

Institute for Public Policy Research



INSURGENT GOVERNMENT

**HOW MAINSTREAM PARTIES
CAN FIGHT OFF POPULISM AND
REBUILD TRUST IN POLITICS**

Harry Quilter-Pinner

September 2025

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SUMMARY

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Large swathes of voters across western liberal democracies are rejecting mainstream politics. Dissatisfaction with mainstream politics can be seen in ‘silent protest’ as large numbers of voters in advanced democracies switch off from politics altogether. Even more concerning is ‘noisy protest’, as people turn to populist right parties in ever growing numbers. As IPPR’s new ‘antiestablishment index’ shows, these two groups of people, both in their own way rejecting mainstream politics, have been growing, from an average of 22 per cent in parliamentary elections across the world in the 1970s to 44 per cent in the 2020s – doubling over the period. As a result, mainstream parties are seeking to innovate to address these concerns. One proposal, popular with senior figures within the UK government, is for mainstream governments to become ‘insurgent’. But this concept has not been fully defined – and new political slogans are easy to say and hard to turn into a reality. This paper seeks to address this gap.

Defining insurgency in government

An insurgent government elevates the interests of people who have been locked out of power and opportunity – and challenges the status quo on their behalf. The idea of an insurgent government starts from the position of seeking to reform the status quo. It does so to represent those people who have been locked out of power and opportunity for too long. It is comfortable visibly and vocally picking fights with those who defend the status quo: conflict is, in itself, clarifying for citizens. Finally, it is unashamedly values driven rather than technocratic in nature: it makes moral arguments for radical changes to the status quo to improve the lives of working people. These characteristics are highlighted in table S.1 below.

TABLE S.1

Insurgent governments would innovate with both what change they pursue and how they do this

Characteristics of mainstream and insurgent approaches to government

	Mainstream	Insurgent
What and how?	Defend the status quo, incremental	Challenge the status quo, radical
	Win-win politics	A clear ‘for’ and ‘against’
	Technocratic, what works	Emotive, values-driven, more ideological

Source: Author's analysis

WHO SHOULD INSURGENT GOVERNMENT STAND FOR AND WHAT SHOULD IT DELIVER?

An insurgent government must start with a clear analysis of who it stands for. In recent decades mainstream political parties have pursued 'win-win' politics, where political parties purport to stand for everyone. In an era of scarce resources and populism-induced in-out dynamics, this is no longer tenable. Right-wing populists have made their choice, pursuing an ethno-nationalist insiders vs outsiders strategy. Mainstream parties must combat this by being equally clear who they stand for – and be willing to challenge those who oppose the interests of these groups. To stand for everyone is to stand for no one in the minds of the electorate. We set out four approaches to progressive insurgent government recognising that no party fits into these categories precisely but may draw on one or more of them:

1. **Silent majority vs liberal elites:** would be for the majority and against 'liberal elites' with the loudest voices.
2. **Citizens vs the establishment:** would be for voters (normal people) and against the governing classes ('the blob').
3. **Town hall vs Whitehall:** would be for places and communities outside of London and against the 'Westminster bubble'.
4. **Workers vs capital:** would be for workers (defined narrowly or broadly) and against 'the few' (meaning wealth holders or big business interests).

From this definition of who an insurgent government stands for and against follows the issues they elevate and prioritise. This is not intended to be comprehensive but to give examples of how different forms of insurgency might result in different policy agendas in government. For example:

1. **Silent majority vs liberal elites:** would prioritise issues of education (higher vs vocational), welfare entitlements and cultural snobbishness.
2. **Citizens vs the establishment:** would prioritise issues of public service reform (producer vs consumer interest) and democracy/technocracy.
3. **Town hall vs Whitehall:** would prioritise issues of geographical inequality and concentrations of power and city-centric economic policy.
4. **Workers vs capital:** would prioritise issues of worker power, consumer rights and asset ownership.

Recommendations for government

- **Progressives should be more confident in picking fights which signal who they are for and who they are against – particularly on economic policy.** They could draw primarily from options 2 (citizens vs establishment), 3 (town hall vs Whitehall) and, in particular, 4 (workers vs capital) in clearly defining the type of insurgent government they want to be, including who they are for and against. New polling with Persuasion UK shows that this narrative (workers vs capital) maximises the government's vote share and stems losses to right-wing populist parties.
- **This would mean combining moderate policy positions on culture (eg immigration) with a significantly bolder and more confident position on economic fights.** We argue for this because it aligns with progressive values and our diagnosis of the big challenges facing the country. This means being more vocal and ambitious on issues such as:
 - worker rights
 - consumer rights
 - corporate power
 - concentrations of power in London/Westminster
 - citizen-centred public service reform.

The government is pursuing bold reform in many of these areas but voters are largely unaware of this. For example, awareness of workers' rights (28 per cent), renters' rights (22 per cent) and taxing digital multinationals (8 per cent) is very low. These policies are popular and, as new polling for IPPR by Datapraxis shows, are made more popular with insurgent messaging which picks a fight to champion issues that citizens face on a day-to-day basis.

HOW CAN INSURGENT GOVERNMENTS DELIVER REAL CHANGE?

There are growing questions about the effectiveness of the state across liberal democracies, including in the UK. This is driven by an inability to 'get big things done' quickly and cheaply and a decline in satisfaction in key institutions such as the police and the NHS. There is a consensus across political parties that there is a need to reform the state. This is true even for governments that don't claim to be insurgent: just to maintain or incrementally improve on the status quo there is a need to overcome *inertia* in the system and respond to 'policy headwinds' such as ageing populations. The playbook for running an effective but status quo government is well known and includes ruthlessly prioritising policy goals, strengthening accountability, building capability across the state and changing incentives for civil servants, public sector workers and service users. An insurgent government must tackle these head on – but also go further.

Insurgent governments must go beyond simply overcoming state inertia to tackle entrenched interests and commit to doing 'whatever it takes' to deliver on behalf of working people. Insurgent governments seek to go beyond simply incrementally improving the status quo, to deliver more fundamental change. This radicalism is a challenge to many status quo actors. As a result, an insurgent government must tackle entrenched interests as well as inertia in the system. This is where the organisations or people in positions of power do not have the same interests as, or are not accountable to, those who would benefit from change. The playbook here is more radical: the solutions – such as abolishing defunct institutions (or building new institutions where needed), empowering innovators and rebels within existing systems, reforming governance, reforming democratic processes or changing ownership – share a common thread of *shifting or building new sources of power*. Insurgent governments do not let processes get in the way of the outcomes they are seeking to deliver on. This should be at the heart of an insurgent reform agenda.

Recommendations for government

- **Radically reduce headcount in Whitehall and use the resources to pay top civil servants better and attract top talent.** This could include much more active performance management of those staff who are not performing – and finding ways to reward innovators and disruptors who are overcoming barriers in the system to deliver for working people.
- **Tackle concentrations of power through radical devolution.** Strip back functions in Whitehall to the essentials (setting goals, setting high-level policy, allocating funding, monitoring performance). Pass down resources, capacity and powers to local government and local delivery bodies (in public services).
- **Find ways to empower citizens (consumers) over producers in key public services.** This could include giving service users more control over budgets, service design, greater transparency, and ownership of data or support plans.
- **Give 'working people' greater voice in our democratic systems by reforming electoral systems and regulating money in politics.** This could include careful deployment of participatory or direct democracy where workers and elite views diverge.

HOW SHOULD INSURGENT GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATE ITS MESSAGE OF CHANGE?

Insurgent governments must also be radical in communicating about change, as well as delivering on it. Delivering insurgent change means challenging powerful interests. These interests will fight back in the public debate through the media, lobby groups or organised interests. They will often come out publicly, or deploy resources privately, to defend the status quo or attack proposed changes. Meanwhile, those who stand to benefit from them are often less engaged (or organised) or have less power to mobilise. Equally, governments are increasingly finding that delivery alone is not enough: they need to ensure that citizens are aware of what they have delivered on their behalf and attribute it to the government.

