



REIMAGINING LAWMAKING

HOW TO REBUILD TRUST
IN PARLIAMENT

Ryan Swift

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SUMMARY

People feel that politics is something that is done to them, not with them. All too often citizens are merely spectators as decisions are taken and laws are made in Westminster that shape their lives. This must change. People must feel that they have influence in the collective decision-making endeavour that is democracy (Patel 2023).

Fixing this is essential, not only to the task of making our politics more equal and fairer but also to the vital mission of restoring faith and trust in politics as a force for good.

Political trust is essential to a well-functioning democracy, but it has declined sharply in the UK over recent decades (Scholes 2025). Almost half of people (46 per cent) now say they “almost never” trust governments of any party to act in the national interest ahead of their own party interests – an almost fourfold increase since 1986 (authors analysis of BSA 2024). We now live in an era of low trust politics which has contributed to lower political participation (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021), weakened democratic legitimacy (Foa et al 2020), and the growth of populism (Henley 2018).

Voters are losing faith in the key institutions central to our democracy, most notably parliament. Just one in five people feel that parliament as an institution effectively balances the interests of different groups (OECD 2024), while most voters feel that governance in the UK needs substantial improvement (BSA 2024). Compared with other European democracies, the UK ranks 13th out of 17 countries for trust in politicians and 16th out of 17 for trust in parliament, with only Greece in a worse position (authors analysis of ESS 2023).

The populist right has sought to respond to this. The Leave campaign’s slogan of ‘take back control’ reflected widespread feelings of democratic voicelessness. However, post-Brexit governments often used regained powers to centralise authority and limit parliamentary scrutiny rather than empower citizens (Garner et al 2024). This has resulted in worse political decision-making and legislation, that has likely exacerbated public dissatisfaction with politics and politicians.

At present, the populist right is seeking to further capitalise on the lack of trust in politicians and parliament, advancing constitutional reform agendas that would consolidate power in fewer hands, weaken democratic law-making, and strip away vital checks and balances.

Progressives cannot fail to respond to this and be left behind and, more damagingly, risk becoming the defenders of institutions that have plainly not been perceived to be delivering for citizens. Progressives must recover their interest in collective action when it comes to the ways in which our democratic institutions operate.

This task must begin at the heart of democracy: in parliament. This will require significant transformation that both revitalises institutions and makes them more representative, responsive and legitimate in the eyes of citizens and, in turn, improves the standards of legislation that parliament produces. To begin this mission – to democratise law-making and rebuild political trust – this report makes the case for action in three key areas:

1. REBUILDING TRUST IN LAWMAKERS

A crucial task is rebuilding trust in lawmakers by improving accountability and limiting the influence of private interests in politics. This will raise standards, increase responsiveness, and give the public a greater say in representation. We recommend the following.

- Extending the right to recall giving voters the ability to remove any MP if they wish to do so.
- Improving the transparency of lobbying activities by extending the lobbying register and introducing new transparency requirements for both lobbyists and powerholders.
- Introducing a near total ban on second jobs for MPs.

2. REBUILDING TRUST IN LAW-MAKING INSTITUTIONS

Trust must also be restored in law-making institutions by improving parliamentary procedures and representation. Stronger scrutiny and more democratic processes are essential for good legislation. There is also a need to improve the representativeness of parliament, the composition of which significantly shapes outcomes. We recommend the following.

- Reforming how time is allocated in the House Commons to limit executive dominance and empower MPs.
- Restricting the use of delegated legislation and improving legislative scrutiny.
- Increasing working-class representation in the Commons through financial support and a legal 'right to run' for candidates.
- Establishing a series of citizens' assemblies on House of Lords reform and setting out a clear roadmap for change.

3. EXTENDING THE ROLE OF CITIZENS IN LAW-MAKING

To increase the public's influence over parliament and strengthen collective agency in our politics there is a clear need to enhance the voice of citizens in the functioning of parliament and the law-making process. We recommend the following.

- Improving and extending the citizen consultation process on legislation.
- Making the petitions system stronger and more meaningful.
- Significantly extending the use of citizens' assemblies at the national level.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political trust – the belief or working assumption that political actors or institutions will act in accordance with your interests or preferences even if you do not enforce it (Easton 1975) – is vital for a healthy democracy. Yet trust in British politics and its institutions has reached an all-time low. Levels of trust have declined markedly over recent decades, from 40 per cent trusting governments ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ in 1986 to just 12 per cent doing so by 2024 (Scholes 2025). Almost half of people (46 per cent) now say they “almost never” trust governments of any party to act in the national interest ahead of their own party interests – an almost fourfold increase since 1986 (authors analysis of BSA 2024).

This has far-reaching implications for our democracy. A decline in political trust has been associated with a decline in political participation (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021), a crisis of democratic legitimacy (Foa et al 2020) and the rise of populism (Henley 2018). We now see this playing out in our politics. Most strikingly, just one in every two adults voted at the 2024 general election – the lowest share of the population to vote since the advent of universal suffrage (Patel and Valgarðsson 2024).

When it comes to legitimacy, public belief in the capacity of politics and politicians to change things for the better is waning. Governments have repeatedly offered sweeping transformation to sceptical electorates, only to find themselves unable to deliver change on the scale promised. The Leave campaign’s injunction to “take back control” spoke powerfully to a widespread sense of democratic voicelessness. Yet, as work by IPPR and the Bingham Centre has shown, post-Brexit, the previous UK government used its recovered freedoms to centralise power and limit parliamentary scrutiny rather than to empower citizens (Garner et al 2024).

A deeper and more responsive democracy was set aside in favour of a centralist vision of national sovereignty with the misuse of parliamentary processes having increasingly stifled deliberative law-making. This has resulted in worse legislation and political decision-making, that has likely exacerbated public dissatisfaction with politics and politicians.

