IPPR

ROAD TO RENEWAL

ELECTIONS, PARTIES AND THE CASE FOR RENEWING DEMOCRACY

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As we stand up for democratic values in Ukraine, we should renew them at home too. The surge of right-wing populists in the UK, US, Europe and elsewhere are shaking the foundations of liberal democracy. But while it is easy to fixate on populist moments and individual politicians, the challenges to democracy run deeper.

A protest against democratic politics has been mounting for decades and is gathering steam. It can be seen in the form of 'silent' and 'noisy' protests across advanced democracies.

- **Silent protest** refers to citizens not engaging in democratic politics. For example, by not voting at elections. Voter turnout across advanced democracies fell from an average of 81 per cent during the 1970s to 71 per cent in the 2010s, and turnout in UK has been below the average across advanced democracies in every general election since 1951. Another sign of the withdrawal from democratic politics is the decline of party membership, which in the UK has plummeted from one in 12 people in the 1950s to around one in 50 today.

- **Noisy protest** refers to shifts in voting behaviour that signal against the democratic status quo. This includes the surge in support for right-wing populist parties, whose vote share in advanced democracies has doubled since the 1970s. The UK Independence Party won 12 per cent of the vote share in the 2015 general election, while the Brexit Party may have cost the Conservatives as many as 25 additional seat gains from Labour in the 2019 general election. The noisy protest also manifests through the rise of electoral volatility as partisan loyalty decays. Three of the past four general elections in the UK had the highest ever levels of voter switching in modern times.

Mainstream political parties are failing to respond to the protest against democratic politics. This can be seen in their electoral decline, which has been especially precipitous for European social democratic parties, whose share of the electorate has fallen by a third since the turn of the 21st century. In part, this is because they have focussed on the *symptoms* of the protest. Centre-left and centre-right parties have shifted their policy positions in response to the right populist challenge, most obviously on immigration. But it is a not a strategy that is reaping electoral dividends and may only to strengthen their populist challengers. Instead, mainstream parties should seek to address the *causes* of the protest.

There is an urgent need to address the causes of the protest against democracy. Silent and noisy protests against democratic politics have emerged in response to sweeping economic, social and political transformations such as

deindustrialization, increased immigration and the professionalization of political parties. These transformations have created two widely felt phenomena that drive people to protest against democratic politics:

- **Status anxiety**: the actual or perceived decline in social status relative to other groups.

- **Diminutive voice**: the lack of consideration in, and influence over, public policy decisions relative to other groups.

A progressive response to declining status and lack of voice necessarily involve reforms that put citizens back at the centre of democracy. These reforms should seek to improve three aspects of democracy: *of* the people, *by* the people and *for* the people.

- *Of* **the people**. A major reason for the growth in citizens and communities experiencing a lack of voice is the remoteness of modern political parties. Four in five people in Britain say politicians poorly understand their lives. Politicians and parties need retune themselves to hear the people they claim to represent. Reforms should look to strengthen links between political parties and civil society as well as improving the representativeness of political elites.

- *By* **the people**. One in two people believe the most powerful influence on government policy decisions are political donors, businesses and lobbying groups – in comparison only one in 20 people said voters. Reforms to increase the sway of citizens over public policy are much needed. As are reforms to better respect the voices of all citizens. People living in the least deprived neighbourhoods are 70% more likely to say "democracy addresses their interests well" compared to people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods, while those aged over 65 are over twice as likely to say "democracy addresses their interests well" compared to people aged 18 to 24.

- *For* **the people**. Four times as many people believe "more decisions should be made by devolved and local governments" than those who believe the government in Westminster should have more power. Being one of the most centralised advanced democracies in the world makes it challenging to govern on behalf of everyone. It is likely that questions of constitutional reform will be high on the political agenda for years to come. At their simplest, they are questions about whose voice should be heard, and to what extent can governments ignore them. It is important not to detach this from questions of who has a voice in the first place, and how powerful it is. That is to say, reforms to improve democracy *for* the people should not be separated from reforms to improve democracy *of* the people and *by* the people.

Parties committed to democratic values should put 'giving back control' at the heart of their electoral strategy and their agenda for government. The campaign to leave the European Union etched 'take back control' into our collective consciousness. But if control has been 'taken back' from Brussels, it is only being concentrated instead. The current government has been attacking democratic institutions, paring back democratic checks and balances and behaving in ways that erode trust in democracy. These are not actions of a government that is looking to 'give back control' to citizens. Indeed, 'giving back control' should become a dividing line at the next general election.

This paper is the start of a programme of work on democracy and justice at IPPR. Building on the arguments in this paper, and working with citizens and underpowered communities, we will set out reforms to 'give back control' and refresh democracy in the UK for the 21st century.

1. INTRODUCTION

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, democracy is once again being fought for. "In the battle between democracy and autocracy", US President Joe Biden said in his State of the Union address, one week after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, "democracies are rising to the moment, and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security."

In truth, the rally around the democratic flag belies a tumultuous start to the 21st century for democratic nations.

Many 'third wave' democracies birthed in the embers of the cold war across Eastern Europe, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are experiencing democratic backsliding and strongman rule.[1] To some extent, instability in emerging democracies is to be expected, as nascent party systems and democratic institutions search for societal moorings and popular support.

