Understanding the Changing Structure of Turnout in British General Elections, 1964–2024

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Motivation – Long-term perspective on turnout

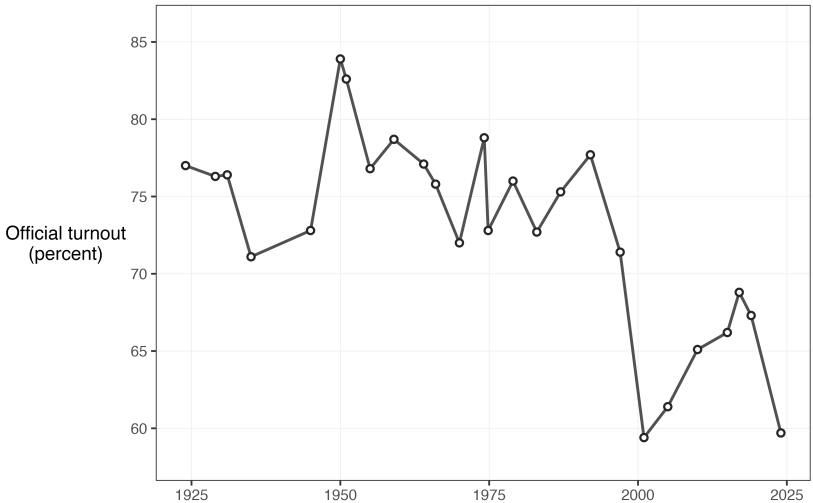
1. Demographic and occupational change: expanding university education, aging population and growing racial diversity Evans & Tilley (2017); Ford & Jennings (2020)
2. Party dealignment: decline in partisanship, higher volatility and fragmentation

   Dalton (2018); Sobolewska & Ford (2020); Fieldhouse et al (2020); Prosser (2025)

→ What roles do demographic shifts and dealignment play in explaining variation in turnout since 1964?

Turnout over 100 years

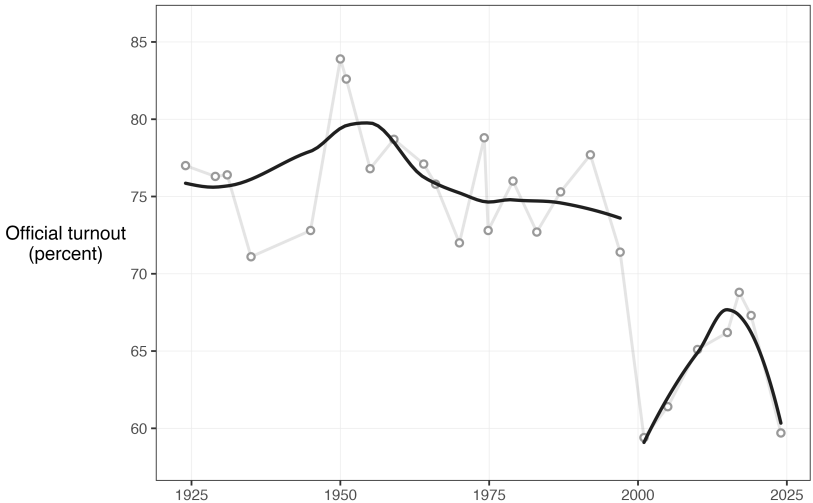
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Turnout over 100 years

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Our aim

To assess the **changing structure** of **turnout** over fifteen general elections

Specifically, to evaluate the role of **demographic shifts** and **declining partisanship** in explaining **variation in turnout**

Our data

- British Election Study post-election random probability surveys, 1964-2024
- Pooled N=34,672 (complete information)
- Harmonised weighting using census and other sources (including data from the British Social Attitudes surveys)

Method – Decomposing the effects of a changing electorate

Five bivariate models predicting turnout as a function of:

1. Partisanship: no party identification, not strong, fairly strong, strong
2. Age, including a nonlinear component
3. Race: white, non-white
4. Class: working (manual, routine, non-skilled), middle (skilled, management, employers)
5. Education: no qualification, school, university