The result is a population that has largely lost faith in the system, with 79 per cent of people now saying that the way Britain is governed could be improved ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ (BSA 2024). Currently, the UK parliament and the legislation it produces is not living up to public expectations. Compared with other European democracies, the UK ranks 13th out of 17 countries for trust in politicians and 16th out of 17 for trust in parliament, with only Greece in a worse position (authors analysis of ESS 2023). Only one in five people in the UK think that parliament balances interests of different population groups and regions. This is well below the 36 per cent of people on average across other OECD countries (OECD 2024).

Meanwhile, the populist right is on the march, leading in the opinion polls and making breakthroughs in local government. They are now seeking to capitalise on the lack of trust in politicians and parliament, advancing constitutional reform agendas that would consolidate power in fewer hands, weaken democratic law-

making, and strip away vital checks and balances. Progressives who fail to match this ambition risk being left behind and, more damagingly, risk becoming the defenders of institutions that have plainly not been delivering for citizens.

This report argues that a key piece in the wider puzzle of restoring political trust must lie in reimagining law-making in order to restore faith in parliament, politicians and politics as a force for good. People should no longer feel that politics is something that is done to them, not with them. At present, all too often citizens are merely spectators as laws are made and decisions are taken in Westminster that shape their lives. This must change. People must feel that they have influence in the collective decision-making endeavour that is democracy (Patel 2023).

A progressive politics that merely defends or lightly tweaks poorly functioning institutions will only open the door wider to the populist right. The current government's challenge is simultaneously to strengthen and revive institutions and to make them more representative, more responsive, more democratic and more legitimate. It must reconcile the promise of stability with the promise of a politics that genuinely serves working people, and balance accountability with a more engaging role for citizens in national legislating. Progressives must recover their interest in collective action when it comes to the ways in which our democratic institutions operate.

We must forge a system which allows for governments to deliver on their commitments to voters and be empowered to respond quickly to crises where necessary. But one that also allows for effective deliberation, both to enhance the quality of legislation and policymaking to prevent costly mistakes and policy churn, and a system that gives citizens a greater stake in the decisions and laws made on their behalf.

To do so – drawing on UK and international evidence, insights from focus groups with citizens from across the country and a roundtable with leading experts in parliamentary studies – this report makes the case for:

- rebuilding trust in lawmakers through strengthening accountability and reducing the influence of private interests
- rebuilding trust in law-making institutions with procedural reforms and action to improve the representativeness of parliament
- extending the role of citizens in law-making by embedding a sense of collective ownership over our politics.

Taking bold action in these areas to reimagine law-making is vital for the health of our democracy, and essential to efforts to rebuild political trust, combat the populist threat, and remake parliament so that it effectively provides what Abraham Lincoln famously called government of the people, by the people and for the people.

2. REBUILDING TRUST IN LAWMAKERS

A crucial task in this agenda is to take steps to rebuild trust in our lawmakers. Here, we identify two key areas for reform. First, there is a need to enhance the accountability of lawmakers to citizens to improve standards, increase political responsiveness and give the public a greater say over who represents them. Second, there is a pressing need to take action to limit private interests in our politics and their influence on law-making. This is vital to improve trust and rebalance law-making in the interests of all citizens.

BETTER HOLDING LAWMAKERS TO ACCOUNT

Outside of general elections, citizens have very little ability to hold their representatives to account. This is damaging for the standards and responsiveness of representation and the approaches the representatives may take to decision-making and law-making. Moreover, being limited to having a say on who represents you just once every five years limits citizens' agency over their representation, which in turn may have negative impacts on their satisfaction with and trust in the political system. There is a strong case for improving accountability mechanisms for the public, so that they have the ability to remove lawmakers who are widely seen to be failing in their representative duties.

Extending the right to recall

As things stand, the public have very limited opportunities to remove MPs seen as underperforming in their representative duties. Since 2015, partly in response to the MPs' expenses scandal, voters can recall their MP, but only under three circumstances: if the MP is convicted of an offence and imprisoned; if they are suspended from the House for at least 10 sitting days (or 14 calendar days) following a Committee on Standards report; or if they are convicted under section 10 of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 (Kelly and Johnston 2026).

If these conditions are met, constituents can trigger a recall petition, open for six weeks. For success, 10 per cent of registered voters must sign. If reached, the seat becomes vacant and a by-election is triggered. While the system gives voters some influence, its use has been limited: six petitions have been triggered, with four leading to by-elections.

We recommend that the 2015 Recall Act should be reformed to allow voters to remove any MP should they chose to do so. This would enhance accountability and give citizens greater influence between general elections. Under this reform, voters will have the power to recall MPs deemed to be failing in their representative duties or going against the spirit of what they were elected on.

Some examples where this mechanism might be utilised by voters may include cases where an MP:

- decides to cross the floor and join another political party
- is involved in corruption that is viewed as significant but falls short of current thresholds for parliamentary sanction

- chooses to go against the views of a vast majority of constituents on a controversial issues
- is deemed by constituents to be abandoning their proper duties by, for example, taking several weeks off to appear on a TV show such as *I'm A Celebrity*.

Far from undermining the notion of representative democracy, this reform would improve the quality and responsiveness of political representation (Vandamme 2020). If voters can elect MPs, they can reasonably be trusted to judge their performance while they're in office (Goodman 2019). Extending recall may also act as a 'safety valve' for political dissatisfaction, providing an institutional outlet for public anger that might otherwise fuel instability (Vandamme 2020). Recall can increase trust in political systems (Qvortrup 2011, Vandamme 2020). Many of our focus group participants strongly supported extending recall. Many noted the absence of formal performance review mechanisms, comparing the rules for MPs unfavourably to standard workplace accountability.