But so too are challenges mounting in long-established liberal democracies. Landmarks include the election of Donald Trump, the unexpected vote for Brexit and the surge of far-right parties in France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

Public attention has justifiably fixated on these landmarks and the leaders who brand them. But if the challenge is to navigate out of liberal democracy's crisis and reaffirm core democratic values, we ought not to view these populist moments in isolation but consider the conditions that gave rise to them. No landmark is built overnight.

As such, this paper identifies 'silent' and 'noisy' protests against democratic politics that have formed across advanced democracies since the 1980s. We describe economic, sociocultural and political shifts that have led to these protests and show that mainstream parties, in the UK and elsewhere, are failing to respond adequately. We argue democratic reforms to enhance the influence of citizens and underpowered communities over public policy are a necessary component of any strategy to recapture lost electorates and reinforce the foundations of democracy.

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[1] See Luhrmann and Lindberg (2019)

2.
THE PROTEST AGAINST DEMOCRACY

Democratic dissatisfaction in advanced democracies is on the ascent (Foa et al 2020). In the 1990s, around two-thirds of citizens of Western Europe, North America, Northeast Asia and Australasia were satisfied with democracy in their countries. Today a majority in these regions are dissatisfied. Nowhere has the rise in democratic dissatisfaction been steeper than in Anglo-Saxon democracies (ibid).

Related are drop-offs in political trust. A large and growing number of citizens in advanced democracies distrust democratic institutions and politicians (Dalton 2004). In the UK, the proportion of the public that sees politicians as 'merely out for themselves' has doubled to two in three since the post-war period (Quilter-Pinner et al 2021).

Attitudes to democracy and perceptions of trust are helpful guides. But more informative is real-world behaviour. To that end, satisfaction with democracy can be assessed through patterns and trends in political engagement and behaviour. Focussing on parties and elections, as the most fundamental and universal modes of political engagement,[2] we find evidence of behaviours that constitute 'silent' and 'noisy' protests against democratic politics.

Silent protest

The silent protest against democratic politics refers to the decline in institutionalised political participation. The most common form of participation is voting. Alarming falls in voter turnout across advanced democracies since the 1970s have created a large constituency of people opting out of electoral politics (figure 2.1). It is an especially large constituency in the UK, where voter turnout has been consistently below the average across advanced democracies in every general election since 1951.[3]

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[2] Non-institutionalised modes of political engagement (such as demonstrations, consumer boycotts, petitions, internet activism, etc) are beyond the scope of this paper. Several scholars have documented trends in non-institutionalised political engagement, for example see Inglehart and Catterberg (2002), Norris (2002) and Marien et al (2010).
[3] It is sometimes reported that voter turnout is on the rise in the UK. While this is true, it should be noted the rise is primarily due to an especially low base at the turn of the 21st century.

Figure 2.1: Voter turnout has declined across advanced democracies

Per cent of registered voters who cast a vote in a national election
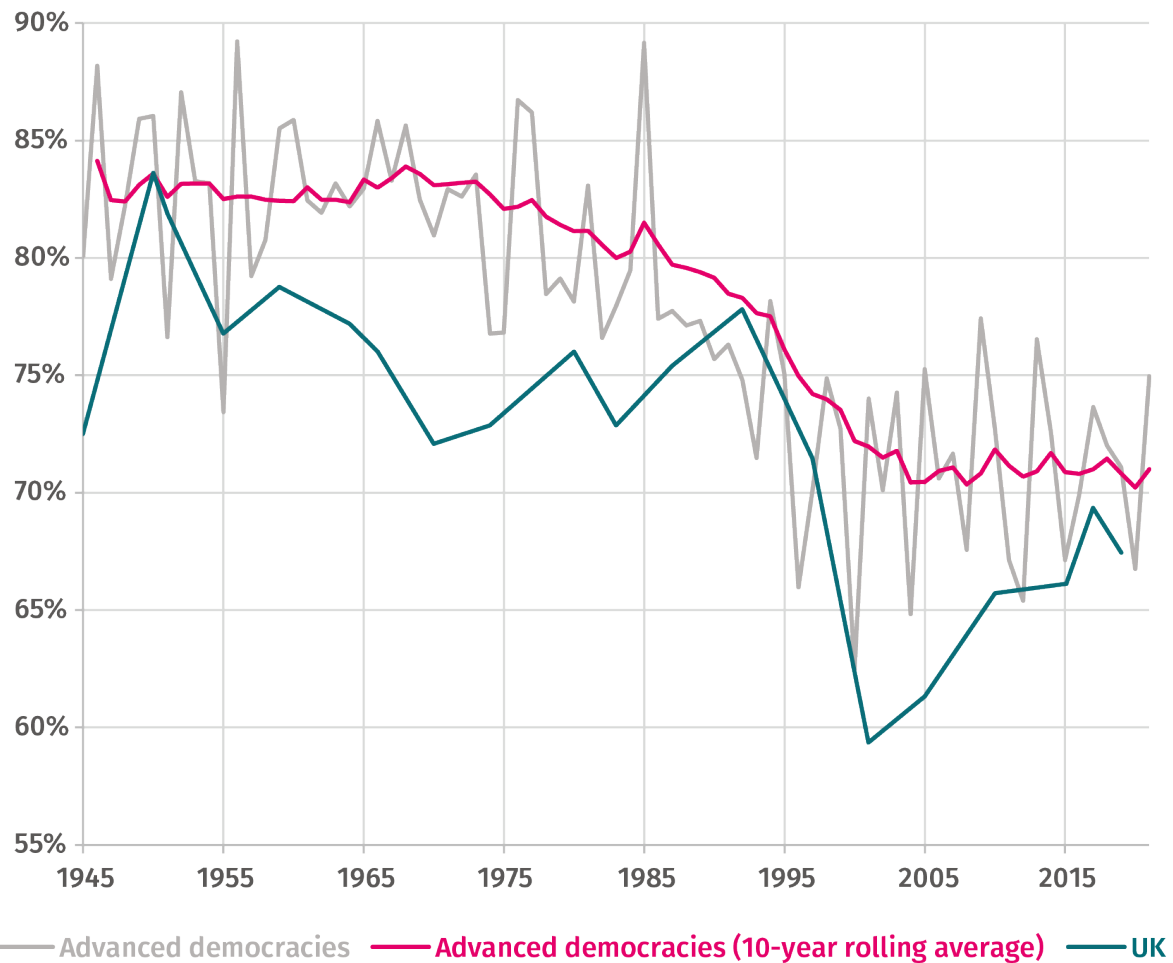
Source: Authors' analysis of International Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance (2021)
Note: the grey line represents the average of voter turnout in legislative elections in advanced democracies in Europe and North America. The pink line is the 10-year rolling average across these same countries. The blue line is voter turnout in UK general elections.

