bill as an opportunity to deliver two commitments it made in its political manifesto. Extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds will have only a small impact on turnout at the next election but a considerable impact in the long run. When the UK passed the Representation of the People Act, it became the first democracy in the World to allow 18 years old to vote in all elections, and many other countries came to follow suit (Loughran et al 2021). It should now amend that Act to extend the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds, following a precedent set already in Wales and Scotland, where evidence suggests voting earlier in the life-course is cultivating a habit of voting among new generations (Eichhorn and Hübner 2023).

The commitment to ‘strengthen the rules around donations to political parties’ in the Labour party’s manifesto in 2024 should also be operationalised through the modernising elections bill. This could include new restrictions on who can donate to political parties to reduce risks of corruption (eg block public contractors donating) and risk of foreign interference (eg block unincorporated associations donating). More ambitiously, the government should consider introducing annual caps on political donors and/or reducing the election spending limit; this will have diffuse benefits on British democracy by reducing the influence of money in politics writ large. Stronger rules only matter as far as they can be enforced. To that end, strengthening the Electoral Commission by re-establishing its independence and granting it new powers should also be considered. Forthcoming work from IPPR will examine each of these proposals (and more) and make recommendations on how the government can increase the ‘return on voting’ relative to the ‘return on donating’.

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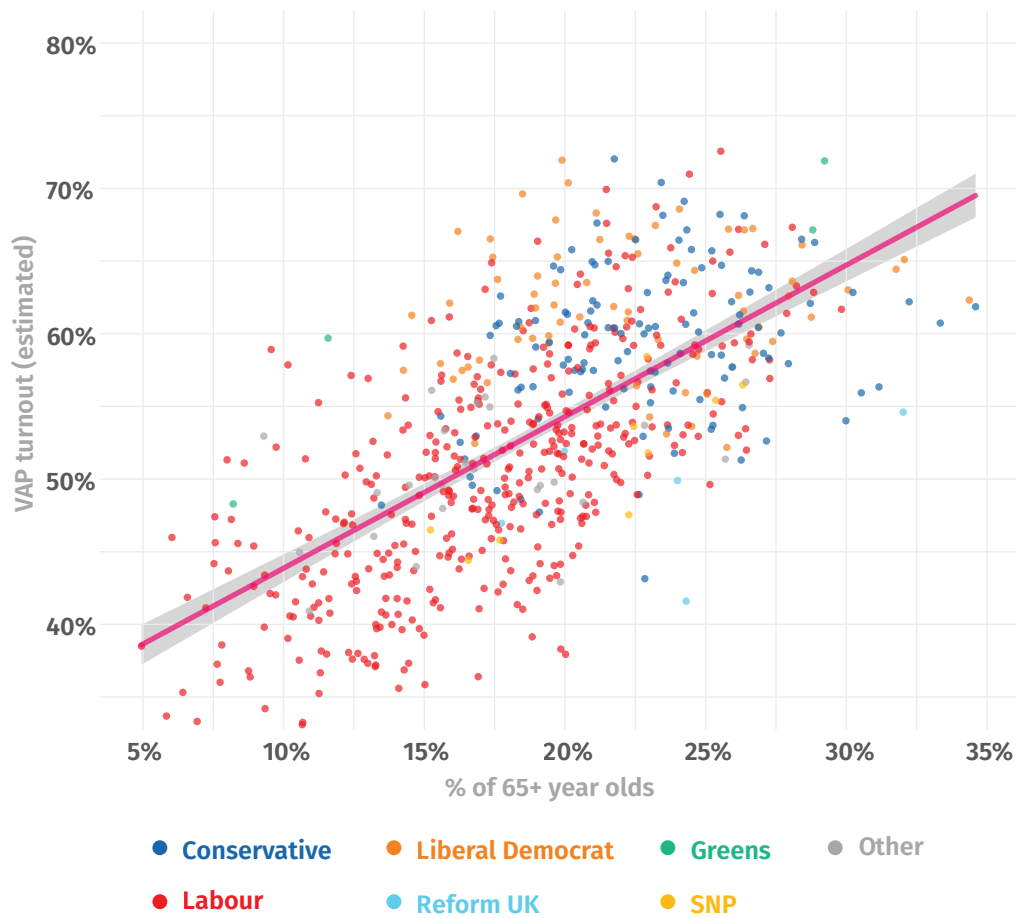
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APPENDIX

