

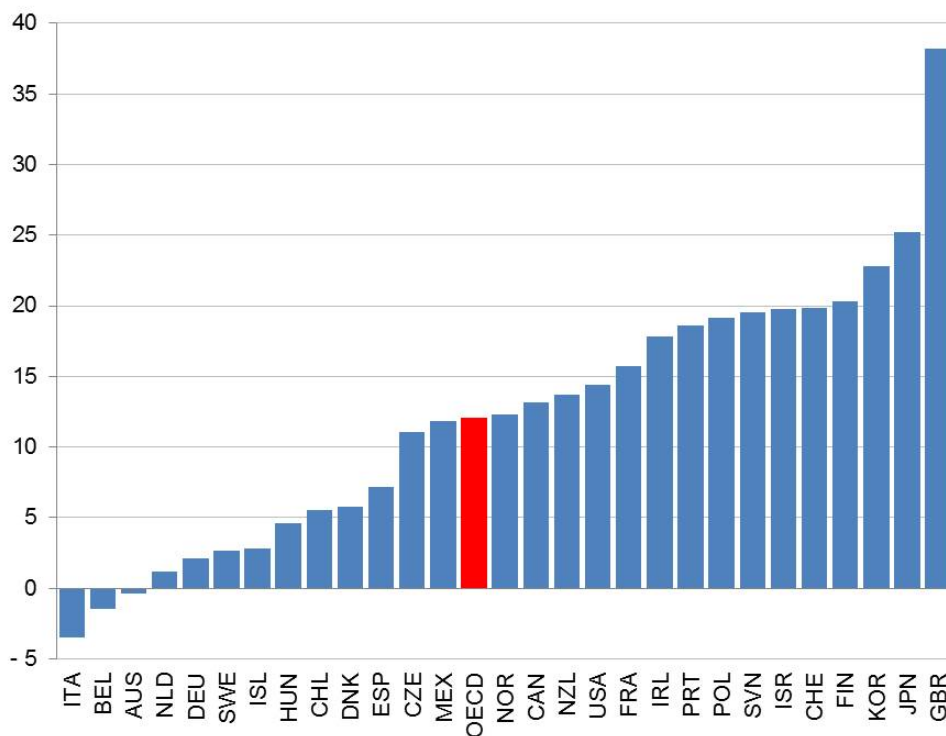
Highly educated young people are less likely to vote than older people with much lower levels of attainment

By Democratic Audit

Older people are more likely to vote and highly educated people are more likely to vote: these are electoral phenomena common in advanced democracies across the world. The UK stands out from its counterparts in some ways: we have a much wider gap in turnout between young and old, while the gap in turnout based on education is either much smaller or non-existent. **Richard Berry** and **Anthony McDonnell** investigate these trends, highlighting findings from the 2011 census, British Election Study and OECD data on voting patterns.

The low levels of electoral participation by young people – as discussed by [Izzy Westbury](#) recently on Democratic Audit – is a growing concern for UK democracy. According to [OECD data](#), based on post-election surveys, the gap in turnout between older and younger voters is significantly higher in the UK than in any other advanced democracy – at 38 percentage points. See Figure One below.

Figure One: Difference in voting rates between those 55+ years old and those 16-35 years old (percentage points), most recent general election



Source: [Society at a Glance 2011](#), OECD, 2011

The UK findings are supported by the British Election Study, based on pre- and post-election surveys with voters and non-voters. Table One shows turnout at the 2010 general election.

