

Overcoming the voter registration challenge in Black communities

A report for the UK Democracy Fund

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Ellen Berry, UK Democracy Fund

Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust

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DemocracyFund@jrrt.org.uk

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Introduction

Black Britons are 15% less likely to be registered to vote than their white peers, according to the Electoral Commission. Worryingly, instead of improving, between 2018 and 2022, the rate of registration for Black voters dropped 3% while other ethnic groups saw a modest increase.

There are some practical reasons for this. Black communities are overrepresented in the private rental sector, meaning they are more likely than their white peers to move home multiple times in an election cycle and fall off of the electoral register (a problem which a more automated registration system would solve).

They may also face psychological barriers around mistrust of the state, and belonging. Research for the UK Democracy Fund in 2021 by Professor Maria Sobolewska and Dr Andrew Barclay found that, "Research consistently shows that being asked to participate can make a real difference. For ethnic minorities and immigrants it is often the case that the usual mechanisms of political mobilisation through mainstream political parties fail." In community engagement work with Black voters, the experiences of the Windrush generation are often raised as a reason why trust needs to be rebuilt, not assumed.

The most effective way to resolve this registration challenge is for the Government to introduce an automated voter registration system. This would be impactful for Black voters as our 2021 research showed that, "Electoral registration appears to be the main area of concern for democratic participation, as once non-White ethnic minority voters are registered, the turnout gaps are smaller."

In the meantime, the best way to engage low-propensity voters is by finding the right messengers. Local leaders who have already built trusted relationships with their community, who can engage in meaningful, non-partisan discussions, over a period of time. But engaging Black voters has tended to be under-resourced and under-researched. The UK Democracy Fund wanted to invest in some projects that would register Black voters ahead of the 2024 General Election and build the evidence base for what works.

> ***"Voting is how we demand better, not just hope for it."***
>
> *Campaign participant*

We commissioned Local Champions CIC to help us, led by Nikita Gicanda Vervelde. Their role was to identify organisations who could play a valuable role, support them through the grant application process, and if successful, support them through their campaigns. Finally, they pulled together learnings from across the campaigns, providing a rich set of insights from three very different sets of leaders, and very different ways of working.

Carib Eats

Carib Eats provided a culturally rooted democratic engagement model tailored for Caribbean elders. Through their canteen model, they offered not just a meal, but a space for reflection, storytelling, and civic activation.

Skate Cabal

Skate Cabal delivered the 'Rolling for Change' campaign utilising the historic alignment and cultural significance of roller-skating within the Black community to engage Black people of different ages in conversations about voter participation.



Speaking to prospective voters

Image: Skate Cabal

The Agency (Battersea Arts Centre)

The Agency ran a street peer-to-peer youth voter registration campaign for Black and Asian young people.

What works?

Four main findings for community organisations

1. Embed civic conversations into what you already do.

Whether it's food, sport, youth work, or faith – start where people already gather and build from there.

2. Trust your voice.

Even if you're new to democracy projects, your experience, your leadership, and your story matter. You don't need to be a democracy expert to spark change.

3. Use WhatsApp strategically.

Use WhatsApp for reminders and peer encouragement, not persuasion. Leverage group chats, voice notes, and memes to keep engagement human and consistent.

4. Build and share peer knowledge.

Create or join peer groups to exchange templates, graphics, workshop formats, or grant tips. Collaboration beats competition.



The Manchester team from the Agency's Voter Registration Project

Image: The Agency (Battersea Arts Centre)

What did we learn?

Trust is not a variable – it's the core infrastructure of effective democratic engagement

Across every pilot campaign, trust emerged as the single most important enabler. Trust determined who participated, how they engaged, and whether energy could be sustained beyond the election.

Trust building takes time, people, safe spaces, and deep listening. This proves challenging for scaling this work to reach the millions of unregistered voters – how can deep trust be replicated at scale without an unrealistic injection of investment?

1. Identify your audience and work with people who understand them

Engagement does not start with issues. It starts with people – their cultures, identities, routines, and the spaces where they already feel a sense of belonging. Traditional outreach models often fail to connect with more underrepresented communities if it treats identity as one-dimensional – targeting people by race, postcode, or age group alone or as if these identities are homogeneous.

Rather than treating civic participation as a standalone topic, our most successful pilots embedded it in communities of interest – spaces defined by shared activity, identity, or cultural expression. Whether in kitchens, skate meetups, shared community spaces or youth WhatsApp groups, these were the real starting points for influence. For example, online content activated younger, more tech-savvy users, while in-person methods were critical for older and digitally excluded participants.

