

**Written evidence submitted by Dr Elin Weston and
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Executive Summary

- The 'first past the post' electoral system has considerable adverse effects on voter engagement and turnout. Consideration should be given to reforming the electoral system to include an element of proportional representation.
- There is a lack of real choice available for voters in the present political climate, both in terms of competing political ideologies and of the type of people who enter into politics at the national level. There is an urgent need to take steps to improve diversity among the candidates selected to stand for parliamentary seats, which may lead to a Parliament that is more reflective of the society that it represents.
- A number of features and characteristics of Parliament and parliamentary processes do not encourage voter engagement, in particular Prime Minister's Questions.
- A number of steps should be taken to facilitate and improve voter engagement and turnout, including changing the rules governing voter registration, providing information for first-time voters, and expanding the opportunities to cast votes in elections.
- The most important factor in improving voter engagement and turnout in the long-term is ensuring the provision of excellent citizenship and political education in schools.

Introduction

1. Advanced Constitutional Law is an LLB module at King's College London which examines the main institutions of the UK constitution with a particular focus on contemporary issues and the desirability of and options for constitutional reform. The course is led by Professor Robert Blackburn and primarily taught by Dr Elin Weston.
2. The students currently following this course are aged between 19 and 23. They are informed and aware of current political and constitutional issues, as well as being members of an age group that is statistically less likely than other age groups to be registered to vote or to be engaged in the political process more generally. In light of this, our collective submission may be of interest to the Committee for its inquiry on Voter Engagement in the UK.
3. The following students took part in developing this submission: Filip Bakardzhiev; Emily Barber; Sean Dryden; Rachel Dosoo; Alexandra Duesbury; Vivian Oh Xiao Hui; Pavlos Kopanas; Rachel Lambert; Ho Lam Lorraine Lo; Estelle Marks; Fraser Peh; Chloe Reid; Matt Sephton; Elina Sfongali; Veronika Shleina; Samuel Shurey; Katrina Simpson; Yeon-ho Son; Poppy Thomas.

Reasons for low voter engagement and turnout

The current electoral system

4. The operation and effects of the ‘first past the post’ electoral system have considerable adverse effects on voter engagement and turnout.
5. The concept of ‘safe seats’ is a significant factor in this respect. There is a widespread perception that in many ‘safe seats’ the act of voting will make little difference to the election outcome, leading to a sense of apathy among voters, whatever their political allegiance. Indeed, the approach of political parties to campaigning in ‘safe seats’ reinforces such perceptions. Research by the Electoral Reform Society has demonstrated that campaign spending varies dramatically between constituencies:¹ spending on some of the ‘most valued’² votes in marginal seats can be up to 22 times greater than on some of the ‘least valued’³ votes in ‘safe seats’. While experience demonstrates that votes can make a difference and that outcomes can change,⁴ these factors contribute to a general sense that in many constituencies the result of the election is a foregone conclusion.
6. Further, even if smaller parties and for independent candidates sometimes achieve some electoral success, such success is unusual as the current electoral system severely disadvantages smaller parties with the effect of reducing real voter choice. The difficulty of achieving election for smaller parties or independent candidates leads to a perception that electoral outcomes are predictable and often predetermined, with the ability to form a government passing pendulum-like between the main political parties. In such circumstances the comparatively low levels of voter engagement and turnout in the UK are hardly surprising.
7. It was the strong view of the Advanced Constitutional Law group that changing the electoral system to include a more proportionate element could help to alleviate a number of these issues. Ensuring that the number of seats won in a general election was more reflective of the number of votes cast would help reinforce the idea that constituency seats should not be viewed as ‘safe’ by political parties or by the electorate. It might also help ensure that every vote was of more equal value, thus encouraging voter participation on the basis that the act of voting could directly affect the outcome of the election in all constituencies.

A lack of real choice

8. Political parties today appear to coalesce around a political ‘middle ground’, leaving voters with little meaningful choice at election time. When smaller parties do come to prominence, they tend to do so on the basis of narrow issues such as immigration, the impact of membership of the European Union, or environmental matters.⁵ Even if people supported those smaller parties on those issues, the parties were not perceived as presenting a viable wider programme for government. This lack of choice, whether in terms of competing political ideologies or as regards comprehensive policies, is likely to contribute to low voter engagement and turnout.