Insurgent governments must use new channels of communication, build powerful, emotive messages and deploy ‘insurgent’ messengers. This means shifting how government communications is done in three ways:

- **Channel:** Insurgent governments must move beyond a ‘traditional media only’ strategy, often dominated by status quo voices, and use ‘new media’ such as social media more effectively. This enables them to connect more, and more directly, with those likely to support the change they are pursuing, without relying on legacy media to be a good intermediary of government messaging.
- **Message:** In what has been called ‘the attention age’, politics is competing with everything else for attention. To get noticed, political content must be more effective at grabbing attention. The populist right has grasped this and is leaping ahead. They have realised it means leaning into ‘shock value’ to grab attention and then tapping into deeply held emotions, values and identities. It is not enough to be right, mainstream parties need to be authentic and compelling.
- **Messenger:** The messenger, as well as the message, matters. This is particularly important in a world where most citizens have lost trust in mainstream political parties and politicians. Mainstream parties must put eye-catching and authentic communication over message discipline – and build networks of trusted ‘non-political’ communicators (such as local leaders, frontline workers, and so on) to champion change.

Recommendations for government

- **Publicly be more vocal – and pick more fights – on insurgent causes that show who they are for and against.** In the short run these could draw on existing policy positions starting with workers’ rights and renters’ rights.
- **Deploy the spokespeople who are most likely to connect with voters at risk of disengaging or turning to the populist right, regardless of whether they are responsible for the relevant policy areas.** These could include mayors or local government leaders.
- **Proactively work with communities and/or external organisations who can deploy trusted communicators on these insurgent agendas to champion the change needed.** Be relaxed about whether these groups are on-message as long as they are pushing in the right direction.
- **Take a digital-first approach to communication – using the materials created through the strategy above – to connect directly with voters.** Put attention-grabbing material and authentic voices above message discipline.

1.

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR POLITICS?

Across the western world it feels like a sea change is occurring in our politics. At the heart of this is a simple fact: large numbers of people increasingly feel that mainstream politics – meaning centre-left and centre-right parties, the people that control them and the systems that these parties have created and still (largely) defend – is failing to deliver for them.

In 2024 this disillusionment was expressed through the rejection of incumbent parties at elections. Every governing party facing an election in a developed country in the last year lost vote share, the first time this has ever happened (Burn-Murdoch 2024). Commentators have argued that inflation is the main cause of this anti-incumbency effect.

There have been some recent counter examples to this trend, such as the Liberals in Canada and Labor in Australia. Some will hope that this marks a shift back to politics-as-usual. But it is equally possible that these are the result of one-off dynamics, such as Trump's attacks in Canada bolstering the Liberals who previously looked set for defeat.

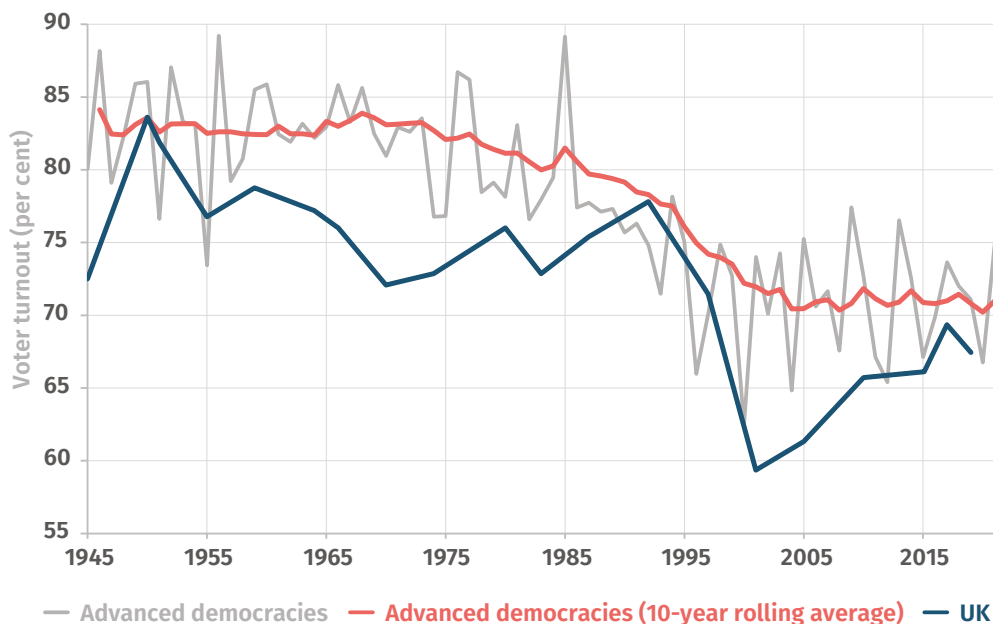
This is because dissatisfaction with the status quo runs much deeper – and has been much more consistent over the longer term – than the recent anti-incumbency effect. There has been a consistent rise in two forms of 'political protest' against the status quo over multiple decades that are worth highlighting.

Large swathes of potential voters in advanced democracies are switching off from politics altogether. This can be seen in the long-run decline in voter turnout since its peak in 1945 – but especially since the 1980s (figure 1.1). This is especially true in the UK where voter turnout has consistently been below other advanced democracies (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022). IPPR has called this a 'silent protest' against the status quo.

FIGURE 1.1

Voter turnout has declined in all advanced democracies, but especially in the UK

Percentage of registered voters who have voted in a national election



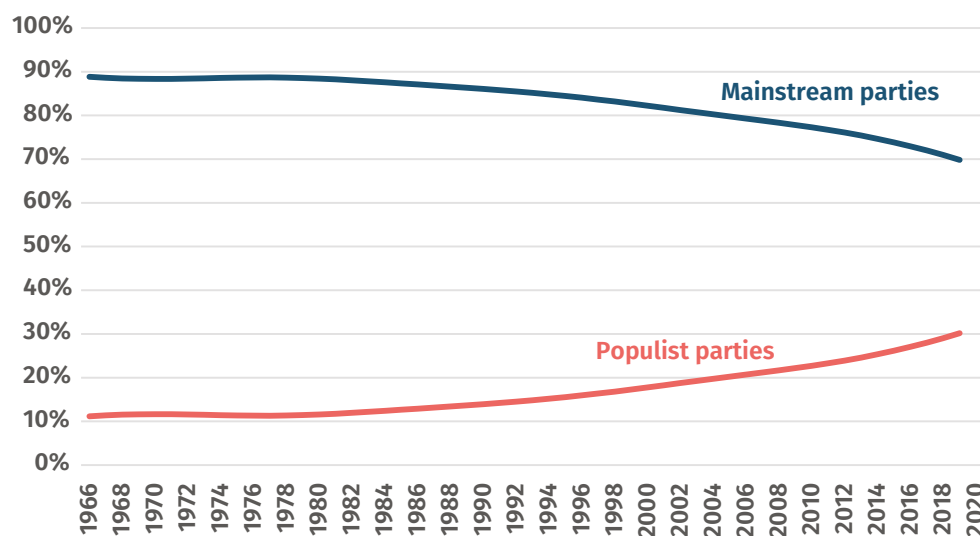
Source: Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022

There has also been a long-run increase in electoral volatility as loyalty to specific parties has declined. But this volatility is not just voters switching between the two main parties. Instead, voters are increasingly turning to the populist right. Across advanced western democracies, populist parties have halved the gap between the two in the west since 1980 (figure 1.2) (Patel et al 2025). We call this ‘noisy protest’.