FIGURE A.1

Turnout was higher among constituencies where a large share of the population is 65 and over

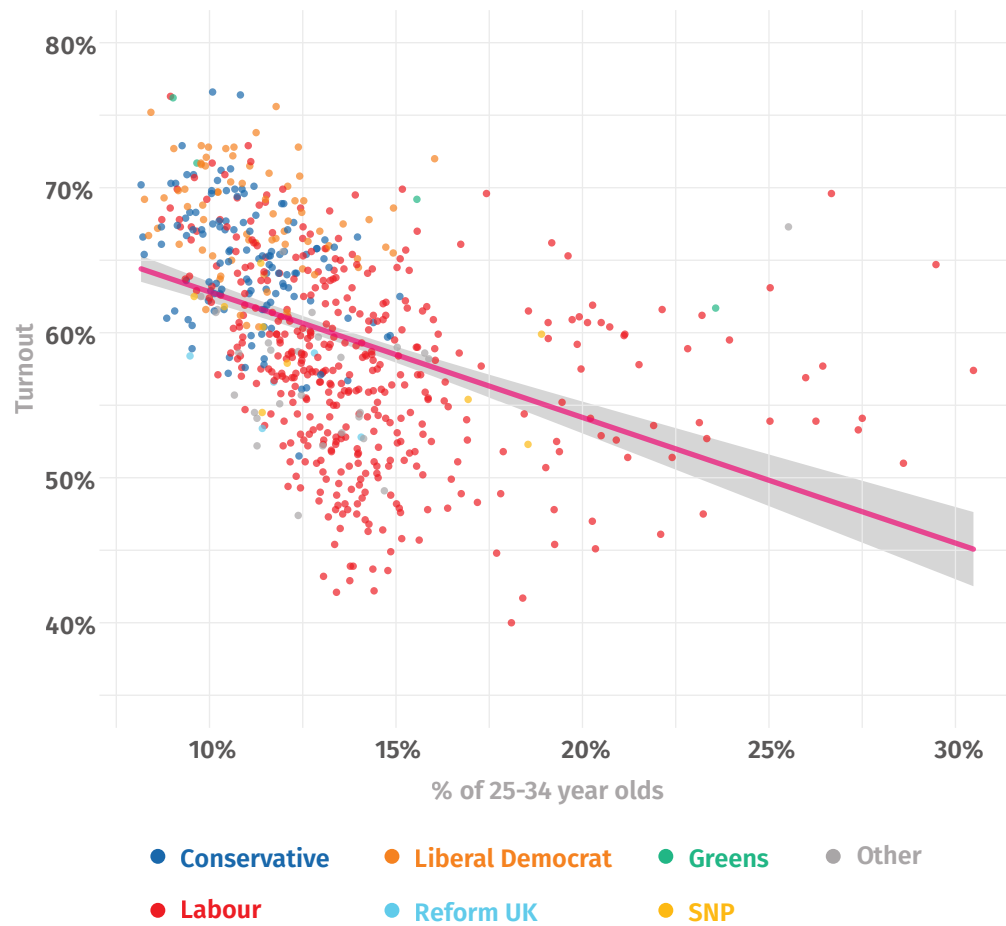
Turnout among voting age population in each constituency by percentage of voters aged 65 and over



Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

FIGURE A.2

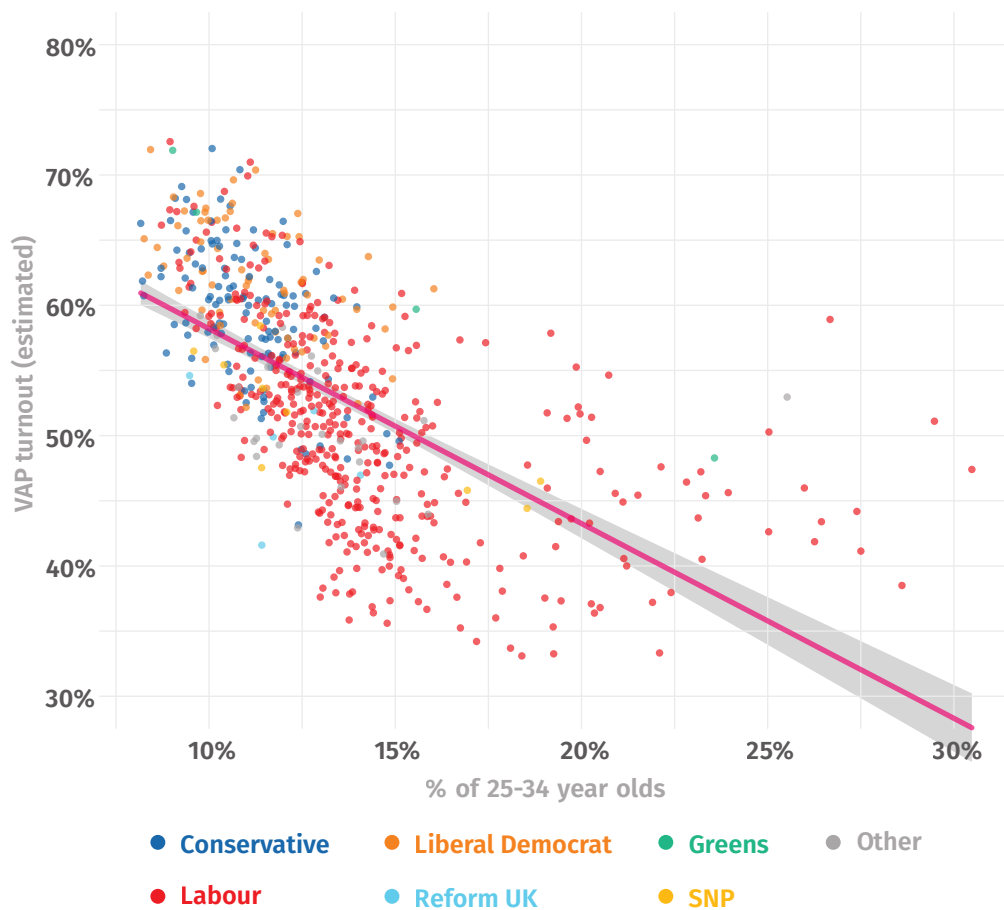
Turnout was lower in constituencies where a large share of the population is aged 25–34
Turnout among registered voters in each constituency by percentage of voters aged between 25–34



Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

FIGURE A.3

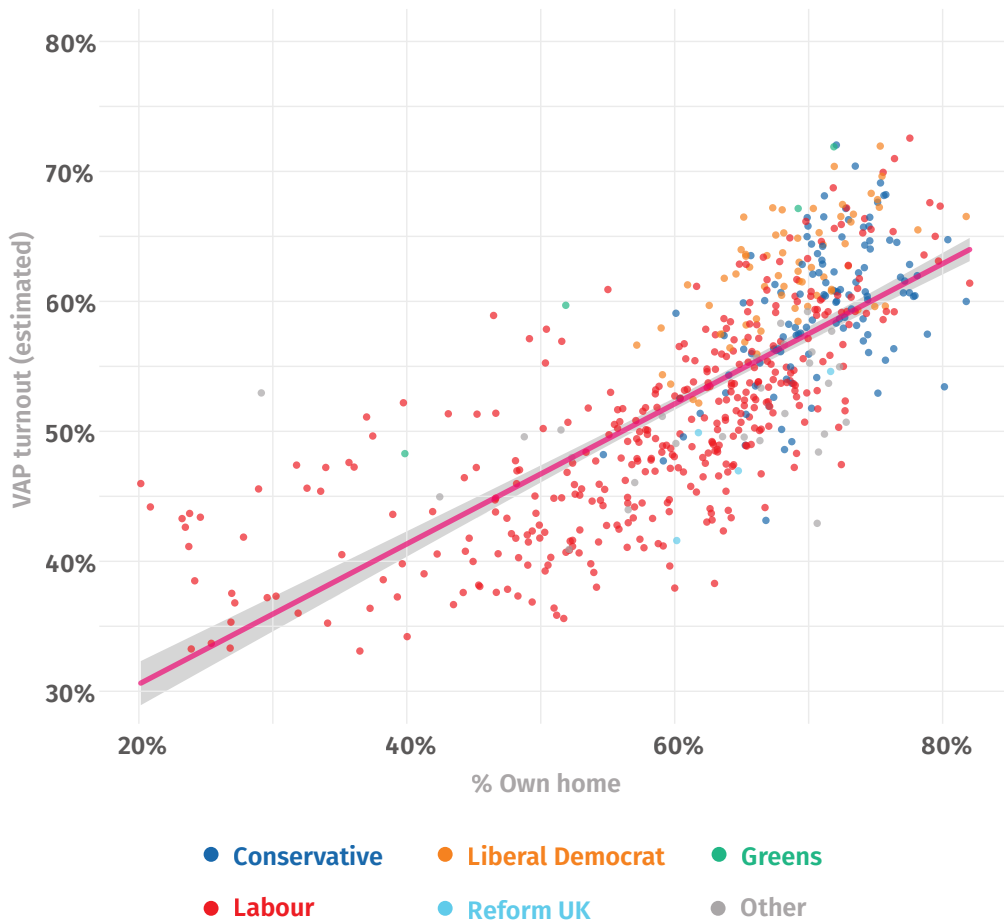
Turnout was lower in constituencies where a large share of the population is aged 25–34
Turnout among voting age population in each constituency by percentage of voters aged between 25–34



Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

FIGURE A.4

Turnout was higher in constituencies where a large share of the population are homeowners
Turnout among voting age population in each constituency by percentage of voters who own their own home



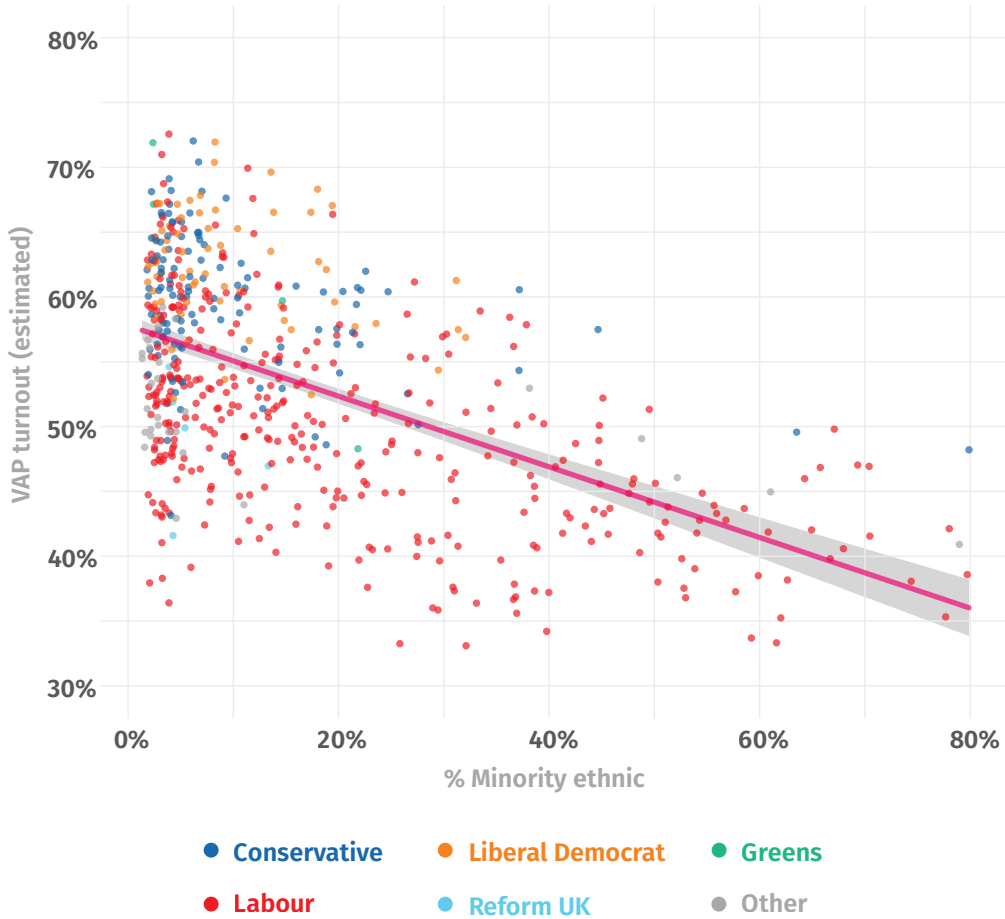
Note: Scottish constituencies are excluded because we lack relevant sociodemographic data.

Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

FIGURE A.5

Turnout was lower in constituencies where a large share of population are from minority ethnic backgrounds

Turnout among voting age population in each constituency by percentage of voters from a minority ethnic background

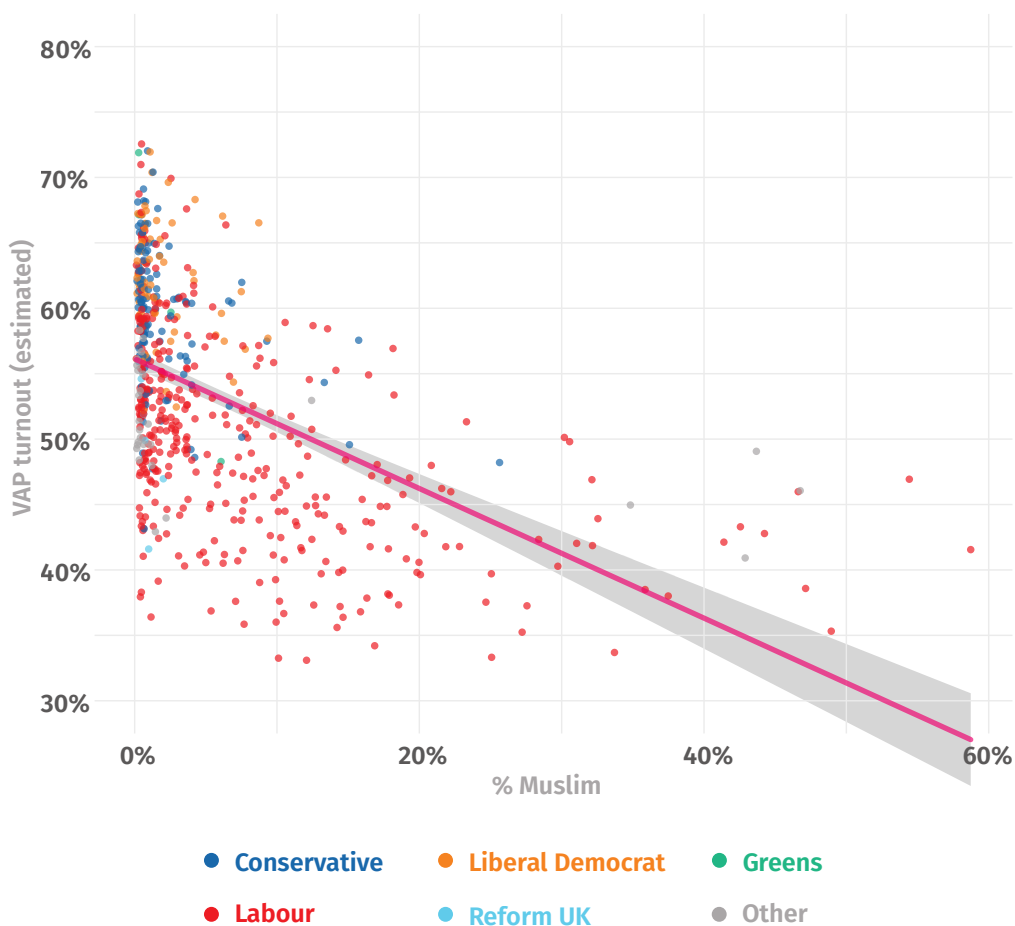


Note: Scottish constituencies are excluded because we lack relevant sociodemographic data.

Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)

FIGURE A.6

Turnout was lower in constituencies where a large share of the population is Muslim
Turnout among voting age population in each constituency by percentage of voters who are Muslim



Note: Scottish constituencies are excluded because we lack relevant sociodemographic data.

Source: Authors' analysis of House of Commons Library (2024a, 2024b), BBC (2024) and ONS (2023, 2024)



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