¹ Terry, ‘Penny for your vote? Counting the cost of an unfair electoral system’ (Electoral Reform Society, 2013)

² *ibid* 5-6

³ *ibid* 7-8

⁴ For example the election of Green Party MP Caroline Lucas in Brighton Pavilion in 2010, and the election of independent MP Richard Taylor in Wyre Forest in 2001 and 2005

⁵ Respectively the BNP, UKIP, and the Green Party

9. It was also noted that many of the candidates that stand on behalf of political parties have very similar characteristics: they are predominantly white, male, educated to university level (often having first been educated in fee-paying schools), and middle-aged. Indeed, in the current House of Commons the average age of an MP is 50, only 22% of MPs are women and only 4% of MPs identify as BAME.⁶ Although not supporting many of the arguments made by Russell Brand during his interview on *Newsnight*,⁷ many members of the Advanced Constitutional Law group were in clear agreement with the view that Parliament and the current political system favoured certain categories of person, specifically those who had not been educated at State schools, and those who had attended Oxford or Cambridge Universities. Brand summarised this view as follows: Parliament ‘is decorated exactly the same as Eton (...) exactly the same as Oxford so a certain type of people goes in there and thinks “this makes me nervous”, and another type of people go in there and think “this is how it should be”. And I think that’s got to change’.⁸
10. There is therefore an urgent need for steps to be taken to encourage a more diverse pool of candidates to stand for election to Parliament.⁹ If this in turn led to the creation of a more diverse House of Commons, the electorate may begin to feel less alienated by the institution as a whole, and instead understand the relevance of Parliament to them and to their lives. In this sense, a Parliament that more closely resembled the society that it represents could help to improve political engagement and voter turnout.

Features and characteristics of Parliament and parliamentary processes

11. Visibly improved accountability within Parliament and the political system more generally would make a major contribution to improving voter engagement in the UK.¹⁰
12. The reforms implemented following the Wright Committee report¹¹ have made a positive impact in this regard. The election of select committee Chairs by secret ballot of the whole House of Commons and of committee members by the parliamentary parties has produced select committees which appear to be more confident and assertive. This development has helped create an image of Parliament as separate from government, and more able effectively to scrutinise the executive. However, there remain serious concerns. The Advanced Constitutional Law group believed that Prime Ministers Questions – widely considered as one of the primary accountability mechanisms available to the House of Commons – was both ineffective and off-putting for the public. This flagship event in the parliamentary week is perceived as theatrical rather than effective: an event where point-scoring is prioritised at the expense of properly holding the government to account.¹²

⁶ <<http://www.parliament.uk/about/faqs/house-of-commons-faqs/members-faq-page2/>>

⁷ Interview on 23 October 2013, available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YR4CseY9pk&noredirect=1>>

⁸ *ibid* at 7:24

⁹ Relevant in this regard are Speaker’s Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), *Final Report* (2009-2010, HC 239-I) and Williams & Paun, ‘Party People’ (Institute for Government, 2011)

¹⁰ See Baroness Shephard in Webb, ‘Democracy and political parties’ (Hansard Society, 2007) 29-31

¹¹ House of Commons Reform Committee, *Rebuilding the House* (2008-09, HC 1117)

¹² For example BBC News, ‘Prime Minister’s Questions “hits politics’ reputation”’, 23 February 2014

13. The expenses scandal continues to produce adverse effects in terms of the public's perception of politicians and the political process as a whole. This was perhaps illustrated by the reaction to the recent IPSA proposal to increase MPs' salaries.¹³ This is a significant issue when considering voter engagement. Although public hostility to any increase in MPs' pay is understandable, this question affects the pool of people who enter into politics at the national level. The salary available to MPs may be a factor that encourages people – particularly younger people - to instead consider entering more lucrative careers, or may favour those people who are already wealthy – which may well mean older people who have already had a successful career outside Parliament. As discussed above, this situation does little to improve the diversity in Parliament that is a necessary element of improving voter engagement in the UK.

Improving voter engagement and turnout

14. Among younger people, the major issue relevant to voter engagement and turnout is not political apathy per se, but instead apathy towards the current, traditional methods of political participation. Although membership of political parties may be in decline, other established organisations have increased their membership in recent years: for example, membership of the *National Trust* reached four million for the first time in 2011.¹⁴ Further, campaigning organisation *38 Degrees* currently claims to have 1.7 million members¹⁵ and involvement in movements such as *Occupy*¹⁶ and *UK Uncut*¹⁷ demonstrates that political engagement – albeit in a less traditional form – is thriving in the UK. The issue therefore is how to encourage greater voter engagement and voter turnout within the established political system.