Method – Decomposing the impact of a changing electorate

Kitagawa–Oaxaca–Blinder decomposition

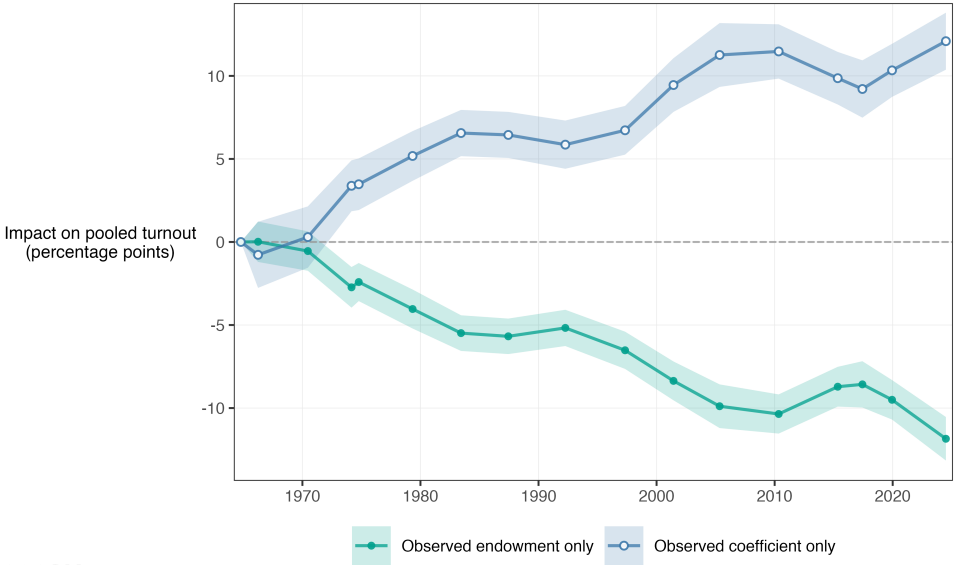
$$\overbrace{\bar{T}_{\text{pooled}} - \bar{T}_{\text{year}}}^{\text{Difference in turnout}} = \underbrace{\sum (\bar{X}_{\text{pooled}} - \bar{X}_{\text{year}})\hat{\beta}_{\text{pooled}}}_{\text{Endowment: impact of distributional shifts}} + \overbrace{\sum \bar{X}_{\text{year}}(\hat{\beta}_{\text{pooled}} - \hat{\beta}_{\text{year}})}^{\text{Coefficient: impact of differing predictor–turnout relationship}}$$

Method – Two counterfactuals

1. Endowment: "What would turnout look like if the effect of a predictor remained constant over time, but its distribution among the electorate changed?"

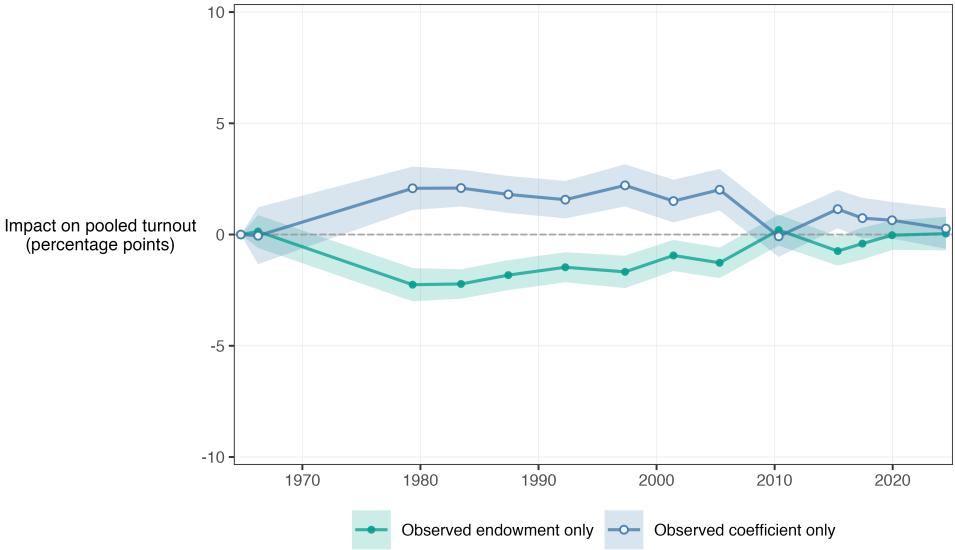
2. Coefficient: "What would turnout look like if the distribution of a predictor among the electorate remained constant over time, but its effect on turnout changed?"