FIGURE 1.2

Populist parties are becoming more popular while mainstream parties are losing their grip on politics

Vote share in countries in western Europe and North America, by party family



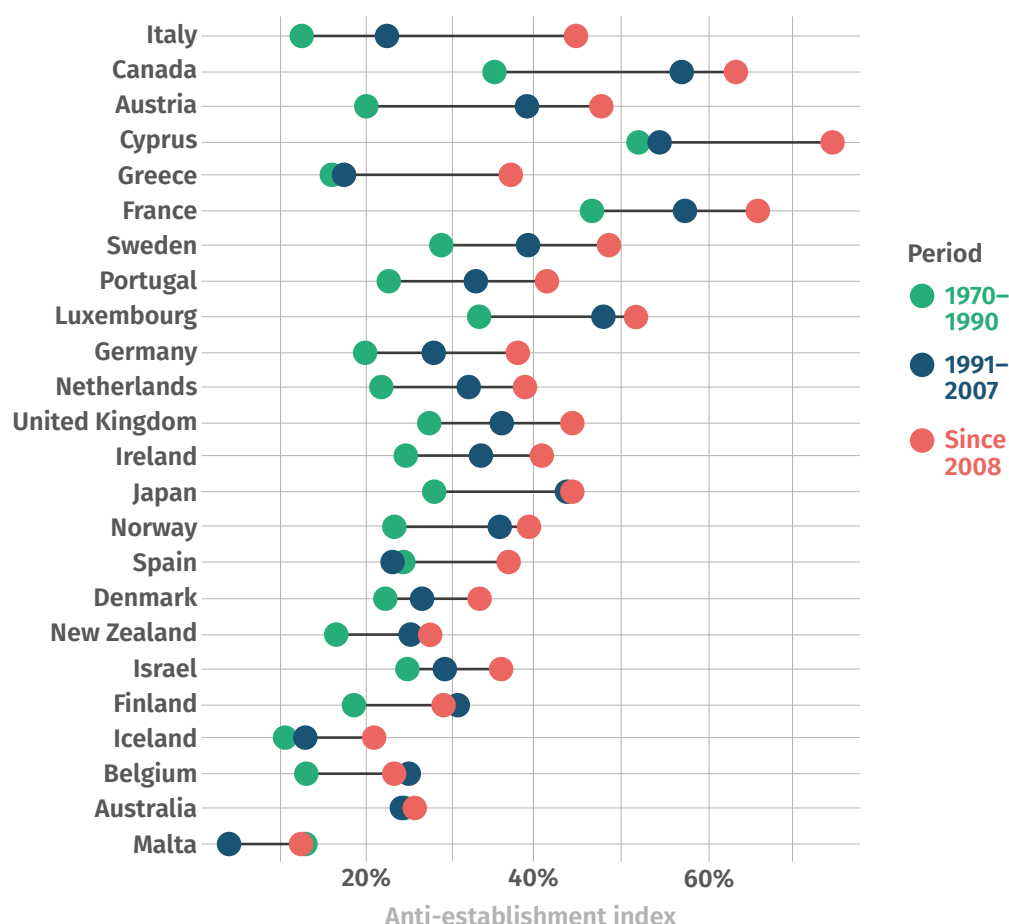
Source: Patel et al 2025

These two forms of ‘political protest’ against the status quo are not seen equally across society. They tend to be concentrated among young people, people on low incomes, those without a degree and those who don’t own their own home (Patel and Swift 2024). However, over recent decades the scale of discontent has grown. Our antiestablishment index – which measures the proportion of a countries’ electorate who don’t vote for an establishment party – has grown from an average 22 per cent in parliamentary elections across the world in the 1970s to 44 per cent in the 2020s (figure 1.3) – doubling over the period.

FIGURE 1.3

The antiestablishment index shows a growing rebellion against the status quo over time

Proportion of citizens (18+) in selected advanced democracies either not voting or voting for right-wing populist parties



Source: Authors’ analysis of ParlGov and IDEA voter turnout databases¹

¹ See: <https://www.parl.gov.org/> and <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database>. The antiestablishment index measures the proportion of eligible voters who do not vote for establishment parties in parliamentary elections, either because they have not registered, they registered but didn’t vote, or because they voted for far-right parties. We include as far-right those parties with an index greater than 7.5 on ParlGov’s left-right index, with the exception of the Conservative party in Norway, the People’s Alliance party in Spain and the Liberal Democratic party of Japan. We combine ParlGov data on far-right vote share with IDEA data on eligible population, registration and turnout. Where the number of registered voters exceeds the eligible population we cap registrations to the eligible population, as such discrepancies are likely to indicate problems with electoral registers. We include countries on grounds of data availability in the ParlGov and IDEA databases. We exclude countries for which we do not have data for at least three elections in each period (1970–1990, 1991–2007, 2008–present). We also exclude Switzerland because its unique system of semi-direct democracy results in a high non-voting share which is not clearly indicative of antiestablishment sentiment.

Recent political events in the UK demonstrate this antiestablishment turn all too clearly. The Labour party won a landslide at the 2024 election, but this was based on the lowest ever turnout since 2001 and a lower share of the vote of any party forming a postwar majority government. At the same time, Reform got the third highest vote share at the election, more than the Liberal Democrats.

Since the election these trends have continued. At the time of writing, polling for IPPR shows that while the current Labour government is not popular (57 per cent think negatively of them compared to 18 per cent positively) the figures are no better for the Conservative party (58 per cent negative, 11 per cent positive). If there was an election tomorrow, the two main parties would get less than 40 per cent of the vote, lower than at any election in recent history.

Put simply: voters are increasingly rejecting both mainstream parties in the UK on the left and the right. The likely beneficiaries of this shift are smaller parties – disproportionately Reform, who, on average, are now the most popular party in the UK and who had a very successful local election result in May.

To combat this antiestablishment turn mainstream political parties, not least the governing Labour party, must demonstrate that they can speak to and for the voters who are turning against them. They must transform to demonstrate that they can be vehicles of change as opposed to guardians of the status quo.

The growing interest in the concept of *insurgent government* in senior Labour circles suggests that those around the prime minister understand this (Simons 2024). But new political slogans – from ‘take back control’ to ‘levelling up’ – are easy to say, but harder to turn into a reality. The concepts of insurgent government has yet to be fully defined or enacted. This is the task facing the government.

This short paper draws on extensive research undertaken by IPPR – including polling, focus groups with key voter groups across the country and interviews with political experts – to help address this challenge head on. It seeks to answer the following key questions.

- Chapter 2: What does it mean to be an insurgent government?
- Chapter 3: What kind of change would an insurgent government champion?
- Chapter 4: How would an insurgent government deliver change?

2.

WHAT IS AN ‘INSURGENT GOVERNMENT’?

This chapter seeks to define insurgent government at a conceptual level. Insurgency traditionally refers to forms of rebellion directed by irregular actors against a state in order to seize control of sources of power (CIA 2011). Notable examples of insurgency historically include the Vietcong in Vietnam and the rebels in the Iraq war. Given this, the attempt to apply insurgency to electoral politics and governing is intended to be evocative rather than literal.

The idea of an insurgent government starts from a recognition that liberal democratic institutions are under attack from non-traditional actors, notably populist political parties. In response to this it suggests that mainstream political parties should seek to exhibit *some* of the characteristics of a non-status quo actor to maintain support for progressive political values and institutions.

Table 2.1 summarises how an insurgent government might differ from mainstream approaches to governing. The rest of this chapter looks at these three characteristics of insurgent government at a conceptual level. Subsequent chapters then set out what this might mean more tangibly for the UK government – though we hope it will be useful for other mainstream progressive governments across the world.