Moreover, turnout is not distributed equally between or within nations. At the macro level, voter turnout is lower in countries with higher levels of income inequality (Beramendi and Anderson 2008). At the individual level, it is lowest among the young, low earners and those without higher education (Franklin 2001, Verba et al 1978). These individual-level disparities are especially stark in the UK relative to other European countries (table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Inequalities in voter turnout are especially stark in the UK

Share of non-voters (per cent of electorate) in Finland, France, and the United Kingdom by age and income distribution

	Finland			France			United Kingdom		
	<35	35-54	>55	<35	35-54	>55	<35	35-54	>55
Top Quintile	32	19	10	50	19	7	29	23	11
Middle Quintile	41	30	18	65	40	12	48	32	10
Bottom Quintile	53	48	33	68	64	29	73	50	20

Source: Boix (2021)

Party membership is another form of institutionalised political engagement, and here too there is evidence of the silent protest against democratic politics (figure 2.2). The proportion of the UK electorate that is a member of a political party has fallen from around one in 12 citizens in the 1950s to around one in 50 citizens today.[4] All three mainstream parties in the UK have had seen falls in membership rates as a proportion of the electorate, although it has been especially precipitous in the Conservative party.[5] Other methods of participation in electoral politics, such as running for an elected office, are also documented to be on the decline (Shames 2017).

Like all behaviours, political participation is shaped by the interaction of structural forces (eg legal enfranchisement, material circumstances, societal norms) and individual agency (eg perceived benefit or efficacy of participation, sense of duty). Put differently, there are several reasons why someone may be a silent protestor, but includes indifference, lack of trust and apathy.

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[4] IPPR estimate based on data from Keen and Audickas (2016) and historic UK population estimates from the Office for National Statistics.
[5] There was an increase in Labour party membership rates in 2015 in the run up to the selection of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the party. More recently, membership rates in the Labour party have begun to decline according to estimates released by the Electoral Commission.

Figure 2.2: Party membership as a proportion of the electorate has fallen dramatically in the UK

Per cent of the electorate that is a member of each political party
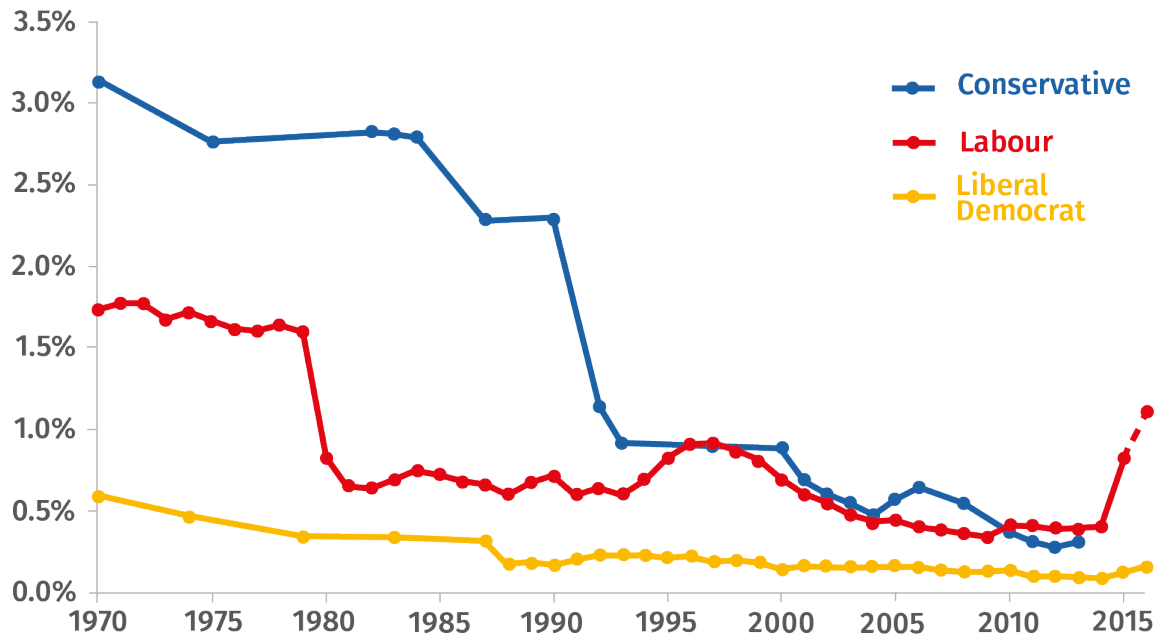

Source: Keen and Audickas (2016)

Noisy protest

The noisy protest against democratic politics manifests through vote switching and rising support for populist challengers (see Box). It is described as 'noisy' because, rather than disengaging with electoral politics, people begin to vote rather differently in electorally significant ways.

