



Encouraging voting in the next election

The UNISON Scotland evidence to the Local Government and Communities Committee
October 2016

Introduction

UNISON is the largest trade union in Scottish public services. Our members deliver services, pay taxes and also have a wider citizenship interest in how services are provided and paid for and have an important role to play in the political process. We therefore welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee.

Response

Democratic engagement is about more than participating in elections and we believe that the key to increasing voter turnout is broadening the range of opportunities to participate in decision making beyond turning out to vote every few years. The best way to tackle the cynical “nothing changes” or “they’re all as bad as each other “ attitudes is for people to have opportunities to influence and engage with decision makers regularly.

A functioning democracy requires not just elections but ensuring that citizens can meaningfully participate in ongoing decision making processes. This requires decisions to be made as close to those affected as possible. Citizens also need adequate opportunities to influence the policymaking and review process from start to finish. Not just a yes or no to plans. This means deliberative involvement in deciding the desired outcomes, framing the problem to be tackled and the methods used to achieve the agreed aims.

All public bodies should have a statutory duty to meaningfully involve users as partners, not customers in the decision making process. To facilitate this, organisational structures need to be decentralised to appropriate levels for each function. Increasingly decision making in Scotland is moving away from local towards national decision making. Local Government in particular is at real risk of becoming an administrative arm of central government. It is no surprise therefore that turnouts at local elections and by-elections is so low.

While many argue for increased centralisation, cuts in the number of councils and more national bodies to deliver services like the new Police service, and proposals for regional education boards; Scotland is already highly centralised in comparison to other European countries. For example, Scotland has on average 1 councillor per 4270 people while France has 1 per 125. The basis for the proposals from some organisations is that economies of scale are created by centralising services, but there are real costs from failures caused when one size doesn’t fit all. If people feel that they cannot influence policy making they are less likely to participate.

General election turnouts are falling and local government elections turnouts are even worse with less than 40% of registered voters participating in the Scottish local government elections in 2012. Recent by-election turnouts show no sign of a reverse in that trend. It is also significant that the change to forms of proportional representation in Scotland has not led to increased turnout or a smaller decline in turnout than the rest of the UK.

Table 1: Turnout (valid vote) in council elections, 1995 -2012

1995	1999	2003	2007	2012	Change 2007-12
%	%	%	%	%	
44.9	58.1	49.1	52.8	39.1	-13.7

Report on the Scottish Council elections 2012 H Bochel, D Denver and Martin Steven July 2012
University of Lincoln Lancaster University

General election turnout since 1945, by region

Election Year	UK	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
2015	66.1%	65.8%	65.7%	71.1%	58.1%
2010	65.1%	65.5%	64.7%	63.8%	57.6%
2005	61.4%	61.3%	62.6%	60.8%	62.9%
2001	59.4%	59.2%	61.6%	58.2%	68%
1997	71.4%	71.4%	73.5%	71.3%	67.1%
1992	77.7%	78%	79.7%	75.5%	69.8%
1987	75.3%	75.4%	78.9%	75.1%	67%
1983	72.7%	72.5%	76.1%	72.7%	72.9%
1979	76%	75.9%	79.4%	76.8%	67.7%
1974 Oct	72.8%	72.6%	76.6%	74.8%	67.7%
1974 Feb	78.8%	79%	80%	79%	69.9%
1970	72%	71.4%	77.4%	74.1%	76.6%
1966	75.8%	75.9%	79%	76%	66.1%
1964	77.1%	77%	80.1%	77.6%	71.7%
1959	78.7%	78.9%	82.6%	78.1%	65.9%
1955	76.8%	76.9%	79.6%	75.1%	74.1%
1951	82.6%	82.7%	84.4%	81.2%	79.9%
1950	83.9%	84.4%	84.8%	80.9%	77.4%
1945	72.8%	73.4%	75.7%	69%	67.4%

UK Political Info <http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm>

Polling stations are usually in the heart of communities; so it's not about access to polling stations, but about a desire to go and participate. Walking/travel to polling stations does not correlate to turnout. The key to improving turnout is to understand who already votes. Work by ComRes, the polling company, (Who Votes Wins) shows that older people, wealthier people, home owners, and postal voters vote. Even in the Scottish referendum where we saw record turnouts; poorer areas like Glasgow and Dundee had the lowest turnouts of 75% and 78.8%, while better off areas saw much higher voting rates e.g. East Dunbartonshire (91%), East Renfrewshire and Stirling (both 90%).

Trade union members are more likely to vote than the population at large. We believe that this is because they are already part of a movement and both expect to and do influence decision making.

Trade union members have a wider role in political process. They know it's about more than just voting every few years. Trade unions provide training and support for members specifically on influencing and campaigning and alongside that through UNION Learning, wider literacy and numeracy skills which ensure that are better able to understand and participate in politics. Trade union members are used to influencing politicians at all levels through writing to them, one to one meetings and hustings/public meetings. Trade unions are themselves democratic bodies members also take part in internal elections, they stand for election to internal positions at both local and national levels and democratic decision making via committees and conferences. This means they feel more part of an ongoing democratic process and are therefore more engaged and more likely to vote

UNISON actively encourages members to vote. We run campaigns to encourage members to register to vote and to apply for postal votes. We produce manifestos on issues affecting members' working lives and analyse party policies and the possible impact on public services. Members are also encouraged to attend meetings and raise issues with candidates and branches and committees arrange hustings events with key spokespeople from all major political parties to ensure that members are able to make informed decisions in elections.

Increasing turnout is not something that should be thought about in the run up to elections but must be a permanent process of including people in decision making at all levels. When people living in poverty say that they can't influence things so they don't bother, it's not a sign that they don't care, that they don't understand how the world works or can't be bothered. It's because every day of their lives they see their needs and voices ignored by the powerful. Much is written about "hard to reach" groups. Progress requires a better understanding that they are actually "seldom looked for". Increasing turnout requires the promotion of active citizenship, supporting community activism and ensuring that all voices are heard at all levels of decision making.

Political parties could also do more to ensure that their candidates are representative of the communities they seek to represent. This is most obvious in terms of gender, when only 25% of councillors in Scotland are women.

The Scottish government should invest in voter registration both campaigning and the teams required to organise and administer the process. This means actively seeking out seldom listened to groups, rather than just an advertising campaign. As well as encouraging people to register they should also be encouraged to sign up for postal votes. The Scottish government should resist any and all attempts to restrict the role of trade unions in engaging in public life. Government should also support organisations like trade unions and community groups to support citizens to participate in elections and the wider political process.

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