1. Partisanship & turnout



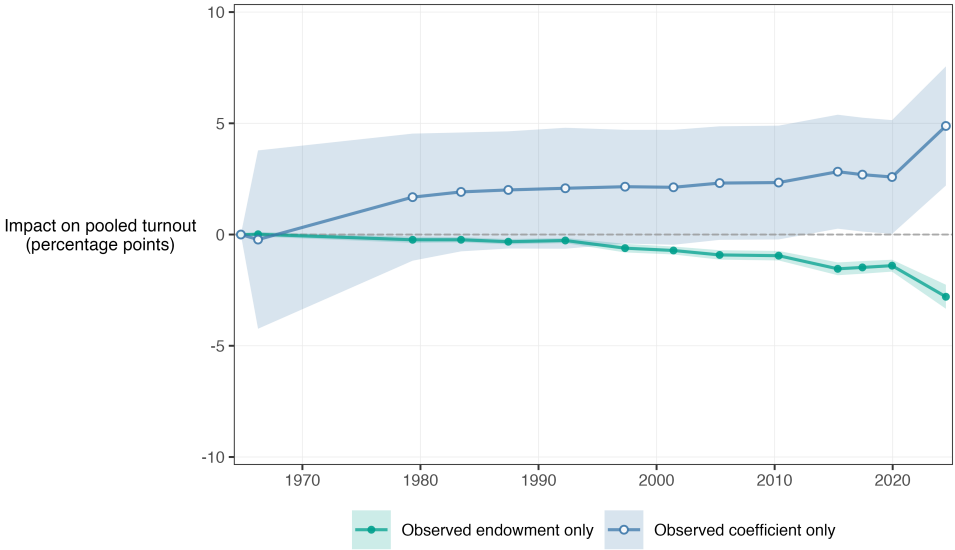
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2. Age & turnout



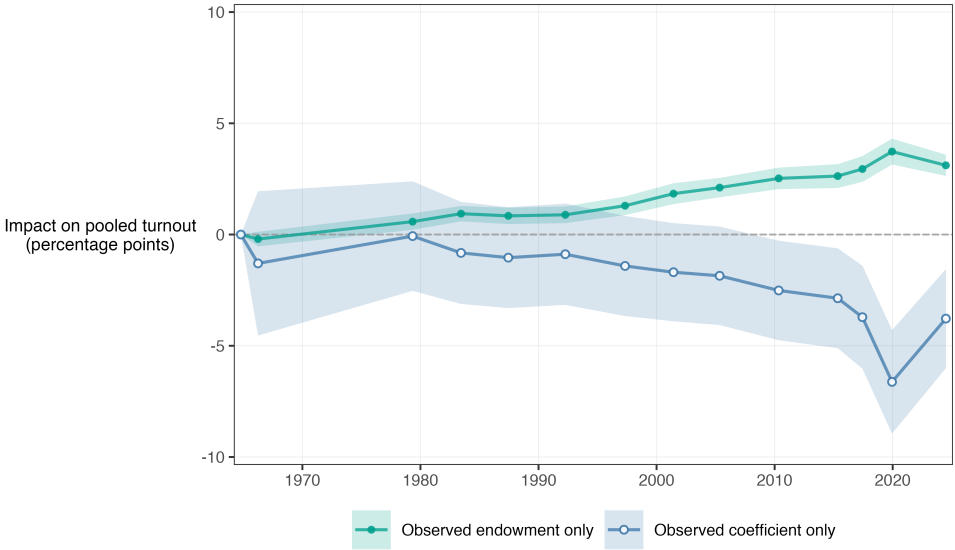
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3. Race & turnout



