

The latest Commons Political Reform Committee report illustrates popular opinion on voter engagement measures

By Democratic Audit UK

*The House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee recently released [a new report](#) evaluating a range of ideas to increase political engagement and to stem the tide of apathy towards democracy. Democratic Audit's **Carl Cullinane** runs the rule over the report, assessing its recommendations and findings on voting, registration and voter information.*

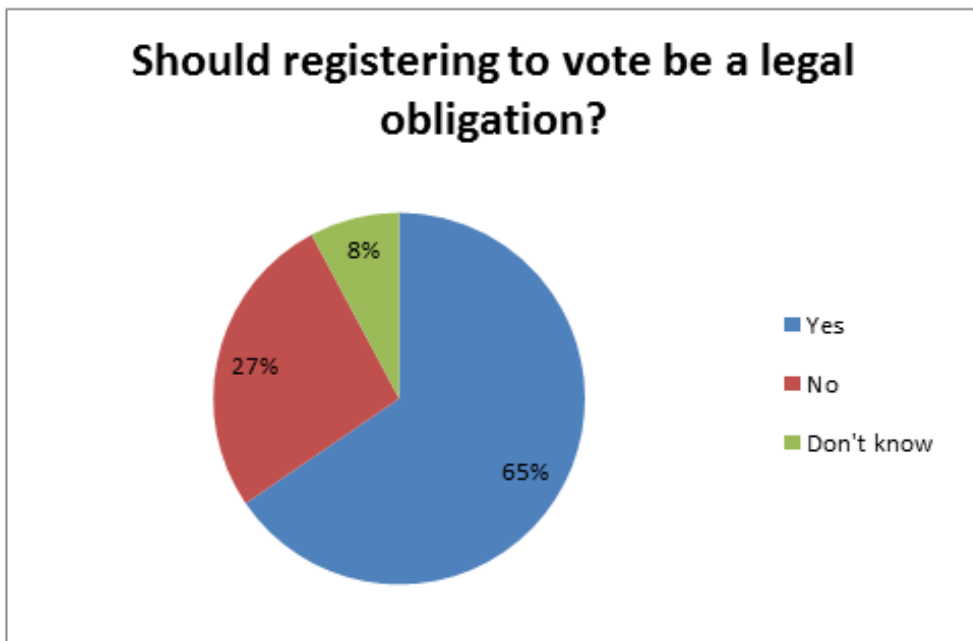


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Earlier this month, the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee published their follow up report on Voter Engagement in the UK. It includes feedback from a consultation period with stakeholders in the area of political reform, along with some interesting survey results from online polling by several organisations as part of the consultation process. While the Report acknowledges that a major source of voter disengagement is the wider issue of disillusionment with politics in the UK, it concludes with a series of policies recommended consideration in order to reduce barriers to electoral participation and increase engagement. These recommendations fall into three broad categories, those aimed at voter registration, those aimed at election day turnout, and those aimed at increased engagement generally.

