BEO response to The Representation of the People Bill

Call for Evidence

The Black Equity Organisation (BEO) is a charity that was created to dismantle systemic racism, drive generational change and work to deliver better lived experience for members of Black communities across the United Kingdom.

We welcome the introduction of The Representation of the People Bill and the changes that will be brought forward when the Bill is enacted. However, gaps remain.

Impact of the Bill on the Black Community

The Black community is the one ethnic group where registration rates dropped between 2018 and 2022. It dropped by 3%, while other ethnic groups saw modest rises.[1] The provisions with The Representation of the People Bill will go some way to addressing the deficit of Black voters who do not take up their right to vote.

One of the provisions we welcome in Part 1 of The Representation of the People Bill, is extending the right to vote in Westminster and English elections to 16 and 17 years old. There has been inconsistency across the UK on this matter. In Scotland and Wales, young people aged 16 and 17 have been able to vote in elections since 2014, while their English counterparts could not. The Bill will now close this deficit and bring England in line with other UK regions.

Another provision within the Bill in Part 2, we believe will enable more Black people to express their democratic right to vote is the implementation of automated voter registration systems that would lead to Automatic Voter Registration (AVR). These measures if enacted would remove barriers for registering to vote every time a person moves home and allow more people to be registered to vote and take part in the democratic process.

Housing, renters and intersection with Black communities

We know that many Black people are in precarious housing conditions within the private rented sector and move frequently. AVR would enable the electoral register to be up to date and reflect the accurate number of people living in a constituency.

Allowing automatic voter registration to vote will alleviate the burden on Black voters to remember to register every time they move home. "The UK has one of the most difficult voter registration processes among liberal democracies, according to research that examined 62 countries."[2]

Electoral Commission data shows that those who have lived in their home for less than a year are registered at only 39%, compared to 95% for those who have lived in their home 16 years or more[3].

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[1] Explore the data: Who is and isn't registered to vote? | Electoral Commission
[2] Britain has one of most difficult voter registration processes, report finds | Politics | The Guardian
[3] https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-is-registered

The number of renters is growing, so without confronting this, the issue could worsen. "The 2021 Census revealed that there were 4.8 million households renting in the private sector in England, 1.1 million more than there were in 2011. This was an increase of 29%, and the sector now comprises 20% of the population."[4]

Black communities are overrepresented in the private rental sector – meaning many more Black than White voters face this practical barrier to voting.

o 4.4 million (19%) of the 23.1 million households in England rented their home from a private landlord in the 2 years from April 2021 to May 2023

o White British households (14%) were the least likely to rent their home privately out of all ethnic groups

o 55% of households in the Black Other ethnic group rented privately, followed by 52% of Mixed White and Black African households"[5]

This data shows that "Black other" is the ethnic group most likely to rent their homes privately.

AVR should also address the difficulties faced by those members of the prison population who are on remand and are entitled to vote. Unlock's research has shown that the prison estate and local councils do not actively follow through on the right of those on remand to exercise their vote. This will have a positive impact on some members of Black communities as there is a disproportionate number of Black men held on remand as compared to other ethnic groups[6].

For indictable offences, Black females represent 18% of females remanded in custody at magistrates' courts, while Black males represented 31% of males remanded in custody. Those identifying as Black made up some of the highest proportion of custodial remands at 30%[7].

<u>Widening access to voting by extending different types of voter ID</u>

The provision in Part 3 of the Bill to increase the number of acceptable Voter ID is welcomed and would enfranchise many more Black voters to participate in the democratic process. Black communities have been disproportionately affected by injustices such as the Windrush Scandal which has resulted in many individuals' lacking documentation despite having a lawful right to reside in the UK and participate in democratic processes. The Bill also provides an opportunity to protect the right to vote for Commonwealth citizens; based Britian's colonial past in Africa and the Caribbean.

The Bill's potential change to voter ID would allow the use of bank cards to be used as a valid voter identification document at the next general election. This would reduce the number of people turned away at polling stations simply because they do not possess one of the currently accepted forms of identification.

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[4] https://www.generationrent.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/GR_JRRT-Report-2023_Web.pdf
[5] Renting from a private landlord - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures
[6] Why Prisoner Voting Matters
[7] Statistics on Ethnicity and the Criminal Justice System, 2024 (HTML) - GOV.UK

In 2024 more than 400,000 people were turned away from polling stations because they did not have valid voter ID. A Hope Not Hate poll found 6.5% of voters of colour were turned away from a polling booth at least once, compared with 2.5% of white voters.

<u>Recommendations</u>

In conclusion we welcome the introduction of The Representation of the People Bill in Parliament and the opportunity to widen the right vote to 16 and 17 year olds, the proposal to implement automated voter registration systems and increasing the number of valid ID such as bank cards. However, for the Bill to ensure Black people are fully enfranchised we have the following recommendations:

1. Implement fully Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) across all public services.
2. Remove the requirement for photo ID and widen the number of valid ID at polling stations, to allow greater participation of Black voters in local and national elections.
3. Full disaggregation of voting data by ethnicity to enable the Electoral Commission and other public bodies to capture an accurate picture of the British electorate.
4. Ensure that local authorities provide notification to any eligible resident who is currently on remand in prison and entitled to vote, informing them that their postal ballot will be delivered to the prison they are remanded in.
5. To protect the right to vote for Commonwealth Citizens.