Voters switching between parties election-to-election is on the rise across several advanced democracies (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). In the UK, the 2010, 2015 and 2017 general elections had the highest ever levels of voter switching (figure 2.3). The rapid decline in party identification has enabled such volatility to arise – UK voters reporting a 'very strong party identity' plunged from 45 per cent in 1964 to 15 per cent in 2017 (Fieldhouse et al 2019). To be sure, we are not characterising vote switching as a negative electoral dynamic. We are simply arguing it is evidence of a 'protest' against the democratic status quo.

Figure 2.3: Electoral volatility in the UK is higher than in the past

Per cent of voters choosing a different party from previous election
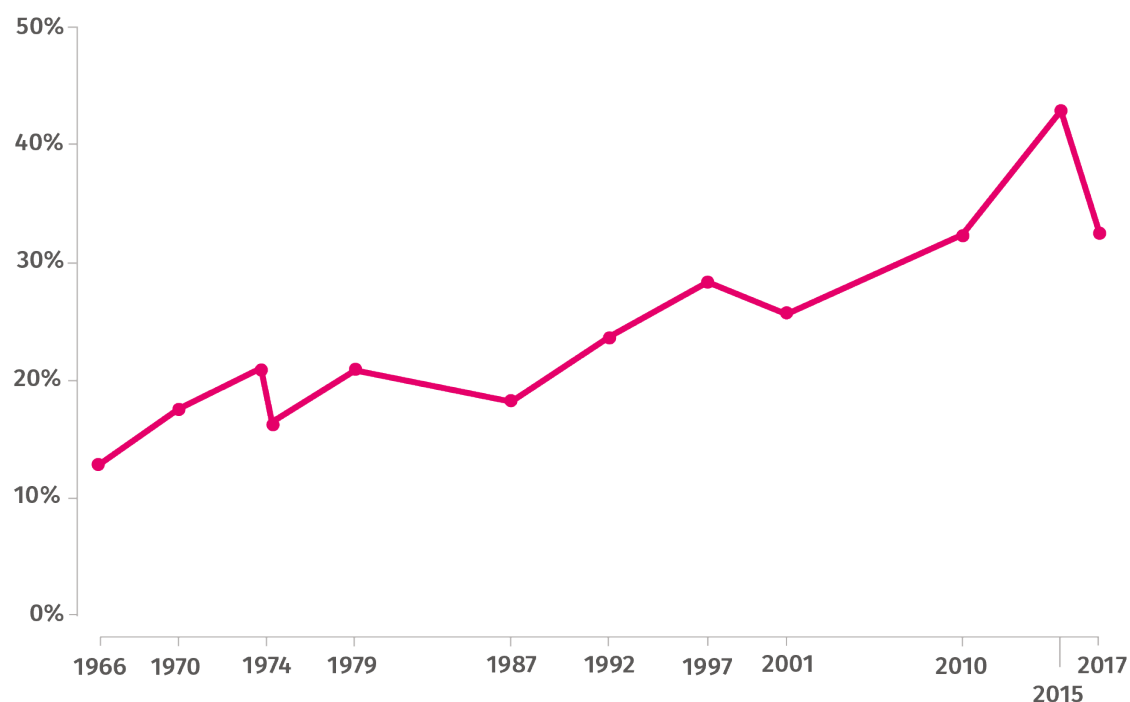

Source: Fieldhouse et al (2019)

There has also been a dramatic rise in support for non-mainstream parties, and in particular for right populist parties (figure 2.4). Indeed, populist politics has been the dominant electoral story across advanced democracies in the 21st century. Politicians openly embracing racist and proto-authoritarian attitudes have presented themselves as alternatives to the failures of liberal representative democracy and garnered support by exploiting social and political tensions.

In the UK, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) won 12 per cent of the vote share in the 2015 general election, and the Brexit Party may have cost the Conservatives as many as 25 additional seat gains from Labour in the 2019 general election (Ford et al 2021). Moreover, populism in the UK has found ways to manifest outside of general elections. The most obvious example is the populist sentiment that contributed the vote to leave the European Union (Iakhnis et al 2018). But further evidence of the 'noisy protest' can be found in the UK's European Parliament elections in 2014 and 2019 where the largest parties were UKIP and the Brexit Party respectively.