Our pilots demonstrated the power of designing engagement around intersectional identities and shared interests – from food and faith to skating and social justice. These grants allowed us to invest in different types of leadership, recognising the power of young influential community leaders, and taking a broad definition of identity.

2. Effective engagement takes time

It wasn't unusual for campaign leads to spend 2–3 hours in personal conversation before political topics could be introduced. Community messengers led open-ended conversations grounded in shared experience. It works when you avoid rigid scripts and lead with stories rather than stats.

Carib Eats: Led by trusted organiser Ali, Carib Eats created spaces of cultural safety and deep listening. Over hours, through storytelling and shared meals rooted in Caribbean traditions, elders were reconnected to both their history and their civic power. This was essential prelude to conversations about voting and democratic engagement.

Skate Cabal: Skate Cabal maintained regular touchpoints with participants over weeks or months, building trust and creating space for authentic dialogue. Skate Cabal found that the sustained engagement was crucial – rather than a one-off conversation, ongoing contact allowed them to nurture understanding and gradually shift attitudes toward voting.

By consistently aligning messaging with the communities' interests, they were often able to bridge scepticism. Some participants who were initially doubtful or disengaged became active supporters within three to six months of sustained involvement. The slow, relationship-driven process proved essential for meaningful civic engagement, showing that change happens not through quick pitches but through persistent, empathetic connection.

James, a young leader in the London skate community, wields community influence beyond skating – seen as a coach, mentor, cultural commentator, and community organiser. This trust, plus the multiple touch points offered through skating events, WhatsApp, and repeat check-ins, built a perspective shift within his community. One skater messaged: "This is the first time I'm going to study [voting] like a geek."

In contrast, where trust was shallow (eg youth canvassers doing cold outreach in The Agency's early model), participants hesitated to engage – even when they shared a background or lived locally. As one grantee put it, "They might look like me, but they're still a stranger." This demonstrates that these slow-build moments and relationship building cannot be compressed. They are the result of time, presence, and consistent reinforcement.

3. People were more receptive to these conversations in familiar spaces

Voter engagement flourished in familiar, informal environments where people already felt safe and seen. Carib Eats used their intergenerational Caribbean canteens where elders explored politics through food and cultural storytelling. Skate Cabal incorporated voter registration into their existing skate meetups. Civic discussions emerged organically between sessions and in WhatsApp groups.

In contrast, outreach in unfamiliar or transactional formats – like street canvassing – struggled, even when led by local youth. Participants were reluctant to hand over personal information without prior relationship or context. Even some of the young people delivering the campaign were reluctant to appear in campaign videos, due to discomfort with what felt like political visibility.

Digital engagement was effective only when it reinforced real-world relationships. QR codes and WhatsApp reminders worked well as light-touch follow-ups after in-person contact, but had limited success unless followed by in-person or peer-to-peer reinforcement. In some cases, community members expressed hesitation to complete digital registration forms due to data privacy concerns, unfamiliarity with government platforms, or fear of how their information might be used – especially among elders and undocumented relatives. This reinforced the importance of trusted messengers who could demystify the process and offer step-by-step support. Once enthusiasm was built, Skate Cabal's peer-led WhatsApp networks became mini civic ecosystems, where voting resources circulated organically.

> ***"People were reminding each other to vote – not because we told them to, but because it became part of the culture."***
>
> *James, Skate Cabal*



Familiar spaces, such as skate meetups, provided safe spaces *Image: Skate Cabal*

4. When you know your community, you can tailor your message to them

These pilots confirmed that style and method of outreach mattered more than message content – but when framed well, messaging could be powerful. Voters weren't disengaged due to laziness or ignorance. Many expressed cynicism (Voting doesn't change anything); disillusionment (No one in power looks like me or gets my life); or distrust (What are they really doing with my data?).

But when messengers linked voting to real-life impact, attitudes shifted.

- ✓ **Carib Eats** framed voting as a way to protect elders' credit scores and influence housing policy.
- ✓ **Skate Cabal** framed it as youth voice and future-building.
- ✓ **The Agency** framed it as leadership in practice – a chance to shape systems, not just survive them.



"We weren't just talking about voting – we were talking about legacy, rights, and what our parents fought for. That's what made it land."

Carib Eats participant

These three campaigns worked with different parts of the Black community and took different approaches, but their monthly learning sessions, discussion, peer support and real-time reflection helped them refine their approaches and messaging.

Campaigns also needed to understand real-time events with significance to their audience. For example, the suspension from the Labour party and media treatment of Diane Abbott created anger and sadness among Black voters, feeding into existing mistrust. Internationally, Hurricane Beryl was a concern for voters with ties to the Caribbean and diverted focus in some communities, shifting conversations from politics to survival. These moments underscored that people's priorities are fluid – and that successful campaigns must be attuned to both global and hyperlocal events. In response, several participants shifted to postal voting the week prior – showing that when civic tools are flexible, engagement can still happen amid crisis.