The UK would not be alone in taking this step. Recall has historical roots and is used in various forms globally. Many democracies – including Japan, Peru, and parts of the US, Germany and Canada – permit recall at different levels (Vandamme 2020, Welp and Whitehead 2020, McCall et al 2025). The idea is also being explored by both the Welsh Senedd and Scottish parliament (ibid).

Expanding recall may carry some risks, including partisan misuse and increased polarisation. These, however, could be mitigated through building in additional safeguards (Goodman 2019). The current process for recall could be retained as it stands for cases of lawbreaking and parliamentary sanction. The right to recall could then be broadened so that it can be invoked by constituents for any reason but with more controls and higher thresholds.

These could include time constraints whereby a recall cannot be triggered less than 18 months after a general election or by-election so that opponents cannot seek to re-run elections in short order and, in the cases of failed petitions, new recall attempts should not be able to be triggered again (except in cases of lawbreaking and parliamentary sanction) for at least one year to prevent persistent attempts to remove individual MPs.

There should also be a higher threshold in place for a by-election to be triggered than in cases of lawbreaking and parliamentary sanction to prevent this system being abused by small groups of partisans. This could be set at 40 per cent of registered voters, as is the case in British Columbia. Maintaining the current exemption for sitting cabinet ministers from recall would likely be sensible in order to prevent targeted campaigns fuelled solely by partisan political interests.

Participants supported higher thresholds for general recall, recognising that removing an MP for loss of confidence should require stronger justification than clear misconduct. These safeguards and higher thresholds mean that it is likely that recall would be unlikely to be abused and result in ongoing by-elections. Yet its existence as a mechanism would strengthen accountability, improve representation, and enhance citizens' sense of political agency and trust.

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE INTERESTS

A crucial principle underpinning democracy is that politicians, parliament and the laws it makes should work in the common good. Yet there is a widespread perception that this is often not the case (UK Anti-Corruption Coalition 2024). Indeed, several recent political scandals such as the Cameron–Greensill and Owen Paterson lobbying scandals of 2021, and the Mandelson–Epstein scandal of 2026

have shown that sadly it is sometimes the case that private interests are prioritised over those of the public good.

Concern about corruption in politics compounds political disillusionment and fuels a lack of trust in politics. Two-thirds of voters believe UK politics is becoming more corrupt, while just one-third retain faith that their elected officials will put the public interest ahead of their own (ibid). If we are to restore the faith of citizens in politics and parliament and ensure law-making processes serve the collective interest, taking significant action to address this is vital. In particular, clamping down on the potential negative influence of private interest through restricting lobbying activities and MPs working outside of parliament in second jobs should be priorities.

Improving the transparency of lobbying activities

Lobbying is a broad term referring to business and interest groups seeking access to politicians in order to influence policy decisions. This can be carried out by in-house lobbyists within organisations or by professional lobbying firms. In itself, lobbying is not inherently harmful; it can play a constructive role in bringing expertise and ideas into policymaking (Dávid-Barrett 2021, White 2021, Worthy and Langehennig 2021). However, its impact is often opaque, and the privileged access enjoyed by lobbying interests highlights significant inequalities in political influence (Dávid-Barrett 2021; Patel 2023). Recent scandals have drawn further attention to these concerns.

In the UK, lobbying regulation – largely stemming from the Lobbying Act 2014 – remains inadequate and creates major transparency gaps.

First, there is limited knowledge of who lobbyists are. The statutory Register of Lobbyists only includes consultant lobbyists, who represent a small fraction of the industry (Parvin 2021, Worthy and Langehennig 2021). It excludes in-house lobbyists, the most common form in UK politics. It is estimated that fewer than 4 per cent of groups appearing in ministerial meeting records are listed on the register leaving most lobbying activity unaccounted for (McKay and Wozniak 2020).

Second, the public has little awareness of when lobbying occurs. Although meetings with ministers and permanent secretaries must be disclosed, reporting is inconsistent and often delayed. Further, when it comes to departmental recording of lobbying, although many report quarterly, delays are common (Whiffen 2023). This can render disclosures meaningless or ‘tokenistic’ if relevant policy decisions have already been made (Maxwell and Dávid-Barrett 2021).

Third, even when meetings are disclosed, their purpose is often unclear. Descriptions such as ‘introductory meeting’ or ‘general discussion’ provide little insight into what was discussed or sought (Whiffen 2023). While improvements have been made after updated guidance was issued in 2024, there is a clear need to enforce this consistently.

Fourth, much lobbying activity goes entirely unrecorded. Only formal, in-person meetings are covered; communication via phone, email, messaging or post is excluded. Interactions with junior officials and special advisers are also largely omitted (Parvin 2021).

These gaps mean that the scale and nature of lobbying activity remain poorly understood (Worthy and Langehennig 2021), and the UK compares unfavourably with other advanced democracies (McKay and Wozniak 2020). Given the size of the Westminster lobbying industry – the third largest in the world with over 4,000 lobbyists (Crepaz and Worthy 2024) – this lack of transparency is concerning.

Public awareness reflects this, with only 15 per cent believing there is sufficient information about who is lobbying (Worthy and Langehennig 2021). Focus group participants expressed concern about the influence of professional lobbyists, arguing that it enables the promotion of self-serving interests aligned with individual MPs. Many emphasised that democratic representation should prioritise ordinary citizens over organised lobbying groups. The Covid-19 pandemic was frequently cited as an example, with PPE procurement controversies illustrating how weak oversight can enable corruption and prioritise private gain.

Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reform of the Lobbying Act 2014. This would align the UK with international standards, where lobbying regulations are generally stricter (IPU 2025), and reflect a broader global trend towards tighter oversight (Ki Hong et al 2024). Expanding the Register of Lobbyists to include in-house lobbyists and all other organisations and actors engaged in lobbying would improve transparency.