TABLE 2.1

Insurgent governments would innovate with both what change they pursue and how they do this

Characteristics of mainstream and insurgent approaches to government

	Mainstream	Insurgent
What and how?	Defend the status quo, incremental	Challenge the status quo, radical
	Win-win politics	A clear ‘for’ and ‘against’
	Technocratic, what works	Emotive, values-driven, more ideological

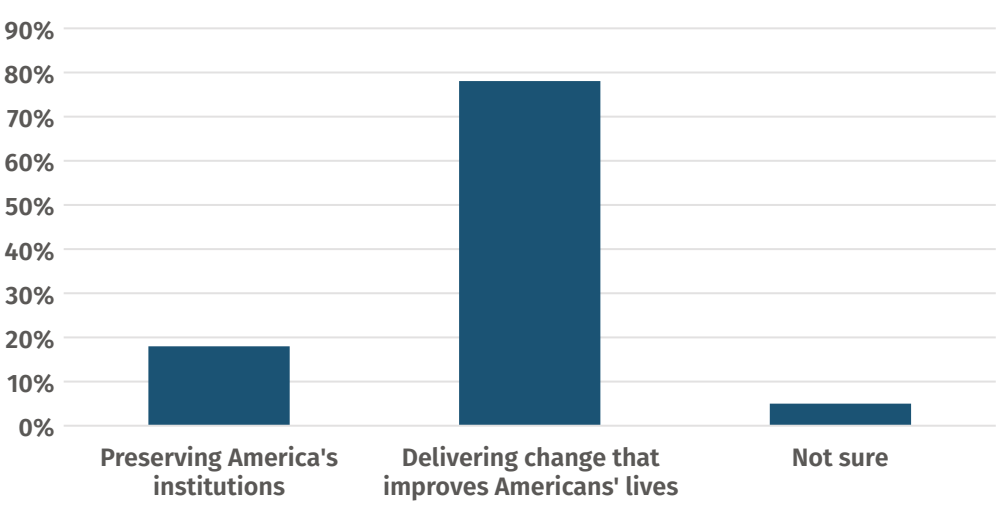
Source: Author's analysis

2.1 FROM DEFENDERS TO CHALLENGERS OF THE STATUS QUO

Progressives across the world have become associated with the status quo, whether on culture or on economic policy. In some ways this is unsurprising: mainstream parties, including progressive parties, have helped to create many of the systems and policies that shape our societies today. They have done this directly through governing and indirectly through shaping the climate of ideas.

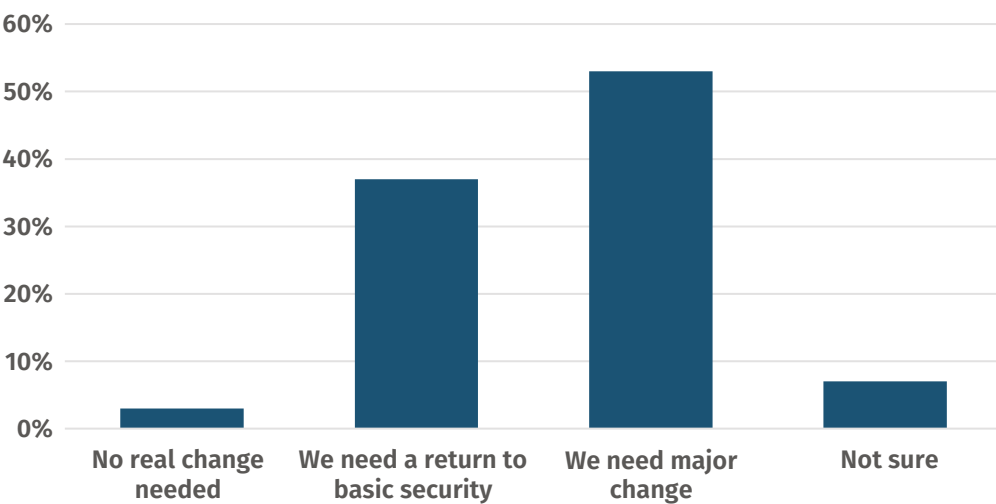
However, with the public increasingly angry at the status quo, it is in many ways an uncomfortable place for them to be. As figures 2.1 and 2.2 demonstrate for the US at the last presidential election, voters want major change not a continuation of the status quo (Shor 2024). This discomfort is especially true for centre-left or progressive parties, which were created, and exist, to champion voices who are locked out by the status quo.

FIGURE 2.1
Voters in the 2024 US election were seeking change not stability
Voters priorities at the US presidential election (% of voters)



Source: Shor 2024

FIGURE 2.2
Voters in the 2024 US election were seeking change not stability
Voters views on nature of the change needed (% of voters)



Source: Shor 2024

With both the centre-right and the centre-left increasingly defending a (failing) status quo that they have co-created, it is populists (particularly on the right) who are capitalising on this sentiment and capturing the public mood. They are championing radical changes – whether on migration, the state (for instance DOGE²) or democracy – while mainstream parties defend the status quo or propose incremental change.

Mainstream parties, especially those in government, must start from a more antiestablishment position, of seeking to reform the status quo in the interests of people, to succeed. This will also mean centrist parties being open to more radical reform that meets the scale of the challenges we are facing and that speaks to the public mood. But delivery alone is not enough: it also means pursuing ‘outsider’ communications strategies that speak to the interests, values and anger of voters (Bhargava et al 2024).

2.2 FROM THE ‘WIN-WIN’ MYTH TO PICKING SIDES

At the heart of this antiestablishment posture should sit a clearer conception of who these political parties exist to serve. In recent decades mainstream political parties have attempted to avoid taking sides in politics: they have not wanted to pick winners and losers. They have instead pursued what we call ‘win-win’ politics (at least rhetorically), where political parties purport to stand for everyone.

This is exacerbated in the UK and the US by their political systems – two party majoritarian systems – which demand that political parties attract the votes of and ‘speak for’ large, diverse and increasingly polarised communities. It has also been driven by the increased ‘hollowness’ of political parties, which have become less rooted in or representative of the communities they have historically existed to serve (Scholzman and Rosenfeld 2024).

The idea of ‘win-win’ politics may sound desirable, but it is in fact challenging to deliver – perhaps even impossible. This is because “to govern is to choose”. There are always winners and losers (even if these are relative). It is also because people are inherently tribal: they see the world through a lens of in-out dynamics, something which is hard to suppress in our politics (Mounk 2022).

It has become even more challenging over time. First, in a world of low growth, trade-offs between groups become more challenging (Friedman 2004). Second, with trust in politics at an all-time low, voters believe that win-win politics is a cover-up for politicians defending their own or powerful interests. And, finally, rising populist parties have raised the salience of in-out politics making it hard for mainstream parties to ignore.

All of this implies that an insurgent government would seek to channel the momentum behind insider-outsider politics, but in ways that seek to deliver progressive outcomes. At a basic level this means being much clearer which groups of people mainstream parties stand for and whose interest they will seek to diminish, where necessary, in serving these groups. This is achieved by being visible and vocal in picking fights for some people and against others: conflict is, in itself, clarifying for voters.

2 The US Department of Government Efficiency.

2.3 FROM TECHNOCRATIC TO VALUES-DRIVEN DELIVERY AND COMMUNICATIONS

In recent decades, since at least the 1990s if not before, politics has largely been a competition between centre-left and centre-right on *competence* to deliver a shared set of policy goals and approaches, including international openness, market liberalisation and liberal democratic institutions (Patel et al 2025). Politics focused on ‘what works’ more than ideological, values-based differences, which were kept within limits.

This is no longer true. As IPPR’s report, *Facing the Future*, argued, crisis and upheaval has eroded faith in those core tenets of our politics: openness, free markets and liberal democracy (ibid). The rise of populism has reopened more values-driven, first-principles and ideological debates. Populists are pulling political contestation away from narrow technocratic policy debates towards broader ideological ones.

This demands that mainstream parties rethink and rearticulate what they stand for and why. They must once again make first-principles arguments for the goals and policies they wish to pursue. These must tap into not just the interests of the public but also their identities and their values. This is something that progressives, in particular, have historically struggled to do as Jonathan Haidt (2012) argued in his book *The Righteous Mind*.

Making emotive, values-driven arguments is also more important in the new media age because of war for attention that politicians and political parties must now compete in. As the journalist Chris Hayes has said, in the context of new technologies and the erosion of traditional media, “the traditional model of communication has fallen apart ... If you can’t be heard, it doesn’t matter what you say” (Hayes 2025).

As he has highlighted, populists such as Donald Trump understand this, while mainstream politicians focus too much on avoiding attention (for example not making mistakes), but without saying anything that will capture attention in our new media environment. Correcting for this demands that mainstream parties move away from technocratic arguments, language and ideas towards more values-driven, emotive alternatives.

3.

WHO SHOULD AN INSURGENT GOVERNMENT STAND FOR AND WHAT SHOULD IT DELIVER?

This chapter seeks to set out what an insurgent government would seek to deliver in reality. This must start with a clear analysis of who the insurgent government stands for. If a government is not defined by elevating the interests of people who have been locked out of power and disadvantaged by the status quo, then it is not insurgent but simply performing insurgency (while defending the status quo). The interests an insurgent government stands against should follow from this: it should oppose those people and organisations who seek to block change that serves the people the government seeks to represent.