Figure 2.4: Support for right-wing populist parties is surging

Mean vote share for populist parties in across 32 advanced democracies
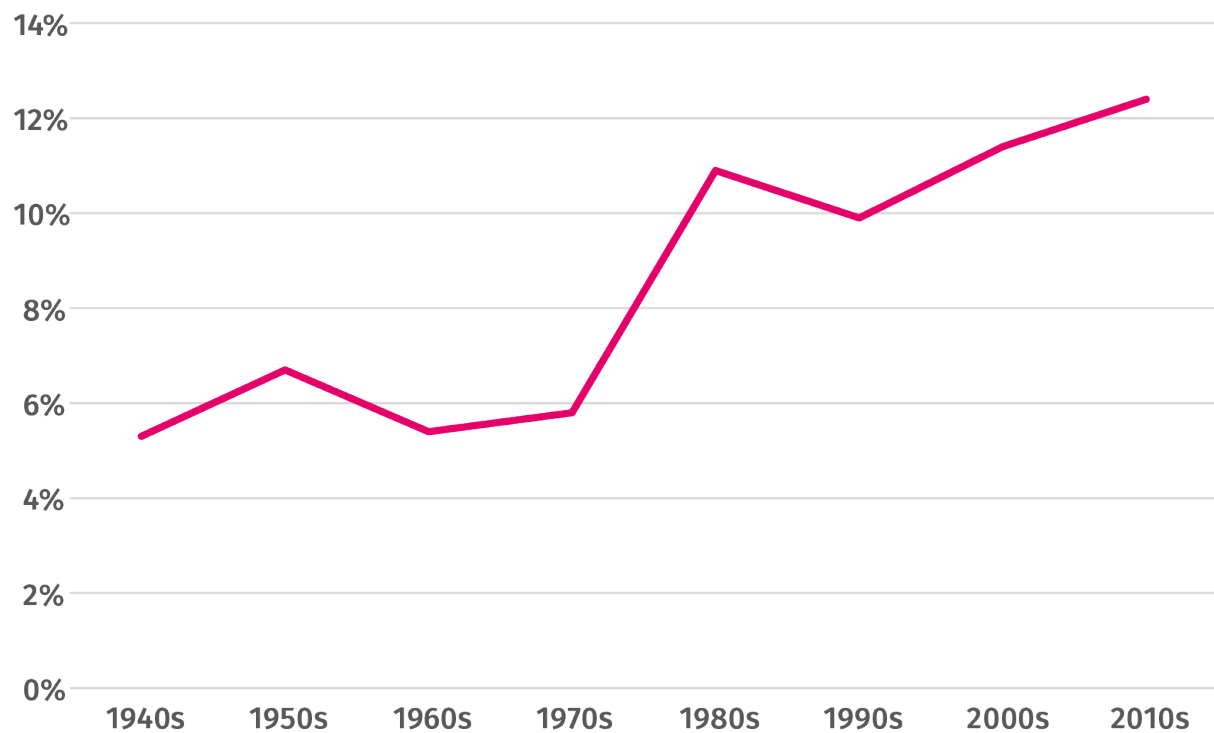
Source: Norris and Inglehart (2019)

What is populism?

Cas Mudde has defined populism as an ideology that sees society as ultimately divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the elite'. Populism believes politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of 'the pure people' (Mudde 2004). He describes populism as a 'thin' ideology, meaning it is often combined with a more substantial ideologies such as nationalism on the right or socialism on the left.
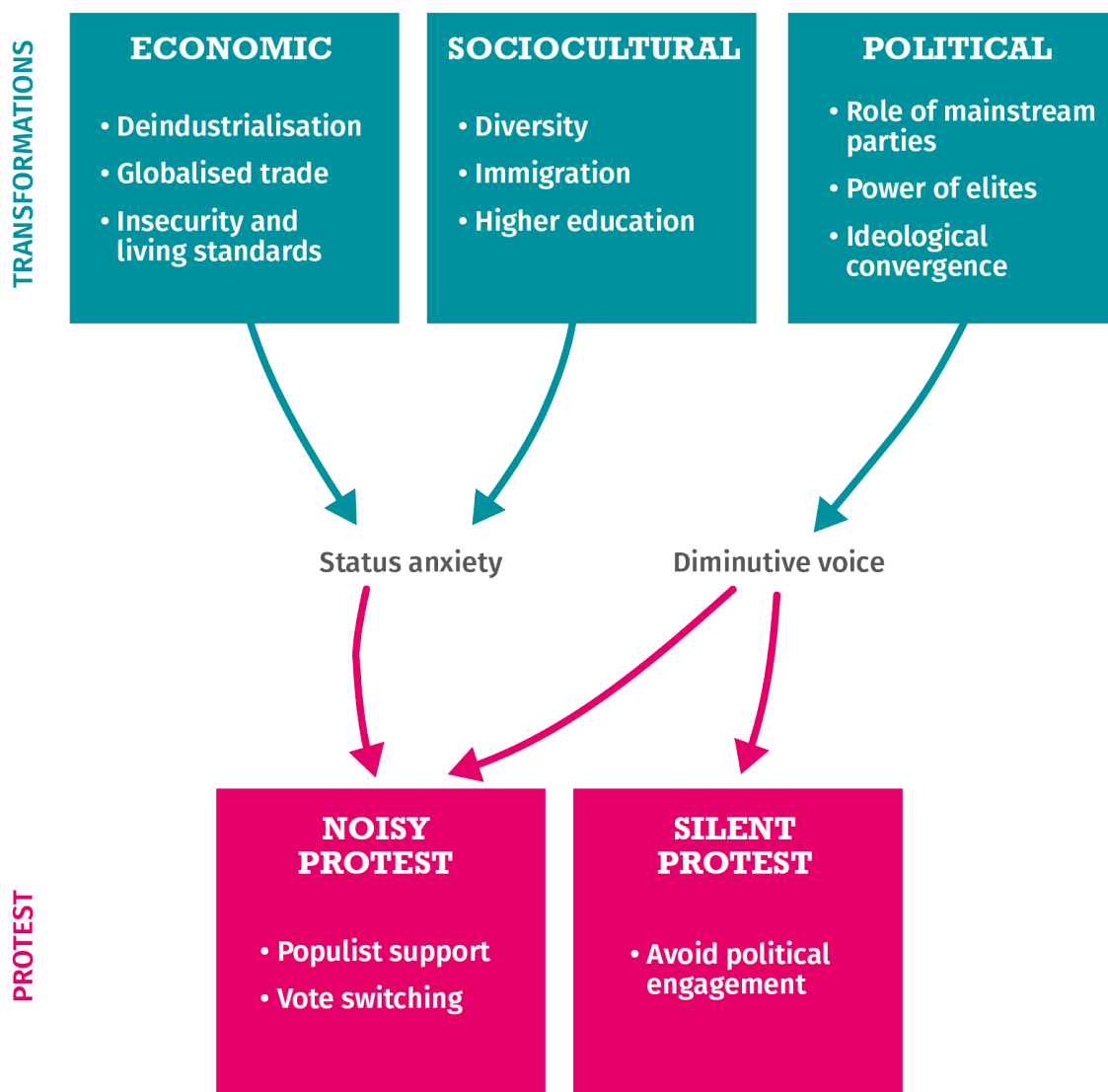
The populist radical right parties surging across liberal democracies have been classified ideologically as a combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007).