Making the established system for voter engagement more accessible

15. Improving voter registration was identified having the potential to contribute to increasing voter engagement and turnout. New technologies and the widespread use of the internet may mean that the residence requirements for voter registration could be eased, if not removed entirely. This could help to raise the level of voter registration among a wide range of groups within society, including: students; younger people who may move to larger towns or cities and move frequently during their first years in those places; people in temporary accommodation; travelling communities. Allowing registration at a polling station on the day of the election was also strongly supported. The basis for these suggestions is the clear view that all reasonable steps should be taken to

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26311315>>

¹³ For example BBC News, 'MPs' 11% pay rise defended by salaries watchdog', 12 December 2013

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-25344188>>

¹⁴ McGuinness, 'Membership of UK political parties' (House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/SG/5125, 3 December 2012)

¹⁵ <<http://www.38degrees.org.uk/pages/members/>>

¹⁶ <<http://occupylondon.org.uk/>>

¹⁷ <<http://www.ukuncut.org.uk/>>

facilitate voting for as many people as possible, and that individuals who would otherwise vote should not be penalised for failing to register within certain periods of time.

16. A further measure to encourage voter turnout would be the provision of information for first-time voters, whatever their age. This should include straightforward, practical information on matters relating to voting, including: the fact that electors receive a polling card prior to the election and that they should take that polling card with them when they go to vote; the location of the polling station; what the ballot paper looks like and how votes are cast. It would also be advisable to inform electors of the date of the election in advance. While such information may seem obvious to people who vote regularly or are already engaged in the political process in some way, improving and making more accessible the information available for first time voters could encourage voting and thereby improve turnout.
17. Expanding the ways that votes may be cast should also be explored, so as to facilitate voting for as many people as possible. Until secure online voting can be developed and implemented, there were a number of other options that could make a valuable difference. There was support for increasing the number of days that polling stations are open, to include at least one weekend day, as well as allowing voters to cast their vote at any polling station within the constituency, rather than requiring attendance at a specific site. A further option would be to permit voting in advance, perhaps at a town hall or other central point within a constituency.¹⁸ Finally, consideration should be given to ensure that polling stations are sited in 'neutral' buildings: a wider range of people may feel more comfortable and confident accessing spaces such as sports or community centres, or even supermarkets, rather than the religious or educational institutions that often host polling stations.

The overriding need for adequate political education

18. The Advanced Constitutional Law group was unanimous in its view that the most important measure that could significantly and meaningfully improve voter engagement in the long-term is the provision of adequate political education for all young people.
19. Until September 2013, the national curriculum for citizenship in England stated that 'Pupils learn about their rights, responsibilities, duties and freedoms and about laws, justice and democracy'.¹⁹ While there will be many examples of excellent practice in relation to the teaching of citizenship in schools, the experience of the members of this group of young people were less than positive. Amongst those who had received citizenship education at secondary school, almost invariably the view was their classes in the subject dealt inadequately with the UK's political system and were often taught by staff with little expertise or even interest in the subject. The group strongly believed that

¹⁸ A number of these options are used in Australia, and many are discussed at Ballinger, 'Democracy and voting' (Hansard Society, 2006) and The Electoral Commission, 'Compulsory voting around the world' (2006) 22-23

¹⁹

<<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130904095100/https://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/secondary/b00199157/citizenship/ks3>>

citizenship education should be considered a core part of the curriculum, and should be taught by dedicated – or at least specially trained - teaching staff.

20. Education about politics and our constitutional and political system – whether as part of citizenship education, or as a separate subject - should be a part of every child's education from a young age. Younger children could be encouraged to participate in initiatives such as mock elections or school councils, so as to develop an understanding of voting and representation. For older pupils, the focus should expand to include more about the history of our democracy and our political system. It should also include information about the respective powers and functions of Parliament and government, of the different levels of government (local, regional, national and even supra-national), and the role of councillors, MPs and Peers and Ministers. Improving the awareness of our political system among young people in this way would contribute to improving political engagement in the UK more generally.
21. There was strong support for lowering the voting age to 16 to complement improved political education. Young people are increasingly well informed about and are often interested in politics. They are directly affected by politics and decisions taken by politicians, but cannot directly participate in the political system. Capturing that interest by enabling and encouraging young people to vote at 16 could contribute to a lifetime of political engagement and regular voting.

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