Further reforms should focus on improving disclosure of lobbying activities. All registered lobbyists should be required to clearly state the purpose of their work, including the legislation they seek to influence and the individuals they aim to engage. Regular reporting – at least every six months – should be mandated, alongside monthly disclosure of all meetings and communications with ministers, special advisers and officials.

Greater transparency is also required from powerholders. Following recommendations from the Boardman Review (2020) and the Committee on Standards in Public Life (2021), ministers should be required to record and publish lobbying interactions monthly. Data should be centrally collated rather than dispersed across departmental websites. Consideration should also be given to extending similar requirements to the Official Opposition and all other MPs. These reforms would go a significant way to improving lobbying transparency and, in turn, limit hidden lobbying influence on law-making, helping rebuild public trust in the system.

Banning MPs from holding second jobs

Historically, the practice of MPs holding a second job – often continuing in their former careers as doctors, journalists, academics or lawyers – was relatively common. It was seen as a way of ensuring the chamber was filled with experienced professionals from different backgrounds (Stowers 2023). However, changes to the operating patterns of the House of Commons and shifting expectations of MPs have led to a decline in traditional second jobs (ibid). From the 1980s onwards, a different type of second job became more common, with MPs increasingly working in the private sector as advisers or consultants to businesses, lobbyists and PR firms (UK Parliament 2015).

Current UK rules mean that MPs, except government ministers, can hold second jobs but must declare earnings above a threshold (Stowers 2023). Many MPs do so. Analysis of the 2019–24 parliament found that 43 per cent of Conservative MPs, 38 per cent of Labour MPs, and 34 per cent of SNP MPs had second jobs (Thévoz 2022). In total, 260 MPs worked 47,325 hours and earned an average of £37,000 each between October 2021 and November 2022 (ibid). Conservative MPs accounted for 90 per cent of total outside earnings (ibid). Recent analysis, of this parliament, suggests a small number of MPs are working the equivalent of one day a week in outside roles (Goodier 2025). Notably, some MPs have already earned over £1 million in addition to their parliamentary salary since 2024 for other work (ibid, McGrath 2025).

While around 80 per cent of democracies allow legislators to take additional employment (Weschle 2022), the growth of private-sector roles among MPs

raises concerns about influence and its impact on politics and law-making. One academic study found that MPs with second jobs asked around 60 per cent more written parliamentary questions, often in targeted ways that may relate to their external work (ibid). Public concern reflects this: 61 per cent agree that second jobs may compromise MPs' independence (Ipsos 2021), while only 18 per cent believe politicians would refuse private-sector roles offered in exchange for favours (OECD 2024).

In order to pervert conflicts of interest and the potential for MPs' decision-making to be swayed by outside employers, there is a clear need to significantly tighten regulation on MPs holding second jobs. The government has strengthened some rules, restricting MPs from providing paid advice on public policy or parliamentary work. However, this falls short of earlier proposals.

Several additional options to tighten the rules on MPs' second jobs have been put forward. For example, introducing limits on time MPs spend on or the income they earn from second jobs. But the clearest and most effective way to address concerns about second jobs and their impact on democratic law-making would be to introduce an outright ban on all other forms of employment for MPs with a small number of exceptions for those where practice is required to maintain professional registration such as medicine. This idea has previously been endorsed by Keir Starmer when Leader of the Opposition (BBC 2021). The government should introduce legislation in this parliament to make it a reality.

3.

REBUILDING TRUST IN LAW-MAKING INSTITUTIONS

We must also rebuild trust in our law-making institutions. This should involve reforming the procedures of parliament and the legislative process in order to democratise law-making and enhance scrutiny. This is vital to the production of good legislation. There is also a need to improve the representativeness of parliament. The composition of our law-making institutions has a significant bearing on the legislation they produce. One obvious means to improve representation in the House of Commons would be to adopt a more proportional voting system for electing MPs. Given the current political contest of fragmented party support, this should be an issue for serious debate and consideration. It is something that IPPR, along with many others, have called for (see for example Patel and Swift 2025). The focus in this report, however, is on improving diversity of representation in the Commons as it stands, alongside delivering meaningful Lords reform to improve representation in the second chamber.

IMPROVING PARLIAMENTARY AND LEGISLATIVE PROCEDURES

The ways in which parliament functions and operates is vital to the law-making process yet there are a number of notable flaws with the current process that restrict democratic, well-scrutinised law-making and governance. The UK system of government is marked by executive dominance that limits the wider legislature. Moreover, there is evidence that law-making standards in parliament have declined over recent years – in particular, the excessive use of delegated legislation and the sidelining of scrutiny norms have undermined democratic law-making (Garner et al 2024). To address these issues, action to enhance the voice of MPs beyond the government, and steps to improve institutional practices and scrutiny of legislation should be taken.

Reducing executive dominance in the Commons

A notable feature of the UK parliamentary model is the concentration of executive power, generally within one-party, bare-majority cabinets (Lijphart 2012). A government with a majority has the ability to wield significant power. While this can allow government to deliver transformative change, it means that there are relatively few limits on executive powers and a limited role for other branches of government, particularly the legislature. Lord Hailsham's adage that the UK government can serve effectively as an elective dictatorship is just as true now as when it was uttered 50 years ago (Le Roux 2014). It is argued that this model – that enables governments to impose laws and policy reforms with few constraints on executive discretion – is a key source of UK policy failure and policy churn (Diamond et al 2024). Evidence suggests that the public want to see parliament strengthened in comparison with the government (Renwick 2023).

When it comes to law-making, executive dominance in the House of Commons significantly limits the legislature's role. The executive exercises strong control over the Commons timetable, giving the UK government more influence over what MPs debate and how they scrutinise legislation than in many comparable parliaments. Aside from limited time for private members' bills, opposition days and Backbench Business Committee debates, the government largely controls the

agenda (Lilly 2019). This constrains the influence of backbench and opposition MPs. As the Wright Committee noted in 2009, a defining feature of parliament is that “MPs ... have inadequate say over the running of their own institution” (House of Commons Reform Committee 2009).