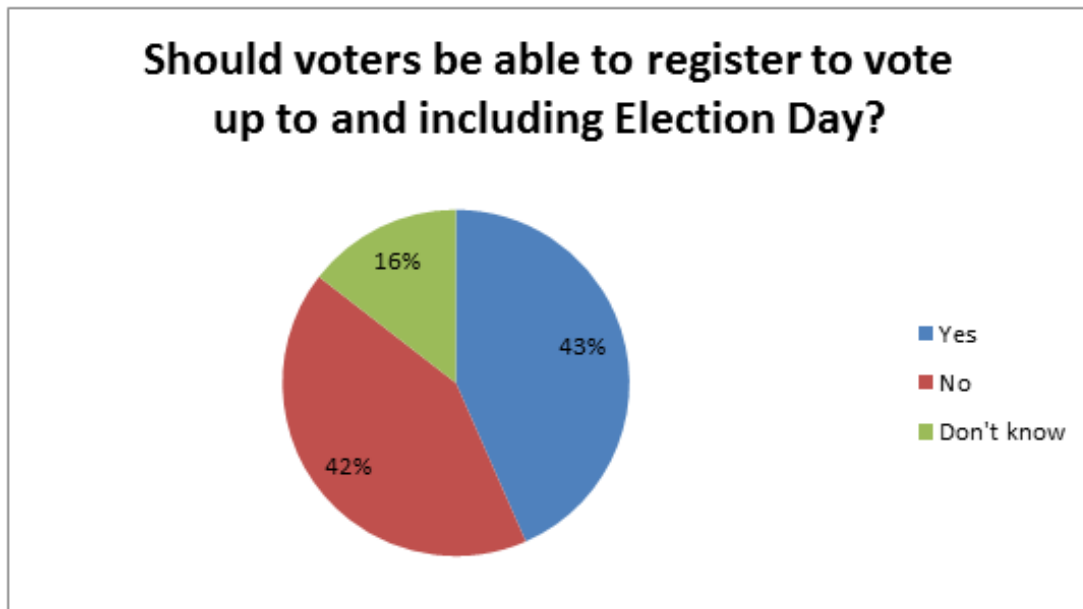
Voter Registration

The recent move to Individual Electoral Registration (IER) has led to well publicised concerns about the completeness of the register and potential for disenfranchisement at the polling booth. The Committee calls, as a matter of urgency, for the money already allocated to be spent on raising awareness of the new arrangements in order to ensure the current shortfall in the register is made up. It also recommends consideration of an extension of transitional arrangements to make sure that once the full switch to individual registration is complete, no-one has fallen through the gaps.



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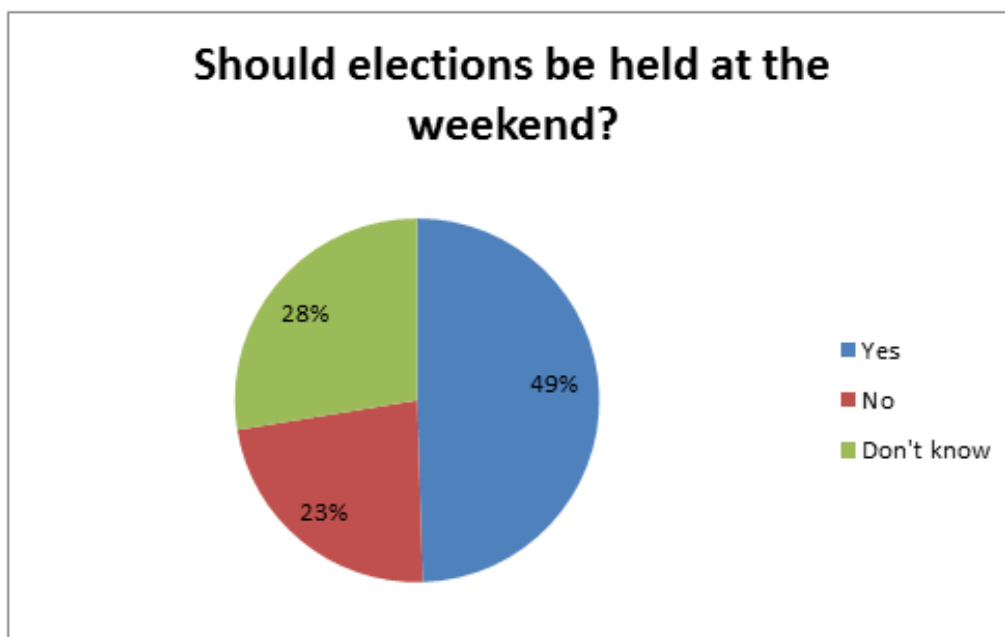
Looking beyond May 2015, the Report evaluates several options for increasing voter registration. Firstly, that registration be made compulsory. While this was a popular measure among respondents to the consultation, with 65% of the circa 16,000 polled in favour, there are practical barriers to this in terms of enactment and enforcement. Less radical alternatives are also posited, including prompting citizens to join the electoral register whenever they use a variety of public services, such as health services, utilities or the Deposit Protection Service. The Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators are both strongly in favour of taking advantage of this to “increase the accuracy and completeness” of the electoral register.



