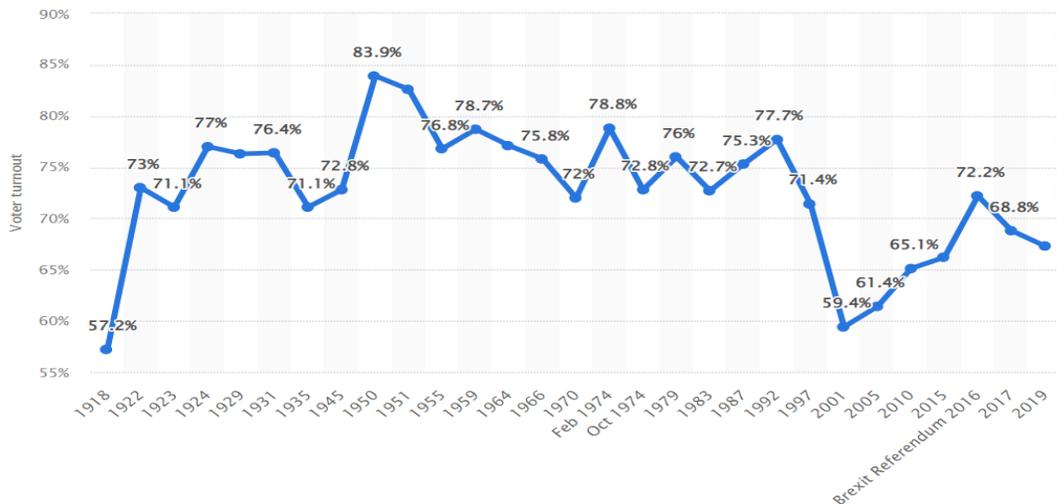


Warwick Economics Essay Competition

By Harrison J. Sargeant

2. How can nudge theory be used to increase voter participation in the next general election? (Behavioural Economics)



United Kingdom voter participation is on the decline. Following 2016, voter turnout in general elections has fallen 3.4%, from 72.2% to 68.8%. Since the turn of the century, average voter turnout has sunk from a 74.2% average across the 1900s to an average of 65.4% in the 2000s¹ so far. These numbers may seem insignificant however the impacts of low voter turnout can prove to be extremely detrimental, the antithesis to a flourishing democratic nation. For a democracy to thrive and breed success: all citizens need to take action and participate. As elementary as this sounds, sadly, it is not the case. In a world connected more than ever, with information more accessible and available for the masses; why is voter participation so low, and how can we employ nudge theory to combat this?

Traditional economics has an explanation for this lack of voters which can be explained using the model of Homo Economicus - the rational economic man. This was used by neo-classical economists to describe and explain consumer behaviour. They believed consumers were always self interested; always knew exactly what they wanted; and always made rational decisions based on the concept of marginal utility in effort to maximise personal economic gain. Theoretically, if this theory was indeed true, the result would be a near 0 voter turnout. This is because a rational agent would understand that his vote has no such deciding impact upon the outcome of an

¹ Graph above. Voter turnout in UK general elections 1918-2019, D.Clark, June 22, 2022, [Voter turnout in the UK 1918-2019 | Statista](#)

election. This therefore means that the time and monetary costs involved in voting would be greater than the miniscule utility gained from making a vote. Subsequently, in pursuit of maximum economic satisfaction, the rational economic man would be better off not voting at all.

On the other hand behavioural economists believe this idea to be false. Instead they utilise a method of analysis that uses psychological insights into human behaviour to explain economic choices. Unlike Homo Economicus, behavioural economists believe individuals have bounded rationality and limited self control. Therefore factors such as imperfect information, limited mental processing ability and time constraints affect decision making. Individuals also display myopic tendencies, valuing the present much more than the future, such as going out with friends rather than voting, this is also known as hyperbolic discounting. Looking at voting from a behavioural perspective we can deduce that people may not possess the sufficient knowledge or willingness to vote, therefore deciding not to vote. This behavioural approach also means governments have the ability to alter people behaviour by employing strategies such as nudges.

Nudge theory is a key concept in behavioural economics. A nudge tries to change people's behaviour in a predictable way by providing them with useful information. This information is framed in such a way that it convinces individuals to undertake well informed decisions, the perfect weapon to get more people active in voting. Nudges also come with the benefit of being generally low cost, straightforward to implement solutions to social issues such as low voter turnout. To create effective nudges for increasing voter participation we need to consider our target audience. In our case we want to target nudges towards the demographics with the lowest voter turnout as this will have maximum effect. There are a variety of different types of nudges, such as: creating a psychological anchor; framing information; or offering a default choice, and some will work better than others in engaging certain audiences so next we need to determine which specific nudges will work best for our target audience. Finally with these two key pieces of information we can start to paint a picture of how nudge theory can be used to increase voter participation in the next general election.