Governments which seek insurgent change but lack clarity on who they are for or against are likely to struggle in an era of antipolitics and institutional inertia. This lack of clarity will limit the government's ability to govern coherently: to know how each reform agenda fits into an overall governing agenda that adds up to more than the sum of its parts. It is also a significant challenge electorally: for groups of citizens to feel that their government is not simply defending the status quo, they need clear and consistent signals that the government is on their side.

To help mainstream political parties think through what type of insurgency they might pursue – who they should be for and against – we set out four broad approaches to insurgent government (figure 3.1). These four potentially *progressive* forms of insurgency stand in contrast to the analysis of the right-wing populists who have chosen an insiders vs outsiders approach that puts ethnonationalism at the centre of their insurgent project. Most parties will not adopt just one of these frames but will likely combine them (with a dominant strand and then secondary narratives) but we set them out as separate for easy distinction.

TABLE 3.1

Examples of how insurgent governments (across the political spectrum) define who they are for and against

	Approach	For	Against
1	Silent majority vs liberal elites	'The silent majority' – usually defined as a majority who share a set of values and priorities that are different from those with the loudest voices	Liberal elites defined as groups of citizens (educated, urban, liberal) who dominate the media, key institutions and parties
2	Citizens vs the establishment	The voters or citizens – normal people – as opposed to those who govern/have power	'Powerholders' or governing class who defend the status quo (eg 'the blob')
3	Town hall vs Whitehall	Places and people in 'left behind' communities outside of London	Westminster and Whitehall
4	Workers vs capital	'The many' defined as either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the 99 per cent • workers • squeezed middle/ just about managing. 	'The few' defined as either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the 1 per cent • capital/corporate interests • extractive businesses/ asset owners.

Source: Author's analysis

These types of insurgencies do not map perfectly onto a left-right spectrum, but it is likely that different party families will be more attracted to some rather than others. The type of insurgency adopted by any government or political party will depend on their analysis of three things:

- what the people want (public opinion)
- the change the country needs
- the identity and values of the party (and leader).

So, for example, progressive parties will rule out the 'insiders-outsider' approach to insurgency that right-wing populists have adopted based both on the views of the voters they are targeting and also their values, just as centre-right parties may rule out the 'worker-capital' approach for the same reasons.

We can use the categories of insurgent government proposed above to explore what different forms of government might prioritise and seek to deliver (see table 3.2). This is not intended to be comprehensive but to give examples of how different forms of insurgency – different approaches to the who are you for and who are you against – might result in different policy agendas in government. These stand in contrast to the issues raised by right-wing populists pursuing an insider-outsider insurgency who focus on issues of controlling mass migration, eroding rights of non-citizens and undermining liberal democratic norms.

TABLE 3.2**Examples of the issues and policy agendas pursued by different insurgent governments**

	Approach	Issues	Example policies
1	Silent majority vs liberal elites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education. • Globalisation (trade). • Welfare. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education policy policy/ apprenticeships. • Tariffs/protection of domestic industry. • Harsh conditionality and entitlement on welfare.
2	Citizens vs the establishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Producer vs consumer interest in public services. • Civil service reform. • Democracy vs technocracy (experts). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil service reform. • Citizen power in public services. • Direct and participatory approaches.
3	Town hall vs Whitehall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentrations of power in Whitehall. • City-centric economic policy. • Stripping back top-down management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devolution. • Industrial policy. • Empowering frontline staff.
4	Workers vs capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic rents. • Worker power. • Ownership of assets. • Pay/wages. • Job quality and security. • Consumer rights/prices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taxation on corporates and higher earners. • Competition policy. • Worker power initiatives. • Common ownership. • Minimum wages. • Industrial policy. • Consumer regulation.

Source: Author's analysis

3.1 WHAT THIS ALL MEANS FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT

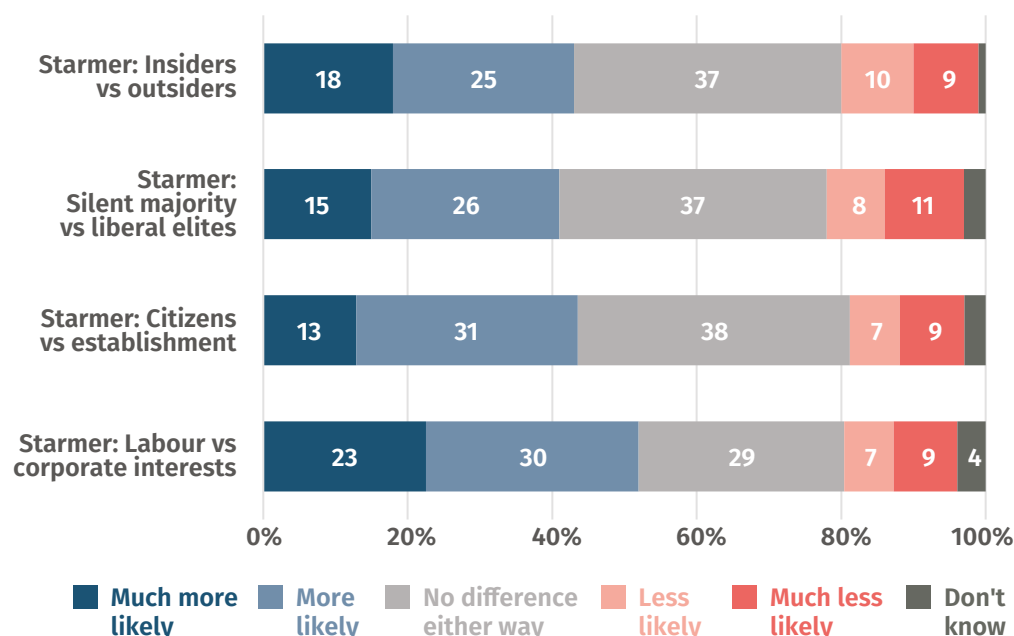
The rise of right-wing populist parties across the world, and the rapid rise in support for Reform in the UK, has led to a growing concern by centre-left and centre-right parties about groups of voters who feel that mainstream parties no longer represent them or deliver on their interests. On the left the fear is that voters who would traditionally vote for Labour will defect to right-wing populism. This would be both an electoral threat to them but also a challenge to their identity as a party of and for 'working people'. This is one of the primary drivers of the interest in insurgent government as a concept.

To demonstrate the effect of different insurgent agendas on support for political parties we undertook a randomised control trial (RCT) methodology. This involved testing a subset of the different insurgent narratives set out in this paper – including those associated with the populist right – against a control group (who saw no message). Because, statistically speaking, the only thing separating the groups is the message they've seen, *any notable difference between a treatment group and the control group can reasonably be attributed to the message they've seen.*

FIGURE 3.1

Voters are most likely to reward Labour for an economically insurgent agenda

Responses to “Imagine if Keir Starmer and Labour governed on the principles in the message you just saw. Would you be more or less likely to vote for them or would it make no difference?”



Source: YouGov polling commissioned by Persuasion UK and IPPR

This shows that Labour is most able to stop voters defecting when pursuing an economically insurgent agenda and least effective under those insurgent narratives most associated with the populist right. These results echo recent Persuasion UK research which finds that ‘Reform curious voters’, meaning those Labour voters most open to voting for Reform, like Reform voters, are concerned about immigration, but are also more likely to support Labour based on an economically interventionist agenda.

This must include making more of their economically insurgent agenda such as on workers’ rights (awareness is at just 28 per cent) and renters’ rights (22 per cent), and taxing digital multinationals (8 per cent), where our polling shows that awareness among the public is low. They should more publicly identify a different set of enemies (current enemies seem to be NIMBYS and asylum gangs) that chime more with worker-capital narratives – starting with landlords (on renter rights) and tech giants (on taxing digital multinationals, including looking at the digital services tax).

We argue for this because it aligns with progressive values and our diagnosis of the big challenges facing the country. But for the government, as our polling shows, it also bridges its voter coalition and offers the most likely route to stopping voters turning to the populist right.