The issue is not time – the Commons already sits for a similar number of days or more than many other legislatures (Parkinson 2018) – but how that time is allocated. Executive dominance is an inherent feature of the system, so reform should focus on redistributing parliamentary time to strengthen the legislature and give MPs greater control. This could be achieved by increasing non-governmental time and reforming how business is scheduled.

Although reforms such as the Backbench Business Committee (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson 2026) have improved opportunities for backbenchers, further lessons can be drawn from other parliaments. In Germany, the Bundestag’s agenda is set proportionally by the Council of Elders, with parties controlling their allocated time (Russell and Gover 2023). Similarly, in the Scottish parliament, the Bureau proposes a programme of business, which parliament approves weekly. In the Welsh Senedd, around 40 per cent of parliamentary time is reserved for non-government business. In France, the constitution guarantees that half of parliamentary time is controlled by parliament, including dedicated scrutiny weeks and regular opposition days meaning opposition time is scheduled more regularly than in the UK (ibid).

Learning lessons from these models, the UK should evolve its approach to parliamentary time allocations. The Leader of the House of Commons and the Modernisation Committee should take the lead on this work. A sensible first step would be adopting the Wright Committee’s recommendation of establishing a cross-party House Business Committee before the end of this parliament. This committee – which should be balanced across parties without any one party having a majority – would draft an agenda for each coming week in the Commons which would then be put to a vote in the House for agreement.

A government with a large majority may understandably be reluctant to reduce its ability to control the parliamentary timetable and reduce the executives’ ability to dominate Commons proceedings. Yet a healthy and robust democracy and effective law-making is dependent on backbench and opposition MPs being empowered to scrutinise and challenge the government of the day.

Improving the legislative process

Beyond the issue of how parliamentary time is allocated and used, there are significant issues concerning the wider legislative process and the ability of MPs to adequately scrutinise legislation. One key issue is the extended use of delegated legislation. This is legislation made by government ministers, or sometimes other authorised individuals and bodies outside of parliament which is subject to significantly less scrutiny (if any) than acts of parliament. It cannot usually be amended, and it is very rarely rejected.

In the last parliament, the government made excessive use of delegated legislation, often in critical areas. While delegated legislation is justified and necessary for technical issues, the previous government repeatedly introduced new delegated powers for issues well beyond their normal scope (Garner et al 2024, Lupo 2026). The result was a weakening of democratic law-making, and worse legislation. This trend has continued to some extent under the current government (Moxhon 2024). An overreliance on this approach, it is argued, “can erode transparency, create legal uncertainty, weaken democratic accountability and ultimately diminish public trust in government policies and laws that fail to meet citizens’ needs” (Lupo 2026).

To address this issue, there is a need for reforms to legislative process to provide much tighter restrictions on use of skeleton bills and delegated legislation.

Previous work by IPPR and the Bingham Centre proposed that the Modernisation Committee should be tasked with implementing reforms to improve the law-making process, including, as a first step, developing a memorandum of understanding with the government on clear criteria for the use of delegated legislation (Garner et al 2024). Furthermore, it should consider reforming Standing Orders so that if delegated legislation is to be used, it can be subject to greater scrutiny and be debated and voted on, as in the case in a number of other comparable systems such as Canada and New Zealand (Flemming and Ghazi 2023).

Beyond the use of delegated legislation, approaches to legislative scrutiny more broadly have been questionable in recent years. In a range of respects, the previous government resisted scrutiny of its legislative agenda (Economist 2023, Sargeant et al 2023). It passed laws in critical areas with limited or no public consultation; failed to publish impact assessments in a timely manner; and increased the use of fast-tracked legislation, often without sufficient justification (Garner et al 2024). These developments have served to alter the institutional practices and expectations of parliament. Indeed, evidence suggest that MPs are spending less time debating legislation in the chamber than 20 years ago and that only 1 in 10 government bills passed by parliament received pre-legislative scrutiny (Sargeant and Pannell 2022).

As such, further reforms to enhance legislative scrutiny are required. There is an urgent need to make the law-making process more open and inclusive with important legislative proposals undergoing public consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny, while impact assessments should be published in a timely fashion, and public bill committees should be given enough time to consider the available evidence and engage with a range of stakeholders (Garner et al 2024). To deliver on this, the government should publicly commit to allowing sufficient time for parliamentary scrutiny of primary legislation and commit to publishing more legislation in draft form, for prelegislative scrutiny and evidence-taking by expert select committees (Russell et al 2023, Sargeant and Pannell 2022).

IMPROVING REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT

A vital factor in both public perceptions of and the role and functioning of parliament concerns the representativeness of both Houses. The composition of our law-making institutions has a significant bearing on the decisions they take and the legislation they produce. Yet at present there are significant issues with both chambers. In the Commons, despite progress in becoming more representative in recent decades in some regards, a large and growing representation gap remains in terms of social class. This must be addressed. The House of Lords as currently comprised, meanwhile, stands as a deeply controversial institution in modern British democracy and has been described as “indefensible in principle” (Commission on the UK’s Future 2022). Despite efforts over recent decade to reform the second chamber, significant reform has proved elusive. We must now take a different approach to deliver bold and lasting Lords reform.

Increasing working-class representation in the House of Commons

MPs have become more representative in terms of gender and ethnicity in recent years. Following the 2024 general election, 40 per cent of MPs are women. While progress is still needed to reach gender parity, the UK now outperforms all G7 partners on women’s representation (Pannell 2025). Similarly, representation of people from ethnic minority backgrounds has improved significantly, with 14 per cent of MPs coming from an ethnic minority background compared to 18 per cent in the general population (Ting 2024, Buchanan and Wong 2025).