To effectively increase voter participation we need to first investigate what groups of people are not voting and why. This will then allow us to target our strategies towards the individuals who are voting the least. The demographic with consistently the lowest turnout in general elections is the younger voters. In the 2019 general election, the average voter turnout for ages 18-34 was just over 50%, whereas for the older cohort, 45+, it was above 75%². This is an alarming statistic, and in order to turn the tides and encourage more youth to vote we need to understand the main factors that cause the younger generations to abstain from voting. Firstly, individuals may not be able to adequately process the tremendous amount of political media and information, leading up to a general election. This overloads the person's brain with vast amounts

² Age and voting behaviour at the 2019 general election, The British Election Study Team, January 27, 2021, [Age and voting behaviour at the 2019 General Election - The British Election Study](#)

of confusing information, resulting in them being unable to come to a coherent conclusion. This decision making process can prove difficult for even the most well-versed political supporters. For this reason, individuals decide that not voting at all would be a much simpler action. The second reason for this low turnout in the younger generation, is a general apathy to voting among the demographic. The unwillingness to vote is the consequence of political party's aiming their policies towards the older cohort, as they know this demographic has a higher voter turnout and therefore will win them the election.

The most critical task in this process is choosing the best types of nudges that will prove the most effective and engage the youth. A 2018 study by the Pew Research Center³ found that 88% of 18-29 year olds use any form of social media, and another 2022 study by the same people found that 48% of 18-29 year olds use social media for their political news. These statistics present us with the perfect opportunity to use social media as the main vessel of attack for our nudge strategy to reach and effectively engage the young. Framing is proven to be an effective nudge which can be used to influence the media we put out to young people. Politics is often complex and knotty and this can deter younger voters. If we change the way in which political media is framed we can highlight specific aspects of information we want people to take notice of and eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic extras that only confuse a younger reader. Thus young people will feel more informed and subsequently comfortable and confident in making a vote.

Another effective nudge to get the young voting is reminding them to take action. This can be through a simple text message reminder or social media post. We need to pay close attention to the vocabulary used in our reminders as this has been discovered to have profound effects. A study conducted by social psychologist Christopher Bryan and his colleagues at Stanford University⁴ showed that just manipulating the word 'vote' to 'voter' invokes a sense of self in the reader, psychologically assuming them the identity of a voter and motivating them to take action and vote. The results of this study prove promising however it was only tested 3 times, each on a small, only few hundred, sample size therefore questions can be raised about the accuracy and subsequent ability to draw valid conclusions based on this study alone. Secondly, to get the maximum number of young voters to participate we can take advantage of bandwagon effect bias, this is a cognitive bias and it's when individuals do something just because others are doing it, regardless of utility gained. An example of this is people investing in the housing market just because they see others are also doing so, often creating a bubble. In our case we can use social media posts and stories to show as many young people voting as possible, therefore other young individuals will see their peers voting and may be nudged into doing the same.

³ Social media use in 2018, Pew Research Center, March 1, 2018, [Social Media Use 2018: Demographics and Statistics | Pew Research Center](#)

⁴ Motivating the voter by invoking the self, PNAS, July 18, 2011, [Motivating voter turnout by invoking the self | PNAS](#)

After increasing 1st time voters, we can encourage repeat voters through thanking individuals for voting. In 2011 a study written by Costas Panagopoulos⁵ showed that thanking voters for voting in a previous election boosted voter participation in the next election. Putting this to the test; the 2009 New Jersey Gubernatorial Election results showed an average 2.475% increase in voter turnout, in all subgroups of voters, after gratitude had been received compared to the control group. This is due to the positive psychological effects of gratitude which stimulate people to repeat helpful and generous acts even if it's not in their individual best interests. This is perfect for getting repeat voters as a simple thank you message is proven to nudge people into repeating desired actions.

The stats show that UK voter participation is low and something needs to be done about it. The young aren't voting and we need to change this, social media is the perfect weapon to grasp their attention. By encouraging 1st time voting, through the use of carefully calculated nudges - such as framing, reminders and herding, we can achieve this. Then turning them into repeat voters by showing gratitude and thanks we can increase voter participation in the next general election and in future elections; setting up the stability of the UK democratic system for years to come.

⁵ Thank you for voting: gratitude expression and voter mobilisation, Costas Panagopoulos, July 2011, [Download PDF | Thank You for Voting: Gratitude Expression and Voter Mobilization \(researchgate.net\)](#)