Messaging that simply urged people to "register to vote" was far less effective than narratives that framed voting as a tool for self-advocacy, protection, and collective dignity.

What can funders learn from this?

1. Support community leaders

Community-based organisations are the first responders to local disengagement – but they often operate without the resourcing to embed voter engagement into their existing work. For example, Carib Eats had never been funded to deliver civic engagement work before, but their deep community roots enabled meaningful engagement with often excluded community members. The majority of groups we worked with were volunteer-led, under-resourced, and overextended. Their work was rooted in trust – but trust alone isn't scalable without support.



"We always wanted to do this work, but we didn't know where to start – or how to afford the time."

Community leader

For many, it wasn't just the funding – it was the trusted invitation. Local Champions CIC's credibility with grassroots organisations made it possible to engage groups who had never applied for democracy-focused funding before. They navigated hesitation, provided practical reassurance, and supported the design of campaigns that fit into existing activities (canteens, skate meetups, youth sessions). This is essential because the scale of funding needed to develop standalone programmes is hard to find.

This shows the value of an intermediary with deep relationships, someone who understands both the funder's intent and the community's needs.

The pilots demonstrated that even organisations with no prior experience in voter engagement can thrive with the right support. James' journey through the Skate Cabal pilot is a clear example: what began as a youth skating collective became a vehicle for civic education, community pride, and leadership development. Through this process, James didn't just deliver a campaign – he began to reimagine what democracy could look like for his community. He shifted Skate Cabal's purpose toward "skating for social action" and now advocates for ongoing civic engagement as part of youth development. The same shift was seen with The Agency, which is integrating political education into their methodology.

2. Longer-term grants enable deeper change

Every pilot achieved meaningful engagement – but nearly all struggled with the constraints of short grant timelines, especially once the General Election was called early. Skate Cabal had to condense their rollout, reducing what could have been a year-long culture shift into six weeks. Carib Eats had to adapt mid-way through when community focus shifted to family safety during Hurricane Beryl, affecting participation levels. Despite these challenges, both organisations expressed interest in continuing the work – but made it clear that without multi-cycle investment, this would remain a one-off effort.

Short-term campaigns may deliver quick metrics, but they cannot build the long-term confidence and civic habit formation that communities need to fully participate in democracy.

3. Invest in bespoke support for grantees who need it

Alongside funding, the UK Democracy Fund provided (via Local Champions CIC) monthly action-learning sessions which brought grantee leads together to share progress, troubleshoot challenges, and build confidence; peer support networks (particularly the WhatsApp group) which offered informal, real-time help on everything from graphic design tips to advice on how to credit funders; and 1:1 coaching which addressed specific capacity gaps, from reporting to digital outreach.

Beyond practical support, the project became a model of reciprocal influence. Peer leads gave generously – often without being asked – sharing media articles, event dates, research, and encouragement.

This capacity-building model not only improved outcomes but strengthened the long-term leadership of participants – some of whom are now seeking additional civic or advocacy funding.



Graphic from the 'Rolling for Change' campaign

Image: Skate Cabal

What can policy makers learn from this?

Crucially, these pilots show that when engaged in a culturally relevant way, Black voters want to take part in democracy, showing that narratives of apathy do not apply. Instead, policy makers should consider how, and through whom, they engage with these communities.

While this work is effective, it is expensive to scale. Automatic Voter Registration would more effectively register these voters at scale. Additionally, communities need community-led engagement during non-election periods; practical voter information guides tailored to different demographics and formats (eg WhatsApp, flyers, voice notes); and multilingual, culturally relevant voter ID education.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that civic engagement spreads through family, peer, and interest group networks – especially on WhatsApp. In Skate Cabal, messages about voting spread to external skate chats. In Carib Eats, postal voting became a topic among families caring for relatives abroad.

Further research, including longitudinal studies on informal voter mobilisation and ethnographic work on how racialised communities experience political systems, could be insightful.

LOCAL CHAMPIONS

Community-Led Consulting for Inclusive Civic Infrastructure.

As a social enterprise rooted in grassroots communities and systems-change practice, Local Champions CIC serves as a trusted intermediary between funders and community groups – particularly those often excluded from traditional funding models.

Local Champions CIC bridges the gap between strategy and lived reality, helping funders like the UK Democracy Fund reach equity-deserving groups with insight, integrity, and impact. Local Champions CIC

DemocracyFund@jrrt.org.uk

Front cover image: Skate Cabal