However, a large and growing representation gap remains in terms of social class. In the 2019–24 parliament, just 7 per cent of MPs came from working-class or ‘blue-collar’ occupational backgrounds compared with 34 per cent of the working adult population (Quilter-Pinner et al 2022). Educational background further illustrates this imbalance. Of the MPs elected in 2024, 66 per cent attended comprehensive schools (compared to 88 per cent nationally), while 22 per cent attended independent schools (7 per cent nationally) and 11 per cent grammar schools (5 per cent nationally) (Holt-White 2024). Parliaments are seldom mirror images of the societies they represent. Yet the political representation women, minority ethnic and LGBT+ communities have seen improvements in recent decades, while the opposite is true for working-class people (Quilter-Pinner et al 2022).

This lack of working-class representation matters for political trust. Between 2014 and 2024, the proportion of people expressing low or no trust in MPs rose from 54 to 76 per cent (Gibbs and Mutebi 2025). Evidence suggests that elite overrepresentation erodes trust, while politicians from modest backgrounds are seen as more accessible, authentic and better representatives of citizens’ interests (Kesberg and Easterbrook 2025, Hahn 2025, Valgarðsson et al 2024).

Focus group participants repeatedly described politics as exclusionary, shaped by early immersion in party structures and dominated by people seen as unrelatable. The typical pathway – university followed by a political career – was viewed as particularly limiting. Several noted that even when individuals from ordinary backgrounds enter politics, they are often perceived as lacking credibility, reinforcing barriers to diversity. Participants widely felt that parliament does not reflect the population it serves. They pointed to a shared social background between MPs and lobbying groups, which distances decision-making from working-class concerns. Participants called for a parliament defined by broader social diversity, including class, professional experience and life circumstances. They favoured more MPs from public service backgrounds and fewer fitting the archetype of wealthy, elite-educated men. There was also support for valuing experience outside politics and stronger local connections in candidate selection.

Improving working-class representation is also important for policymaking. Research shows legislators’ preferences tend to align more closely with affluent citizens than with the general public (Lupu and Warner 2022). Increasing the number of MPs from working-class backgrounds could improve this alignment, as such representatives are often more responsive to working-class voters (Murray 2023, Carnes and Lupu 2022).

The key lever for increasing the number of MPs from a working-class background is improving the diversity of candidates who stand for election to parliament in the first place. The most practical and effective way of boosting working-class representation in the House of Commons now would be for political parties to provide targeted support to enable more working-class people to stand, including improved financial support for candidates.

While some parties run programmes to support candidates, such as the Labour party’s future candidates programme, there should be a clearer focus on social class representation. Parties should invest more resources in targeted programmes to ensure greater class diversity when recruiting candidates. They should also better subsidise the costs of running for office, for example by covering childcare or offering bursaries to working-class candidates (Quilter-Pinner et al 2022). Bursaries should reflect candidates’ financial circumstances and the personal costs of candidacy (Goss et al 2024). This support would help remove financial barriers, particularly for working-class women (Murray 2023).

If parties cannot provide this, the government should explore reinstating and expanding Access to Office funding that previously provided financial support to disabled candidates and establishing eligibility criteria to include support for working-class candidates as well. To further rebalance opportunities, the government should introduce a ‘right to run’, requiring employers to allow staff time off to stand for elected office, similar to jury service. This would be of benefit in particular to those in blue-collar jobs where being granted time off may be more challenging than for workers in white-collar roles. Given the role of time and job security in sustaining the ‘class ceiling’, this would help level access across social classes.

Focus group participants supported these ideas, highlighting financial barriers as a key deterrent. One noted that sacrificing a full-time income raises immediate concerns about basic living costs, making candidacy an issue of both time and money. Participants favoured grant-based support over loans and viewed a legal ‘right to run’ as a way to prevent employer resistance to working class candidates.

Delivering extensive reform of the House of Lords

In international context, the House of Lords appears increasingly anomalous. What sets the Lords apart, even among bicameral systems, is its extraordinary size. Three out of four second chambers worldwide have a membership of 100 or fewer, and the Lords exceeds every other upper house in total membership. More strikingly still, it is the only upper house in the world larger than the lower house to which it is linked, dwarfing the 650-seat House of Commons (Svoren 2024).

Across the globe, second chambers vary considerably in how their members are selected, ranging from wholly elected to wholly appointed bodies, with mixed models also common, in roughly a quarter of cases, the majority of members are appointed (ibid). Even within this diverse landscape, the House of Lords occupies a uniquely outsized and contentious position. Indeed, the current appointments process has seen prime ministers grant life peerages to numerous party donors, raising serious questions about the integrity of the legislature. Despite the important role the second chamber plays in scrutinising legislation, it is perhaps unsurprising that recent polling indicates only one in seven Britons holds a positive view of the institution (Difford 2024).

On coming to office in 1997, the previous Labour government sought to reform the Lords. Its House of Lords Act 1999 fundamentally altered the composition of the upper chamber by removing the vast majority of hereditary peers, who had previously numbered over 600 and were predominantly Conservative. A compromise amendment meant that 92 hereditary peers were retained (Scott 2019). Yet while this reform was significant in modernising the second chamber, it did little to democratise the Lords, given that hereditary peers have subsequently been replaced by political appointees.

The current government has rightly recognised that Lords reform is unfinished business. Labour’s manifesto ahead of the 2024 election described House of Lords reform as “long overdue and essential” and pledged a number of changes including removing the remaining 92 hereditary peers, a new participation requirement to ensure active membership, stronger powers to remove disgraced members, and reforms to the appointments process to improve the calibre of new peers. Some of these reforms, such as the removal of hereditary peers, are in the process of being implemented, but action on wider reform has been slow.