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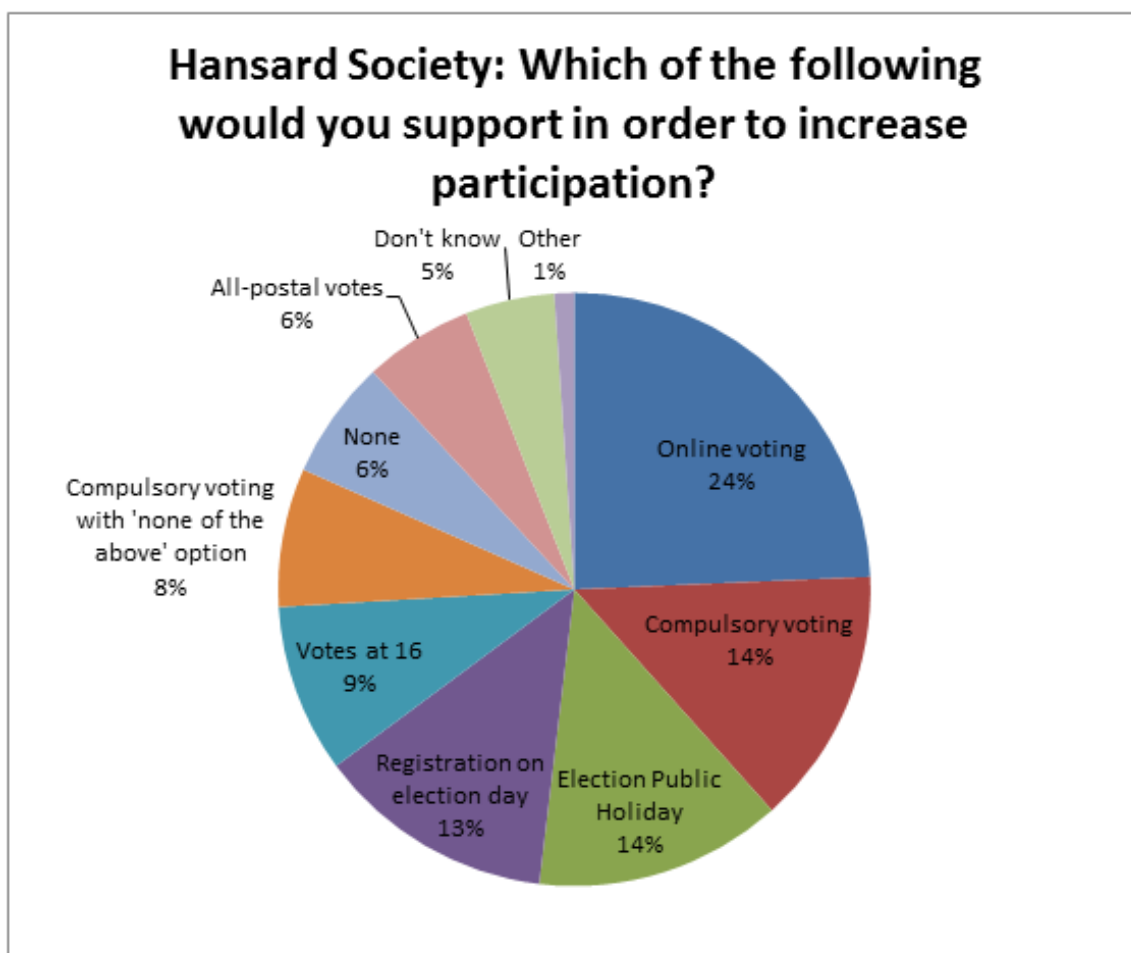
A second main strand of this area is the timing of [electoral registration](#). For the forthcoming election, the deadline for registration will be April 20th, 14 working days before the election. Given the new online system, registration could potentially be extended up to, and possibly including, the election day itself. Proponents argue that this would minimise barriers to voting, by ensuring those energised and engaged by the final days of the campaign will be able to vote. Opponents however warn of the potential for increased fraud on election day. These divisions were reflected in a mixed popular response to Election Day registration, with respondents almost equally split.