On these issues our polling finds that insurgent narratives significantly increase support for these policy positions (see table 3.3 and figures 3.2 and 3.3). Insurgent narratives are those that include a political confrontation including a clear antagonist and speak directly to issues facing citizens on day-to-day basis. For, example when we tested win-win arguments for policy changes against insurgent equivalents

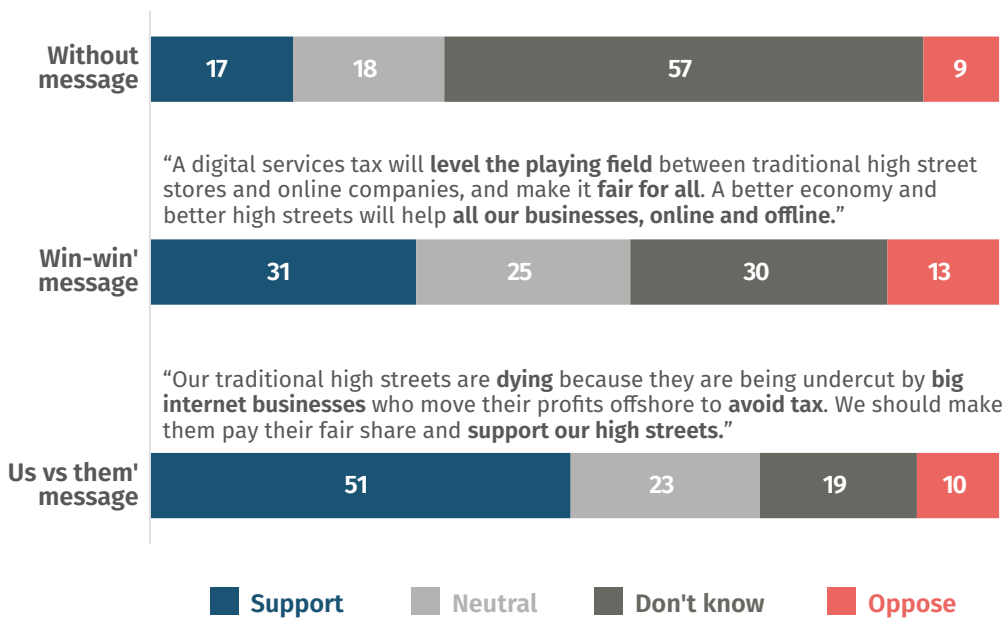
we found it boosted support for policies such as renters’ rights reforms (+24 percentage points) and a digital services tax (+11 percentage points).

TABLE 3.3
Insurgent messages increase support for key policies such as renters’ rights and the digital services tax
Support for key policies under win-win and us vs them messaging

	Net approval win-win	Net approval us vs them	Difference
Digital services tax	+18 pts	+ 42 pts	24 pts
No fault evictions	+ 31 pts	+ 40 pts	11 pts

Source: Datapraxis polling for IPPR

FIGURE 3.2
An insurgent narrative that targets tech giants to put money into high streets increases support for the digital services tax
Support for key policies under win-win and us vs them messaging

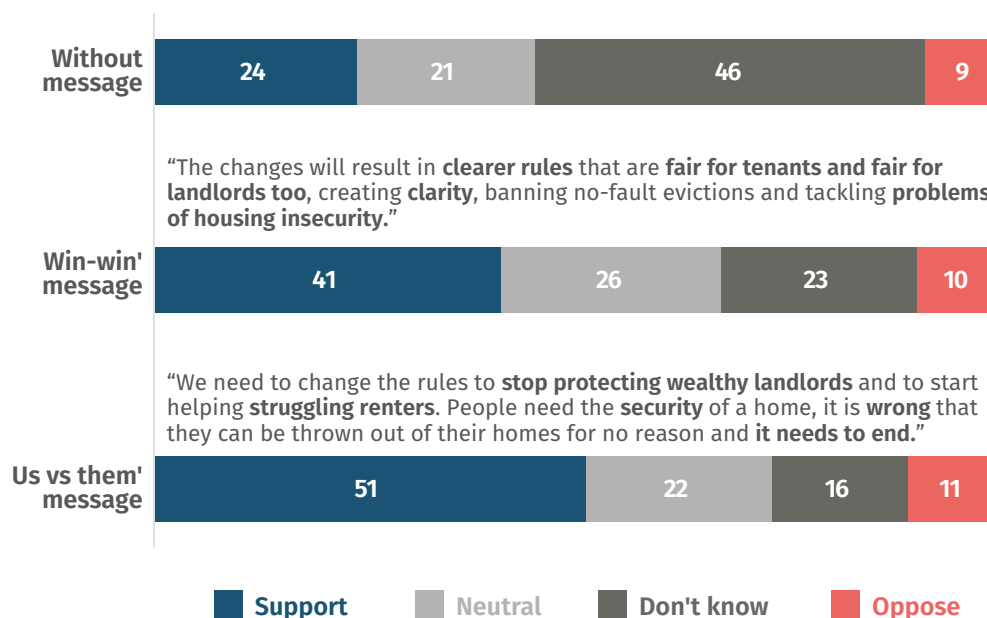


Source: Datapraxis polling for IPPR

FIGURE 3.3

An insurgent narrative that targets landlords and boosts rights for renters increases support for renters' rights

Support for key policies under win-win and us vs them messaging



Source: Datapraxis polling for IPPR

Recommendations for government

- Progressives should be more confident in picking fights which signal who they are for and who they are against – particularly on economic policy. They could draw primarily from options 2 (citizens vs establishment), 3 (town hall vs Whitehall) and 4 (workers vs capital) in clearly defining the type of insurgent government they want to be, including who they are for and against.
- This would mean combining moderate policy positions on culture (eg immigration) with a significantly bolder and more confident position on economic fights. This means being more vocal and ambitious on issues such as:
 - worker rights
 - consumer rights
 - corporate power
 - concentrations of power in London/Westminster
 - citizen-centred public service reform.

We argue for this because it aligns with progressive values and our diagnosis of the big challenges facing the country.

4.

HOW CAN AN INSURGENT GOVERNMENT DELIVER CHANGE?

This chapter sets out how an insurgent government can go about delivering radical change. Insurgent governments are profoundly different in who they seek to represent, their diagnosis of the needs of the country and the policy agendas they pursue. However, they share a common governing challenge: they seek to change the status quo. As a result, they face two significant barriers to implementing their agenda.

1. They face a need to reform the state to deliver fundamental change to the status quo.
2. They must build vocal coalitions of support for the change they seek to deliver (in order to overcome dominant voices and coalitions).

This chapter is not about *what*, but about *how* change is delivered – and takes these two challenges in turn.

4.1 REFORMING THE STATE

There are growing questions from across all political parties about the effectiveness of the state, both in Britain but also across other liberal democracies, in delivering change. These concerns are driven by a few different factors:

- There have been significant increases in government spending but not a corresponding increase in outcomes. For example, in the UK, NHS spending has risen significantly but productivity has fallen sharply (Freedman and Wolf 2024).
- There is evidence that the UK, as well as other liberal democracies, are less effective at building key infrastructure – and that when they do it costs more than it does in other countries (Klein and Thompson 2025).
- Levels of trust and satisfaction, not just in politicians and politics, but in the institutions of the state such as the police and the NHS (BSA 2024), and democracy as a way of organising government, has fallen (Foa et al 2020).

Leading figures from both major parties in the UK have also argued that the state is less responsive to the agendas of political parties and that even where they are responsive capability to deliver in the system has atrophied. This is what we call *inertia* in the system meaning the organisations or people in positions of power are not motivated or incentivised to make change and are more comfortable delivering ‘business as usual’.

The result is that there is now a growing consensus across political parties that there is a need to reform the state – though there is much less consensus on what reform is needed. This is true even for governments that don’t claim to be insurgent: just to maintain or incrementally improve on the status quo, there is a need to drive reform. The playbook for addressing this is relatively well known (figure 4.1) and includes prioritising, strengthening accountability, building capability and changing incentives.