Populism constitutes a fundamental challenge to the main institutions and values of liberal democracy, such as minority rights, pluralism, and the separation of powers.

Reasons to protest

Silent and noisy protests against democratic politics have emerged in response to economic, sociocultural and political transformations across advanced democracies in recent decades (figure 2.5). These range from deindustrialisation and globalised trade, to increased immigration and the growth of higher education, to the changing nature and role political parties. We argue, drawing from political science and sociology literatures, that *status* and *voice* are two important vectors between these transformations and electoral protests we have characterised.[6]

Figure 2.5: Causes of the protest against democratic politics

TRANSFORMATIONS

ECONOMIC	SOCIOCULTURAL	POLITICAL
• Deindustrialisation • Globalised trade • Insecurity and living standards	• Diversity • Immigration • Higher education	• Role of mainstream parties • Power of elites • Ideological convergence

Status anxiety   Diminutive voice

PROTEST

NOISY PROTEST	SILENT PROTEST
• Populist support • Vote switching	• Avoid political engagement

Source: Authors' analysis

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[6] We are not claiming they are the only vectors.

Status

Actual or perceived decline in social status relative to other groups, 'status anxiety', is an important point of antecedent of the protest against democratic politics. A range of economic and sociocultural shifts in advanced democracies drive status anxiety among certain groups, which in turn leads many of them to noisily protest, especially in terms of increasing support for populist parties.[7]

There is abundant literature linking a range of economic transformations to populism. Deindustrialisation, labour market transformations and globalised trade are the most cited economic shifts linked to the populist surge (Autor et al 2020, Beramendi et al 2015, Kitschelt 2007, Oesch 2015). For example, UK regions most exposed to Chinese trade competition had the strongest support for Brexit (Colantone and Stanig 2018a), while European regions most affected by the globalisation trade shock saw the strongest upswings in populist voting (Colantone and Stanig 2018b). These areas are often referred to as 'left behind' places. Other have linked populist support to house price shocks (Adler and Ansell 2020), living standards stagnation and austerity policy (Fetzer 2019, Hopkin and Blyth 2019).

There is equally abundant literature linking a range of sociocultural shifts to populism. The most popular theory is Pippa Norris's and Ronald Inglehart's concept of the 'cultural backlash' (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Increasingly diverse societies, increases in immigration and the growth of higher education are commonly cited as inciting a populist response among socially conservative voters. Many sociocultural topics of contention are sometimes referred to as constituting a 'culture war'. Maria Soblewska and Rob Ford have argued that it is attitudes to sociocultural issues, especially immigration and diversity, that drove the Brexit vote (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). The increased salience of sociocultural issues has added a new dimension to political party competition in advanced democracies (Bornschier 2010), one that populist parties have harnessed to their benefit.

In truth, it is likely both economic and sociocultural factors are important to understand the populist surge and likely interact. Rafaela Dancygier has shown, for example, that economic scarcity conditions the degree of hostility toward immigrants (Dancygier 2010). Noam Gidron and Peter Hall, in a widely cited paper, propose status anxiety is an important point of convergence for a host of economic and sociocultural issues that in turn drives populism (Gidron and Hall 2017). Diana Mutz has argued status anxiety is the key factor explaining the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential election (Mutz 2018), while Thomas Kurer has shown perceptions of relative status decline drives support for right populist parties (Kurer 2020). More recently, a new working paper from

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[7] We borrow 'status anxiety' from Noam Gidron and Peter Hall who use it to explain support for right populist parties (Gidron and Hall 2017). To be sure, the concept of social status in explaining political behaviour is not new. In the 1950s, Seymour Martin Lipset argued perceptions of status are an important determinant of political behaviour and linked it to support for extreme right parties.