Voter Turnout



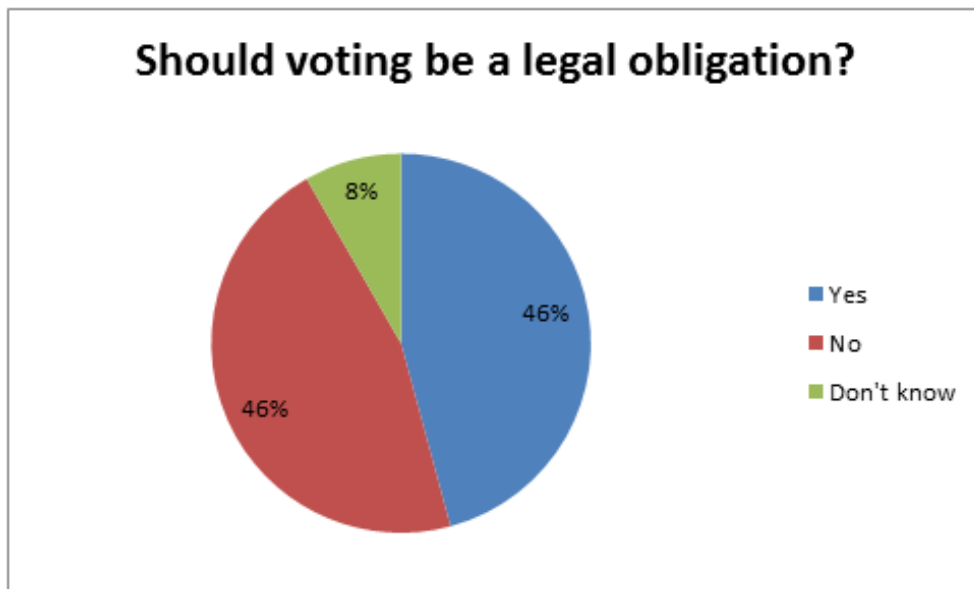
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Several options were proposed by the Committee for consideration in order to increase electoral turnout. Timing of Election Day was a significant one. While opinion among survey respondents was strongly against making polling day a public holiday, 49.5% were in favour of holding elections at the weekend, in order to allow a broader range of people more time to visit the polling booth. Stakeholders and government both warn of the [potential logistical difficulties](#) for staff and facilities hire at the weekend, though the experience of other European countries shows these difficulties are not insurmountable.



n=1123

A more radical proposal, allowing [voters to cast their ballot online](#) found much support, and was supported by almost 60% of respondents in the consultation surveys. It was also by a distance the most popular of a range of measures in a nationally representative survey conducted by the Hansard Society. While concerns remain about ballot secrecy, fraud, high costs and the potential for technical problems, allied with [evidence that suggests minimal impact on turnout](#), voting online is a clear popular choice among respondents to the committee consultation.



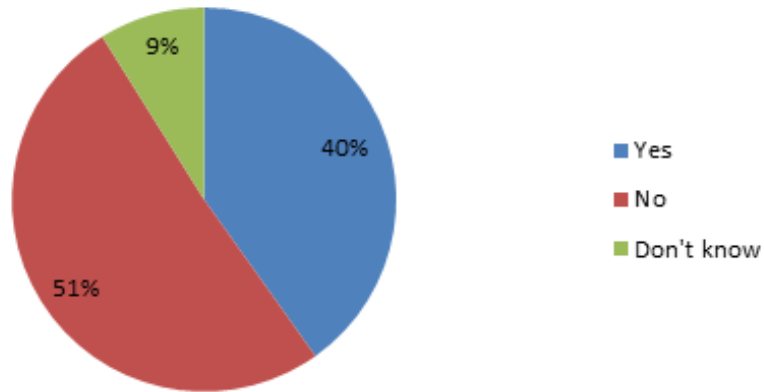
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A third, and equally significant measure would be making voting a legal obligation, a proposal that remains divisive. While 65% were in favour of making registration compulsory, only 46% were in favour of making [voting itself compulsory](#), with respondents and the Committee itself split down the middle on the issue. The Report nonetheless recommends a Government consultation early in the next Parliament on the ideas of voting and civic duty, a debate which in itself could serve to benefit voter engagement.