Table One: Turnout by age group, 2010 UK general election

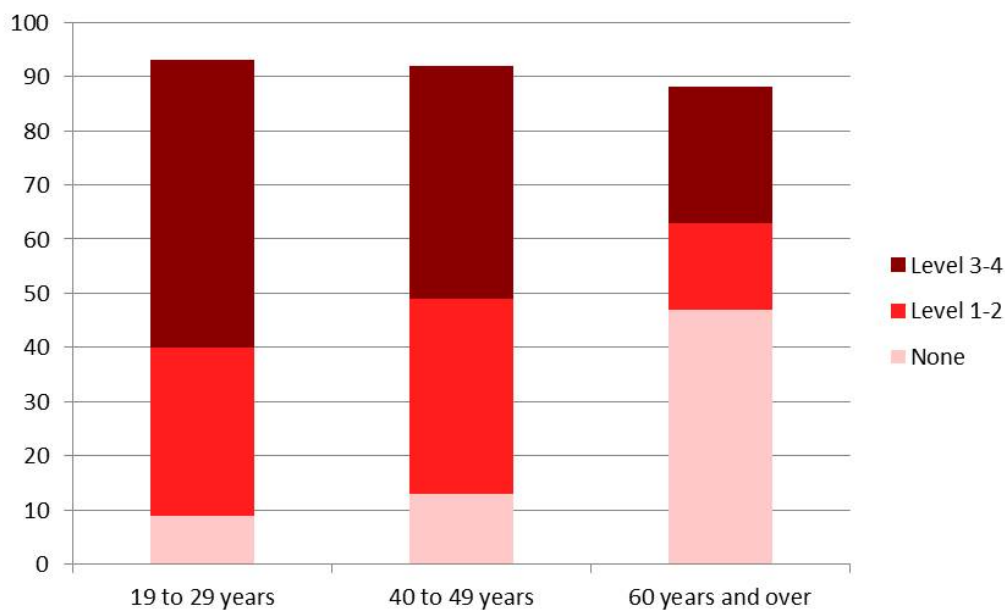
Age group	Turnout
18-25	62%
26-35	68%

36-45	75%
46-55	82%
56-65	82%
65+	89%

Source: [British Election Study](#), 2010

It might be reasonable to expect the opposite relationship between age and turnout. Electoral participation is strongly correlated with education in most countries – the higher your level of educational attainment, the more likely you are to vote. And in the UK, younger people are more likely to be highly educated, as shown by Census data.

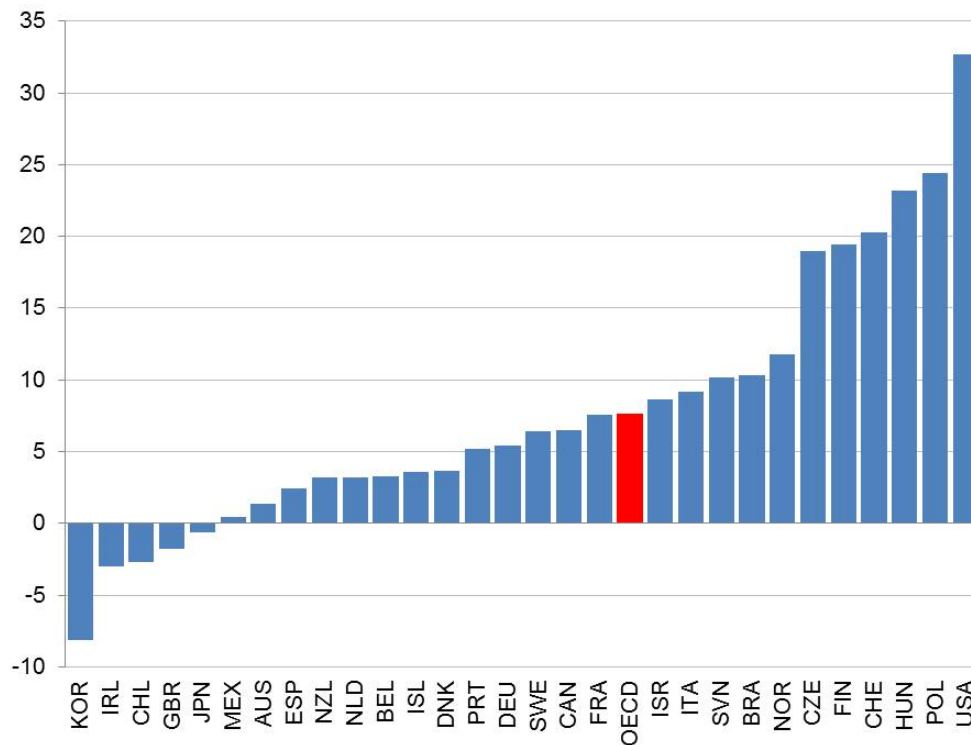
Figure Two: Highest level of educational attainment by selected age groups, England and Wales (%)



Source: [Census 2011](#), Office for National Statistics. Other qualifications and apprenticeships are excluded. Levels 1-2 = GCSE; Levels 3-4 = A-Level/Degree

According to the OECD, however, Britain is one of only a handful of advanced democracies where those with degree-level education are less likely to vote than those with only a secondary education (by 1.8 percentage points). See Figure Three for the full comparison.

Figure Three: Difference in voting rates between 'high' and 'low' educated people (percentage points)



Source: [Society at a Glance 2011](#), OECD, 2011. 'High' indicates university education; 'low' indicates secondary education or lower.

The British Election Study results are less clear-cut on the education effect in the UK, although they also support the view that education has less impact on voting than age does. See Table Two.