Looking further ahead, Labour expressed a long-term ambition to abolish the House of Lords entirely and replace it with a new second chamber that is more representative of the regions and nations of the UK. Given the undemocratic nature of the Lords, and public dissatisfaction with the institutions, bold reform

to the second chamber must be a constitutional priority for progressives. Indeed, in opposition, the prime minister explicitly connected the case for reforming the Lords with the need to improve trust in politics (Savage 2022). How this longer-term ambition is realised, however, remains ill defined.

Historically, while there have been notable piecemeal reforms to the Lords over the past century (Saunders 2020), any significant efforts to entirely reimagine and democratise the House have quickly faltered. In part, this owes to a lack of cross-party consensus on the issue of Lords reform. Moreover, there has been a lack of clarity from advocates of reform when it comes to the functions the second chamber should be serving within our constitution and the law-making process when considering what form Lords reform might take (Horne 2022, Sargeant 2022, Russell 2023).

Given these challenges, to deliver on extensive reform of the Lords, the government should seek to chart a different course to previous administrations – by taking the question of Lords reform out of parliament and opening up the discussion on the long-term future of the second chamber to the nation through a series of citizens’ assemblies to help determine the future function and form of the upper house. Not only would this approach bring the public into this significant question, but it could also serve as an effective mechanism for developing a longer-term cross-party consensus on reform (Allen and Davison 2024, Renwick 2024). The government should commit to beginning this process in time to be completed before the next general election and set out a roadmap and timeline to deliver significant Lords reform in the next parliament – this may involve committing to hold a referendum on the options that emerge from the citizens’ assemblies on Lords reform.

4.

EXTENDING THE ROLE OF CITIZENS IN LAW-MAKING

Many citizens feel they have little influence over parliament. Polling suggests that only one in five people in the UK believe that the political system allows people like them to have a say in what government does (OECD 2024). This is lower than many of our international peers (ibid). This sense of voicelessness and a lack of influence is damaging for faith in democracy and public legitimacy of parliament. To remedy this there is a clear need to enhance the voice of citizens in the functioning of parliament and throughout the law-making process, giving the public greater agency over the decisions and laws that shape their lives.

IMPROVING CITIZEN CONSULTATION ON LEGISLATION

In the UK, public consultation is required by law on key issues including health, environment and equalities, and the ‘doctrine of legitimate expectation’ in common law gives consultees certain procedural rights (Baxter 2025, Hughes 2023). However, despite this legal framework, consultations are often fairly rudimentary and unengaging in practice.

There is no standard format for consultations. The term can refer to written formats such as green and white papers, but also to surveys, online forms, drop-in events, roundtables and public meetings (Baxter 2025). Evidence on quality is limited, but consultations are often conducted late in decision-making and appear designed more to meet legal requirements than to meaningfully engage citizens (Hughes 2023).

This view was echoed in focus groups. Participants noted a gap between formal rights and real influence: while consultations are theoretically open, experts can be invited to committees, and citizens can contact MPs, in practice low awareness and high effort mean public influence is limited. There was a strong sense that citizens should play a more meaningful role in shaping laws.

Improving consultation should therefore be central to strengthening participation in law-making. Effective consultation can improve parliamentary decision-making and create better channels between citizens and parliament (IDEA 2025a). The Modernisation Committee should develop plans to improve the consultation process including expanded online consultations, greater use of deliberative methods, and taking steps to guarantee stronger civil society and citizen representation and input in scrutiny processes. International case studies show what is possible in some of these regards. In Taiwan, for example, the vTaiwan platform combines online and face-to-face deliberation and has been used on around 30 policy issues, reportedly implementing over 80 per cent of resulting proposals (Hughes 2023).

MAKING THE PUBLIC PETITIONS SYSTEM STRONGER

The public petitions system presents a similarly mixed picture in terms of enabling citizens to influence law-making. Petitions are the most common participation tool offered by parliaments globally (IDEA 2025b). In the UK,

the online system allows any citizen or resident to start a petition, triggering a government response at 10,000 signatures and a parliamentary debate consideration at 100,000 (Ghazi 2025). However, while petitions can signal public mood, influence agendas, and occasionally contribute to policy developments such as the sugar tax or brain tumour funding, they rarely lead to direct legislative change. Indeed, most e-petitions are rejected. Nevertheless, it is argued that they still play an important role in terms of public engagement with law-making and scrutiny (Leston-Bandeira 2019). Focus group participants similarly felt that petitions often ‘disappear’ without impact, though some argued they could still make politics feel more accessible.

A further issue with the petition system at present is that participation is unequal. Petitioners tend to be older, white and more affluent, while ‘seldom-heard’ groups face barriers including low awareness, digital exclusion, language difficulties and mistrust of politics (Leston-Bandeira and Tacheva 2024). This reinforces the need for better outreach, education and integrated support rather than treating petitions as a standalone mechanism. Moreover, there are some concerns that the process lacks transparency, that signatures can be duplicated and are not verified and that the system could be open to misuse (Ghazi 2025).

Given these issues, there are a number of ways in which the petitions system can be improved. Recommendations from the Citizens’ Assembly on Democracy in the UK that should be actioned include improving public awareness of the petition system, ensuring petition debates lead to actionable votes, requiring minimum MP attendance, and enabling petitions to trigger citizens’ assemblies or inquiries (Hughes 2023).

Further to this, internationally there are a number of examples of effective petition systems (IDEA 2025b). The UK should learn from such models. Estonia offers a strong example. Following a political financing scandal, it introduced *Rahvaalgatus*, a digital collective petitioning system allowing citizens to submit proposals with at least 1,000 signatures. Participants can track responses, and government bodies increasingly co-create participation tools with civil society (Hughes 2023). We recommend that the Modernisation Committee leads a long-term reform plan for expanding and strengthening the petitions system drawing on international best practice. As with reform to the citizen consultation process, the Modernisation Committee should set out detailed plans to reform the petitions system, making it more inclusive and impactful, before the next general election for implementation in the next parliament.