Geoff Evans et al, using data from the British Election study, finds low social status is a strong predictor of nativist attitudes and voting to leave the European Union (Evans et al 2022).

Based on this literature, we propose that status anxiety is a key factor fuelling the 'noisy protest' against democratic politics. In other words, those who feel economically and socially displaced are looking for an alternative to the status quo and using their vote to that end.

Voice

An inescapable reality of all democracies is that, despite the democratic ideal, not everyone has an equal voice. Some citizens and communities have weak consideration in, and influence over, public policy relative to other groups. Those with diminutive voices are more likely to silently and noisily protests. Reasons include the transformed role of political parties and the power of elites relative to ordinary and marginalised citizens.

Political parties have two major functions in modern democracy. First, they are representatives of citizens, translating collective interests and demands into policy options. Second, they are governors or potential governors. That is, parties (mainstream parties, at least) should have the capability to responsibly manage the institutions of the state and implement their policy programmes when in government. Peter Mair, a leader scholar of party systems, insightfully argued these two functions have become increasingly incompatible and that mainstream parties have become less able to bridge this tension (Mair 2013).

Mair argues parties have become worse at their representative role because they find it increasingly difficult to read and aggregate preferences of citizens (Mair 2009). On one hand, this is because they have withdrawn from civil society and become out of touch with ordinary people, weakened their links with major mass-interest organisations (which have also declined) and maintain smaller and increasingly unrepresentative party memberships. On the other, mass public opinion has become more fragmented and multidimensional. At the same time, their role as responsible governors is taking up more party bandwidth. External constraints obliging governments to act in a particular way have become weightier, for example by the growth of multilateral institutions and agreements, defining the terms of what being a 'responsible governor' entails. So even if parties could read and respond to citizen preferences, they may be constrained in their capacity to act accordingly.

In the past, incompatibilities between representativeness and responsibility were more easily bridged as mainstream parties had the means and power to persuade supporters onside. But modern parties have few members to mobilise public opinion, are one of the least trusted institutions in society, fewer people hold strong partisan identities, and the means of political communication now lie mainly outside the control of political parties (Mair 2002). These factors make it difficult for parties to bridge tensions in their role as representative and

responsible governors – and mean mainstream parties are "more like governors than representatives".

The weakening of the relationship between party leadership and its base means the "bottom-up" approach to partisan policy making is displaced by a "top-down" approach. Many mainstream parties, including the Labour party under Tony Blair, began to redefine policymaking as problem-solving, committing to "what works" over ideological differences (Bickerton and Accetti 2021). This shift has led to an ideological convergence between centre-left and centre-right parties across advanced democracies (figure 2.6). In the process, while parties broadened their appeal to new voters, their traditional base has its voice diminished. The result is non-voting and support for other parties – as has happened with the 'working class' core of the Labour party in the UK (Evans and Tilley 2017).

Figure 2.6: Ideological convergence of centre-left and centre-right parties

Average position on economic left-right scale of main centre-left and centre-right parties in advanced democracies based on election manifestos
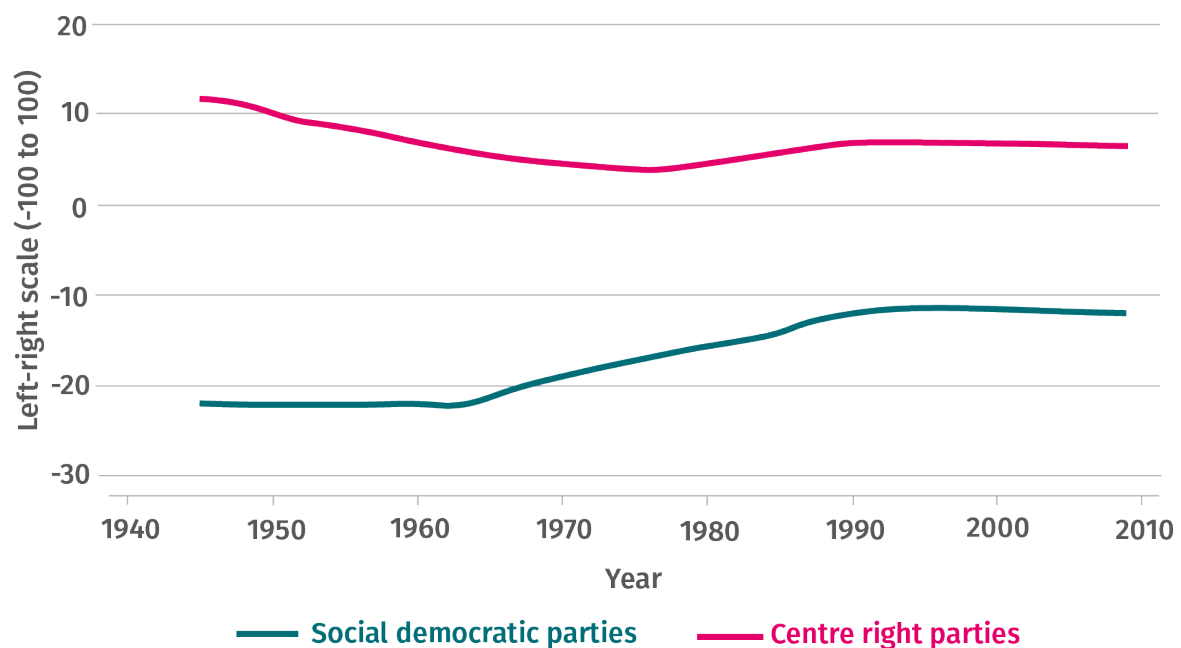
Source: Boix (2019)