General Voter Engagement

The Report calls for better provision of voter information, including [better information on candidates](#), better information on election results, and improved public awareness of registration and elections. While they call for centralised and independent provision of such information and promotion, in the meantime, third sector bodies have moved to fill the gap, including a swathe of Voter Advice Applications (VAA's) from [Bite the Ballot](#) to [VoteMatch](#). With the Committee Report, and the [Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy](#) both calling for improved provision of election information, Democratic Audit ourselves are developing the [Democratic Dashboard](#), a 'results bank' of locally-focused constituency information and statistics to fill that information gap.

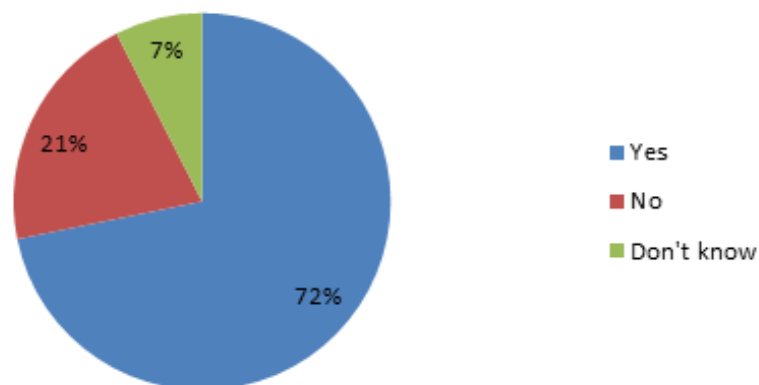
Should 16 and 17 year olds be able to vote in elections?



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Since the Scottish Independence Referendum, reducing the [voting age to 16](#) has gained currency among proponents of electoral reform. The Report cites [research from the Electoral Commission](#) indicating that both registration and turnout among 16/17 year olds was high in the September referendum, with an estimated 75% turnout, in comparison to 54% among 18-24 year olds. This gap emphasises some of the main arguments of those in favour of lowering the age of enfranchisement, namely that due to the fact younger people are still in school and living at home, they are more likely to be in an environment that encourages voting; and that furthermore, this early act of voting is likely to be habit-forming, increasing the likelihood of turnout into their twenties. Despite the increase in popularity of the idea, the consultation still found just over 50% of respondents against lowering the voting age to 16.

Should "None of the Above" be an option on the ballot paper?



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Of all the proposals put to the survey, the most popular is perhaps a surprising one: the inclusion of a '[None of the Above](#)' option on the ballot paper, with over 70% of respondents in favour. A [controversial measure](#), it would allow a process of 'active abstention', and enable voters engaged with political issues, but dissatisfied by the candidates and parties, to register this dissatisfaction officially. The Electoral Commission has opposed this option,

emphasising the role of elections as a choice to elect candidates to office, though proponents argue that such an opportunity to register dissatisfaction would be of benefit to both turnout and political engagement in general.

While the Committee make few concrete recommendations, particularly on measures that are divisive, its recommendation that Government take political engagement seriously and embark on a genuine consultative and potentially legislative process to improve it is a highly important one. Given the current widespread malaise with politicians and political discourse in the UK, this is unlikely to be enough on its own. The Report itself notes that the extremely high level of engagement in the Scottish Independence Referendum was in part because “the vote was one of significance... and every vote was seen to matter”. However, as we can see, there is no shortage of practical and administrative issues that also need to be addressed.

Ultimately, alongside the urgent need for the political establishment to convince people of the importance of the issues at stake in national elections, there also needs to be a process of technical reform that both reduces barriers to, and ultimately fosters, electoral engagement and participation. Using the excellent work of the Reform Committee as a springboard to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the latter would be a step in the right direction towards persuading the electorate that Westminster is interested in the former.

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Note: Consultation survey findings are the consolidated results of four online surveys conducted by the Reform Committee itself, Bite the Ballot, Unlock Democracy and 38 Degrees, at the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015. The Hansard Society survey was conducted by GfK NOP on a representative quota sample of 1123 adults in November/December 2014.

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He has worked for the Irish Ombudsman for Children, the Economic and Social Research Institute, and NatCen Social Research, joining the Democratic Audit in Summer 2014. He can be found on twitter at [@cullinanecarl](#)