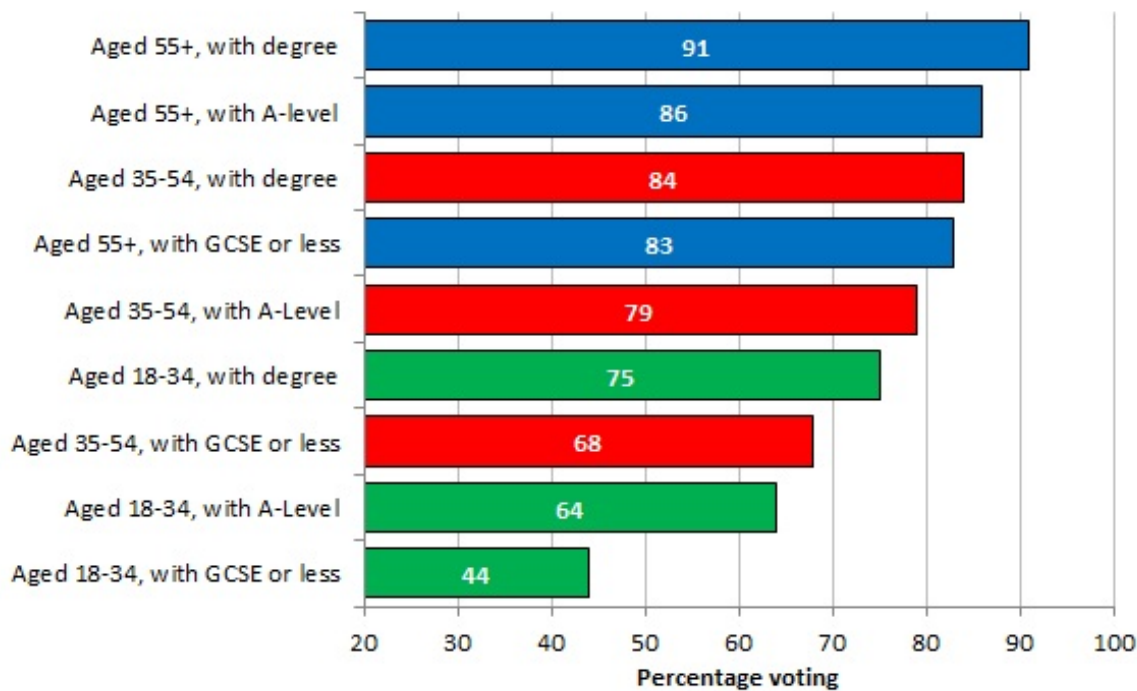
Table Two: Turnout by highest level of educational attainment, 2010 UK general election

Highest level of attainment	Turnout
Lower than GCSE or equivalent	68%
GCSE or equivalent	75%
A-Level or equivalent	74%
Degree	81%

Source: [British Election Study](#), 2010

When we cross-tabulate the age and education results from the British Election Study, the analysis reveals that within age group, more highly educated people are more likely to vote. However, young people of any educational background are less likely to vote than older people. For instance, while 75% of 18-34 year olds with a degree voted in 2010, this was less than the 83% of over 55s with a secondary education or less who voted. See Figure Four.

Figure Four: Turnout in 2010 UK general election by age group and highest level of educational attainment



Source: Democratic Audit analysis of [British Election Study](#), 2010. Includes equivalent qualifications.

Knee-jerk reactions to low turnout among young people need to be avoided. Some may look at the figures presented above and conclude that Australia's system of compulsory voting is the answer – after all, the country has 95% turnout and no gap between young and old. However, it is possible this solution only masks the problem, rather than solving it. It may even backfire - compulsion would increase turnout, certainly, but what impression would it leave in the mind of a young person, and how would it affect the way they participate between elections?

We need to remember that low turnout among young people is not just a 'young people problem'. It is also evidence of wider problems within our political system, which would discourage a person of any age from voting. But there may well be reforms that can be tailored particularly for young people that help support their participation: for instance, better provision of [online election information](#), which may suit people that are highly mobile in geographical terms, and accustomed to using the internet in many aspects of their lives.

Britain's older generations have clearly picked up the voting habit at a time when political, economic, even technological circumstances were very different. We have some searching questions to answer before we can expect young people to do the same in large numbers.

The authors are grateful to Professor Jane Green of the University of Manchester for her support in the analysis of British Election Study data. OECD data is derived from: [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#) (International IDEA), Module 2 and 3 of the [Comparative Study of Electoral Systems](#) (CSES)

Note: This post represents the views of the author, not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting. Shortlink for this post: buff.ly/1gq1z5f

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