EXPANDING THE USE OF CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLIES

Beyond consultation and petitions, there is a strong case for bringing citizens further into the law-making process through participatory approaches and mini-publics such as citizens’ assemblies. Giving citizens a meaningful role in shaping policy is argued to produce more realistic outcomes that reflect public needs, help resolve divisive issues, enable difficult trade-offs, and reduce costly policy failures (Levin 2024). Evidence also suggests participatory processes can help rebuild trust in politics (Levin 2024, Boullianne 2018, Volodin 2018).

Citizens’ assemblies are among the most widely used mini-public models (Escobar and Elstub 2017). They bring together randomly selected but demographically representative citizens to deliberate on issues and produce policy recommendations. Participants typically meet over several days, hear from experts and stakeholders, and engage in facilitated discussion (Baxter 2025). This deliberative approach can help address complex issues in an informed, non-adversarial way, enabling governments to move issues out of the ‘too difficult’ category. The UK Citizens’ Assembly on Democracy recommended using such

processes for important and divisive issues, non-manifesto policies and local perspectives (Hughes 2023).

In the UK, parliament has held assemblies on social care and net zero while the Scottish government has done so on Scotland's future and climate change. Over 40 local assemblies or juries have also taken place since 2019 (Preller and Renwick 2025). Internationally, the OECD describes a "deliberative wave", with the use of deliberative processes increasing significantly in many democracies over the past five years (Elias et al 2025). In Ireland, assemblies have influenced landmark legal changes, including same-sex marriage and abortion reform (Baxter 2025). They have been seen as evidence that deliberative democracy can break political deadlock on deeply divisive issues that elected politicians have been too cautious to tackle directly (Palese 2018).

Expanding the use of citizens' assemblies at national level in the UK should therefore be a priority for the government in order to extend the role of citizens in law-making. The government's plan for a citizens' assembly on digital ID cards is to be welcomed (Stacey 2026) but their use should go much further. Given the role that citizens' assemblies can play in furthering considered deliberation and working towards consensus on challenging political issues, there are a range of topics that would be ideal initial candidates for citizen's assemblies. As set out in the previous chapter, carrying out citizens assemblies on House of Lords reform should be considered a priority. Assisted dying may be another issue where a citizen's assembly would be a wise approach. To increase their profile, public buy in, and to make direct outcomes more likely, citizens' assemblies should be established directly by the government, rather than select committees as was the case for the two previous UK-wide assemblies on social care and climate change.

Focus group participants supported greater citizen involvement but raised practical concerns. These included ensuring demographic representativeness, avoiding overrepresentation of retirees, and providing skilled facilitation to ensure balanced participation. Accessibility was also key, including online vs in-person formats, geographic barriers, and support for those with caring responsibilities or precarious work. Fair compensation covering childcare, travel, accommodation and lost earnings was seen as essential. Participants also stressed the need for safeguards against misinformation and improved civic education.

These factors should be kept in mind when citizens' assemblies are utilised and action to mitigate against them should be built into the process (Renwick 2024). Most importantly, assemblies must have genuine influence, as purely advisory roles risk being seen as tokenistic (ibid). When properly integrated, citizens' assemblies can improve trust and decision-making in a polarised political environment (Griffiths 2024).

EMBEDDING CITIZENS IN THE LAW-MAKING PROCESS

In addition to one-off uses of participatory democracy, citizens' roles in law-making could be made more institutionalised and longer term. Long-running citizens' assemblies or standing citizen councils, are a feature in several other democracies (OECD 2021).

One idea – to embed this approach in the UK – is to establish a 'House of Citizens', potentially replacing or complementing the House of Lords as a third chamber. The Sortition Foundation (2023) proposes a chamber of 325 ordinary people selected by democratic lottery to be a microcosm of the UK population, serving one-to-two-year terms on a staggered rotation and paid a salary comparable to MPs.

This idea found support among some focus group participants, who welcomed the prospect of a third chamber for ordinary people as a progressive step towards genuine citizen inclusion in law-making. While there are many practical and constitutional questions that would need to be addressed, this idea should merit serious consideration and debate as a long-term means of embedding citizens in the law-making process.

5. CONCLUSION

The widening gap between citizens and the political institutions that govern them mean that too many people experience politics as distant and unresponsive. Too many citizens feel that decisions are imposed upon them rather than shaped with their input. This erosion of agency has contributed to a broader decline in political trust which has weakened political participation and undermined democratic legitimacy.

The populist right is seeking to capitalise on this, advancing constitutional reform agendas that would consolidate power in fewer hands, weaken democratic law-making, and strip away vital checks and balances. Progressives cannot fail to match this ambition and must respond with their own bold agenda.

This report has made the case that a crucial component of the mission to enhance collective action when it comes to the ways in which our democratic institutions operate and restore trust in politics and parliament as a force for good must involve a fundamental rethinking of how laws are made and how political power is exercised.

Rather than adopting a defensive crouch, progressives must act and reimagine law-making by:

- rebuilding trust in lawmakers through strengthening accountability and reducing the influence of private interests
- rebuilding trust in law-making institutions with procedural reforms and action to improve the representativeness of parliament
- extending the role of citizens in law-making which is vital to restoring a sense of collective ownership over our democracy.

Taken together, the recommendations set out in this report offer a pathway towards a parliament and a law-making process that is more responsive, more representative, more inclusive and more trusted. Failing to act will only deepen disengagement and dissatisfaction. The government must grasp the opportunity to reimagine law-making and politics as a genuinely collective endeavour.

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