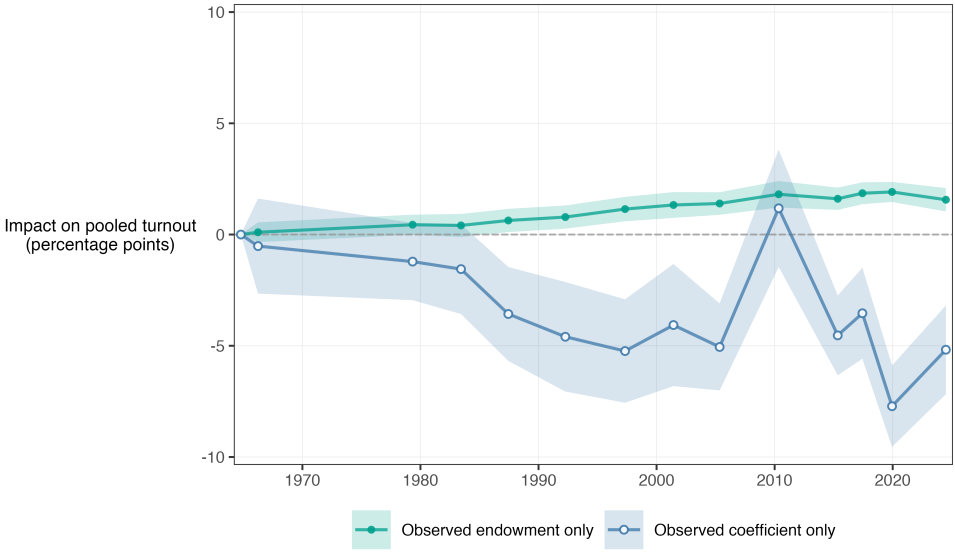
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4. Social class & turnout



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5. Education & turnout



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Conclusions – Trends in turnout

- Decline in turnout is **non-monotonic**
- Postwar turnout hovers around 75 percent
- Since 2001, below 70 percent with higher variance

Conclusions – Role of demographics and partisanship

- Compared to the role of **party dealignment**, the contribution of **demographic change** to turnout *decline* is **limited**
- Social class and education play some role
- For demographic predictors change in composition associated with higher turnout

Conclusions – Future trends & research

- Dealignment associated with **lower** and more **volatile** turnout Fieldhouse et al (2020)
- An electorate increasingly sensitive to short-term, election-specific factors Heath (2007)

→ Future steps: the effects of constituency-level, contextual attributes (e.g. party competition and campaigning)

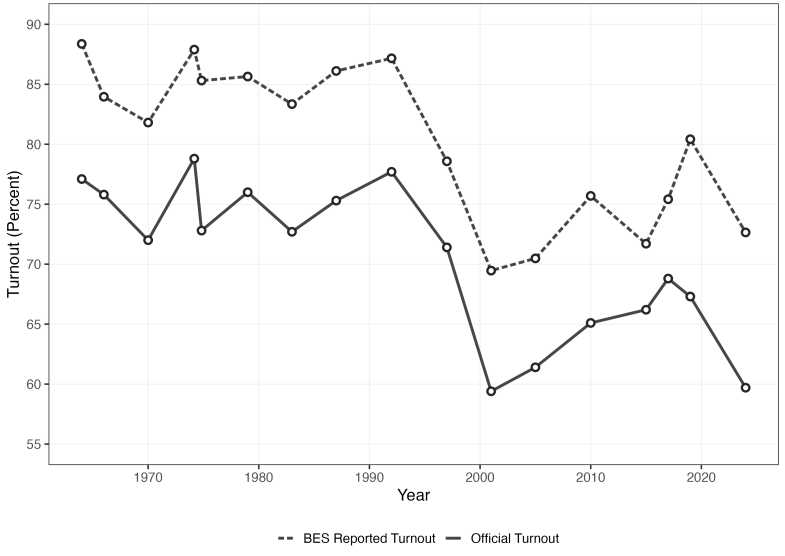
Thank you!

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Additional slides

1. Official and reported turnout over time

Turnout over time



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