But it is even more true for insurgent governments who seek to go beyond simply incrementally improving the status quo, but to deliver more fundamental change. An insurgent government must tackle *entrenched interests* (figure 4.1). This is where the organisations or people in positions of power do not have the same interests as – or are not accountable to – those who would benefit from change. The playbook here is more radical: the solutions – such as abolishing defunct institutions (or building new institutions where needed), empowering innovators and rebels within existing systems, reforming governance, reforming democratic processes or changing ownership – share a common threat of shifting or building new sources of power (table 4.1).

TABLE 4.1
Barriers to delivery and potential reform approaches

Barrier	Approach	Example reforms
Inertia	Reinvigorate or redirect institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set clear objectives • Build capability on priority areas • Crowd out business as usual to focus on priorities • Create stronger forms of accountability (eg delivery unit/metrics) • Create stronger incentives (eg financial) • Commission independent reviews
Interests	Shift or build new sources of power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create new institutions • Direct or participatory democracy • Share out or move power (eg devolution, HM Treasury reform) • Voting reform • Shift ownership • Reforming governance

Source: Author's analysis

To illustrate this point table 4.2 sets out two key examples of reforms in policymaking and state delivery that fundamentally shifted the balance of interests that shaped policy decisions and outcomes. These case studies were not chosen because they all delivered positive changes or were perfectly effective. Instead, they were chosen because, regardless of our view of the outcomes they deliver, they directly tackled 'entrenched interests' which enabled a shift in approach to policy.

TABLE 4.2

Case studies illustrating the ability of the state to shift the interests that shape policy decisions and outcomes

Case study 1: Consumer-led public services	Case study 2: Direct democracy & participation
Historically, public services have been paternalistic and one-size-fits-all. Producers of public services, meaning providers and public service professions have had far more power than consumers. In recent decades a range of reforms have sought to redress this balance. These have included giving service users greater choice (eg competition in the NHS, personal budgets in social care), voice (eg patient-reported outcomes in the NHS) and power (eg free schools in education, access to data in NHS). These reforms have had mixed success and are incomplete in many public services.	Representative democracy is based on trust that representatives – and the institutions that deliver for them (eg the civil service) – will effectively elevate the views and interests of those they speak for over their own. Insurgent government is partly a recognition that this hasn't always been the case. Direct and participatory democracy is one response to this. It directly empowers voters to make choices that have been vested in representatives. As demonstrated by countries or regions that have pursued this at scale – such as Estonia or Paris – can result in different political choices and greater trust and satisfaction by voters in the political system.

Source: Author's analysis

Recommendations for government

- Radically reduce headcount in Whitehall and use the resources to pay top civil servants better and attract top talent. This could include much more active performance management of those staff who are not performing – and finding ways to reward innovators and disruptors who are overcoming barriers in the system to deliver for working people.
- Tackle concentrations of power through radical devolution. Strip back functions in Whitehall to the essentials (setting goals, setting high-level policy, allocating funding, monitoring performance). Pass down resources, capacity and powers to local government and local delivery bodies (in public services).
- Find ways to empower citizens (consumers) over producers in key public services. This could include giving service users more control over budgets, service design, greater transparency, and ownership of data or support plans.
- Give 'working people' greater voice in our democratic systems by reforming electoral systems and regulating money in politics. This could include careful deployment of participatory or direct democracy where workers and elite views diverge.

4.2 BUILDING A COALITION FOR CHANGE

Insurgent governments must be radical about communicating the change they are pursuing as well as about delivering it. This is because, by their nature, they are seeking to change the status quo. This puts them at odds with powerful interests in public debate such as the mainstream media, business lobby or organised interests. These groups will often come out publicly, or deploy resources privately, to defend the status quo or attack proposed changes. Meanwhile, those who stand to benefit from them are often less engaged (or organised) or have less power to mobilise. Likewise, governments are increasingly finding that delivery alone is not enough (if it ever was): they need to ensure that citizens are aware of what they have delivered (Bhargava et al 2024).

TABLE 4.3

Communications and coalition building challenges for governments

Component	Definition	Potential response
Channels	Insurgents often seek ways to 'hack' mainstream media or communicate more directly with citizens through 'new media'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage alternative forms of media • Source more direct forms of communication • Shift incentives in mainstream media organisations
Message	Insurgents often lean on stories and emotions rather than arguments or statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify emotionally resonant stories that tap into people's desire for change
Voice	Insurgents often pick spokespeople who are or can present as authentically from or for the groups they are seeking to represent or perceived as 'non-political'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and utilise the most authentic spokespeople to target audience • Bring along allies who are trusted by those audiences and can champion change

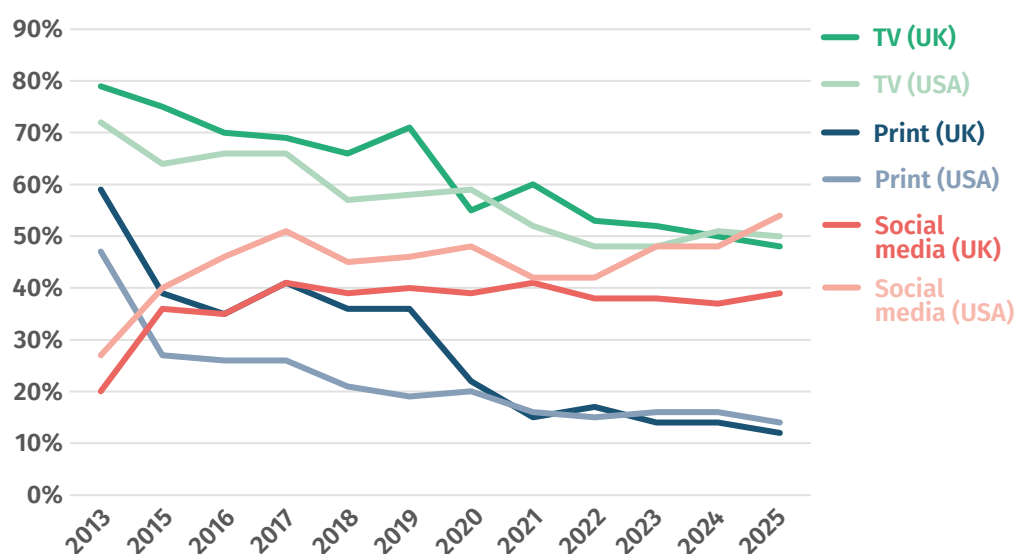
Source: Author's analysis

This creates a need for insurgent governments to proactively build support for the changes they are pursuing and informing citizens of the benefits of these changes once they are in place, in more creative ways. As figure 4.1 demonstrates, a key element of such a communications strategy is moving beyond a 'mainstream media only' strategy, often dominated by status quo voices, and connecting directly with citizens using 'new media'. This is made possible, even inevitable, by the growing fragmentation in the media environment, with the decline of mainstream media both print and TV as the main source of news (see figure 4.1) (Newman et al 2025). This shift is less pronounced in the UK than in the US – with traditional sources such as the BBC still having significant cut through even among Reform and Reform curious voters (see figure 4.2) (Akehurst 2025) – but cannot be ignored.

FIGURE 4.1

Social media is fast becoming the main source of news

Main source of media for news in the UK versus the US, % of population

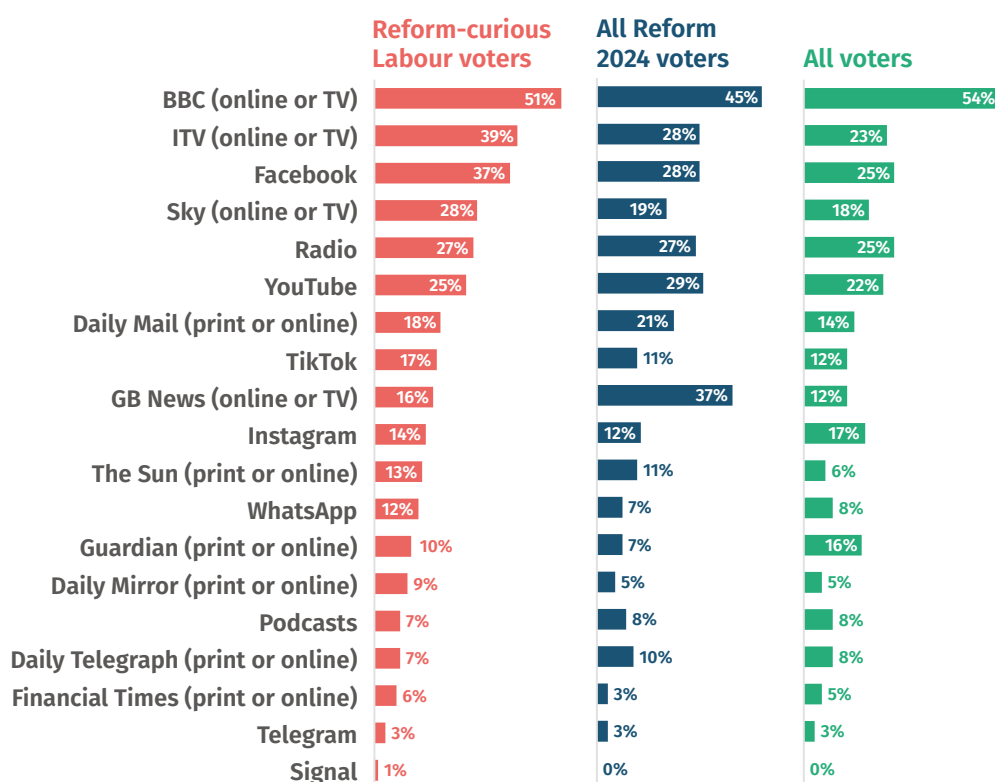


Source: Newman et al 2025

FIGURE 4.2

Reform and Reform-curious voters are more likely to get their news from ‘new media’ – but BBC still the most common source

Responses to “Through which of these media outlets or platforms, if any, have you seen or heard politics related content in the last few days?”



Source: Akehurst 2025

However, building coalitions of support, or getting recognition for delivery, is about more than just changing the channels through which communication occurs. It is also about the nature of the content being communicated. As the commentator Chris Hayes has noted, the fragmentation of media has fundamentally changed the game:

“The reality is that everywhere you look, there is no longer any formal set of institutions to force public attention on a topic, no basic rules for who will speak when and who will listen. Under these conditions, the need for attention becomes exclusive; it swallows debate, it swallows persuasion, it swallows discourse whole. Attention ascends from a means to an end to the end itself. If you can’t be heard, it doesn’t matter what you say.”

Chris Hayes, ‘The loudest megaphone: How Trump mastered our new attention age’, *Guardian*, 28 January 2025.

In what has been called ‘the attention age’, politics (or news) is competing with everything else – from advertising to funny videos – for attention. To get noticed, political content must be more effective at grabbing attention than anything else. As Hayes notes, the right has changed its strategy to achieve this far more effectively than progressives have: “[Trump] is the political figure who most fully exploited the new rules of the attention age” (Hayes 2025). He, and other right-wing populist figures, their communication has to come with ‘shock value’ to grab attention and, ideally tap into deeply held emotions, values and identities, because these are the things that hold attention and are then more likely to persuade.

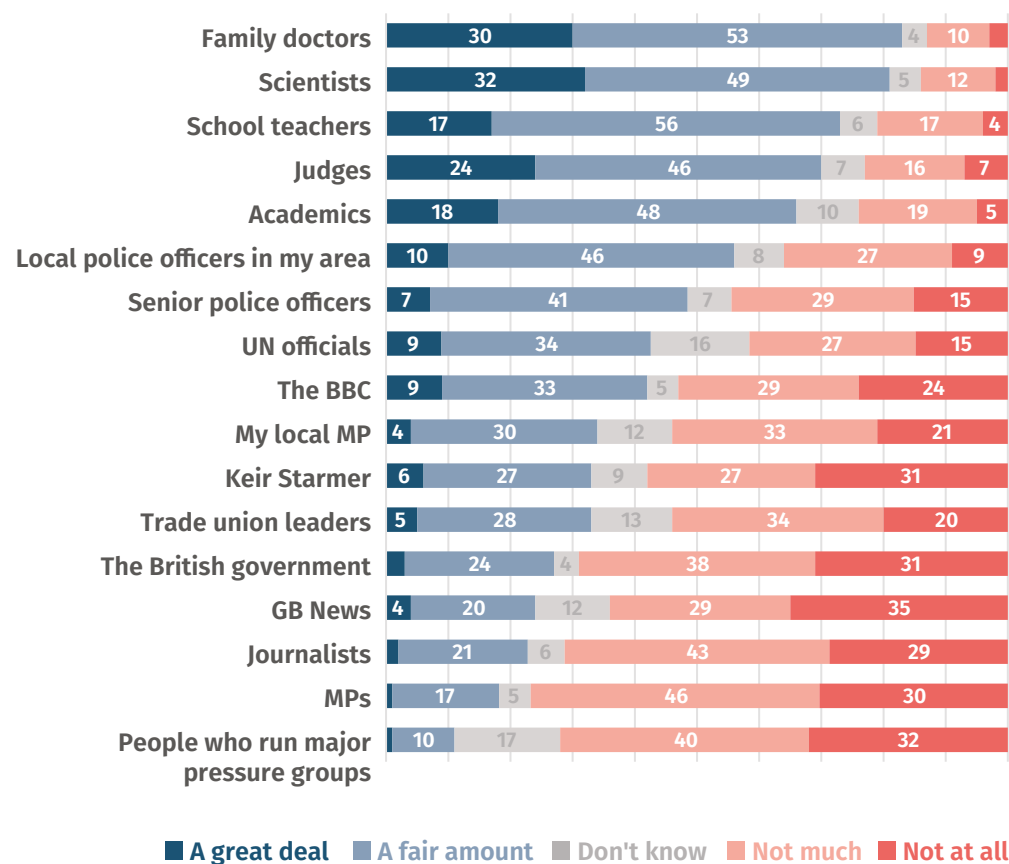
By contrast, too often, progressives continue to play by the old rules where the main aim of media, usually mainstream, is sensible fact-driven content, delivered reliably with message discipline (often at the expense of emotion or authenticity which only the most gifted communicators can conjure to meet a script). Put simply, the progressive communication strategy can be summarised as ‘don’t fuck up, don’t make noise’, whereas the populist right is intensely relaxed about ‘fucking up and making noise’ as long as it drives attention towards them at the expense of their opponents. This strategy also comes with the benefit of dragging their opponents onto their territory: with progressives increasingly on the back foot, responding to the latest shocking pronouncement from the right.

Finally, the messenger, as well as the message, matters. This is particularly important in a world where most citizens have lost trust in mainstream political parties and politicians (Quilter-Pinner et al 2021). To cut through and persuade insurgent governments should seek to deploy their most effective spokespeople into the debate, where effectiveness means the ability to get and hold attention and to communicate authentically and persuade. This should be done at the expense of deploying the people with that brief or who have the greatest message discipline. Moreover, with trust in politicians particularly low, insurgent movements should seek to build networks of spokespeople made up of citizens themselves or ‘unusual’, authentic and trusted champions who are more likely to be listened to, heard and trusted (see figure 4.3).

FIGURE 4.3

Insurgent movements should build spokespeople from groups of trusted people

Responses to “How much do you trust the following to tell you the truth?”, % of people



Source: Difford 2024

Recommendations for government

- Publicly be more vocal – and pick more fights – on insurgent causes that show who they are for and against. In the short run these could draw on existing policy positions starting with workers’ rights and renters’ rights.
- Deploy the spokespeople who are most likely to connect with voters at risk of disengaging or turning to the populist right, regardless of whether they are responsible for the relevant policy areas. These could include mayors or local government leaders.
- Proactively work with communities and/or external organisations who can deploy trusted communicators on these insurgent agendas to champion the change needed. Be relaxed about whether these groups are on-message as long as they are pushing in the right direction.
- Take a digital-first approach to communication – using the materials created through the strategy above – to connect directly with voters. Put attention-grabbing material and authentic voices above message discipline.

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