Related to these shifts is sociologist Colin Crouch's argument that we becoming a 'post-democratic society', in which the institutions of democracy still very much exist, but politics and government "slip back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times" (Crouch 2004). Many scholars have empirically supported this. For example, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page showed economic elites and organised business interest groups

have substantial impact on policy choices, while mass-interest groups and average citizens have little or no influence (Gilens and Page 2014). Jacob Hacker and colleagues have argued the role of organised interests is critical to understand the sway (or lack thereof) of the 'median voter' over policy choices in the context burgeoning inequality in advanced democracies (Hacker and Pierson 2010, Hacker et al 2021).

That is not to say all citizens have an equally diminutive voice. Inequalities also exist between social groups and geographies. For example, the link between the preferences of affluent citizens and policy outcomes is much stronger than the link between the preferences of lower-income citizens and policy outcomes (Bartels 2008, Gilens 2012).

Transformations in political parties and the power of elite interests have hollowed out the voice of many groups of people. Some leave the electoral realm altogether in 'silent protest' while others cook up a 'noisy protest' at the ballot box.

3.
DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL, ELECTORAL REVIVAL?

Mainstream parties are failing to respond to the protest against democratic politics.[8] Most simply this can be seen in their electoral decline (figure 3.1), which has been especially precipitous for social democratic parties (figure 3.2).

Figure 3.1: Support for non-mainstream parties has grown across European democracies (top) and in the UK (bottom) since the 1980s

Total vote share by party family
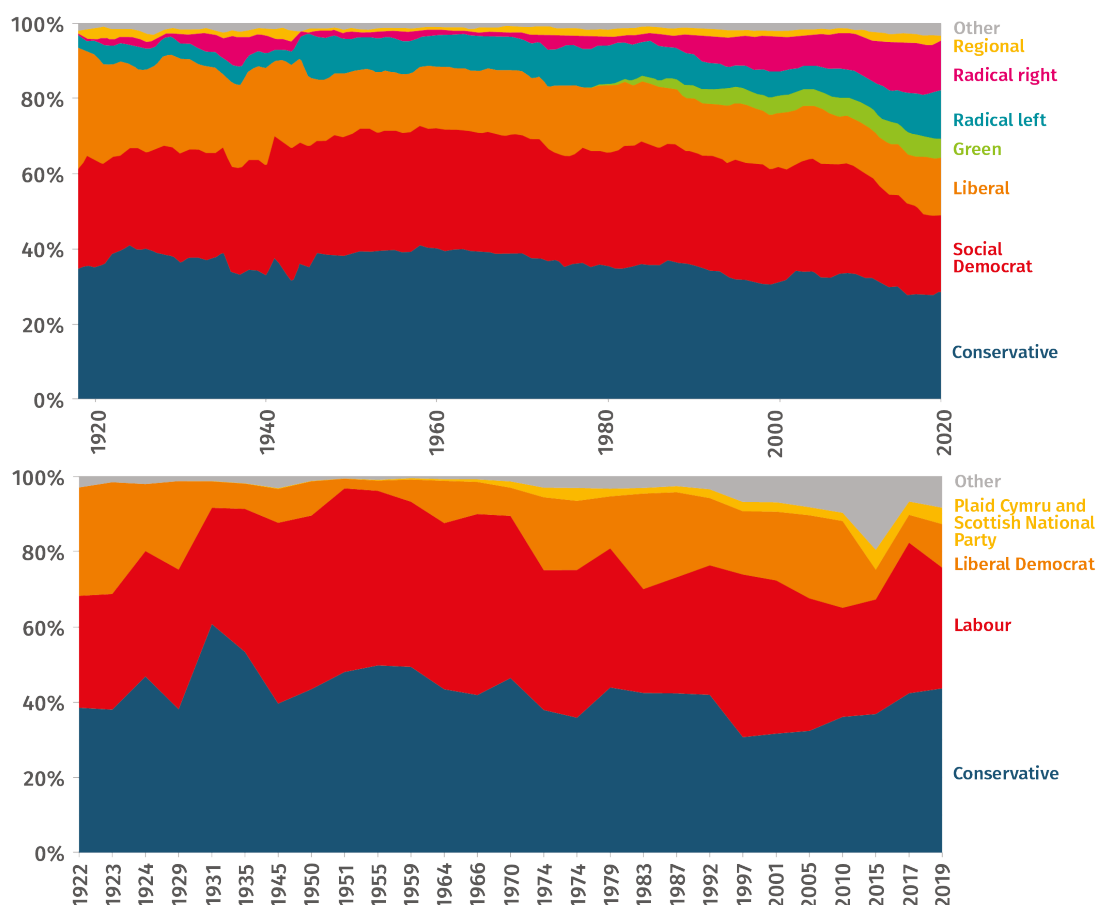
Source: Benedetto et al (2020) (top), Cracknell and Pilling (2022) (bottom)

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[8] In this paper mainstream parties refers to those within the conservative, social democrat and liberal party families.

Figure 3.2: Support for European social democratic parties has plummeted in the 21st century

Vote share and electorate share of social democratic parties across 31 countries in Europe

Total share of votes (%)   Average share of votes (%)   Total share of electorate (%)
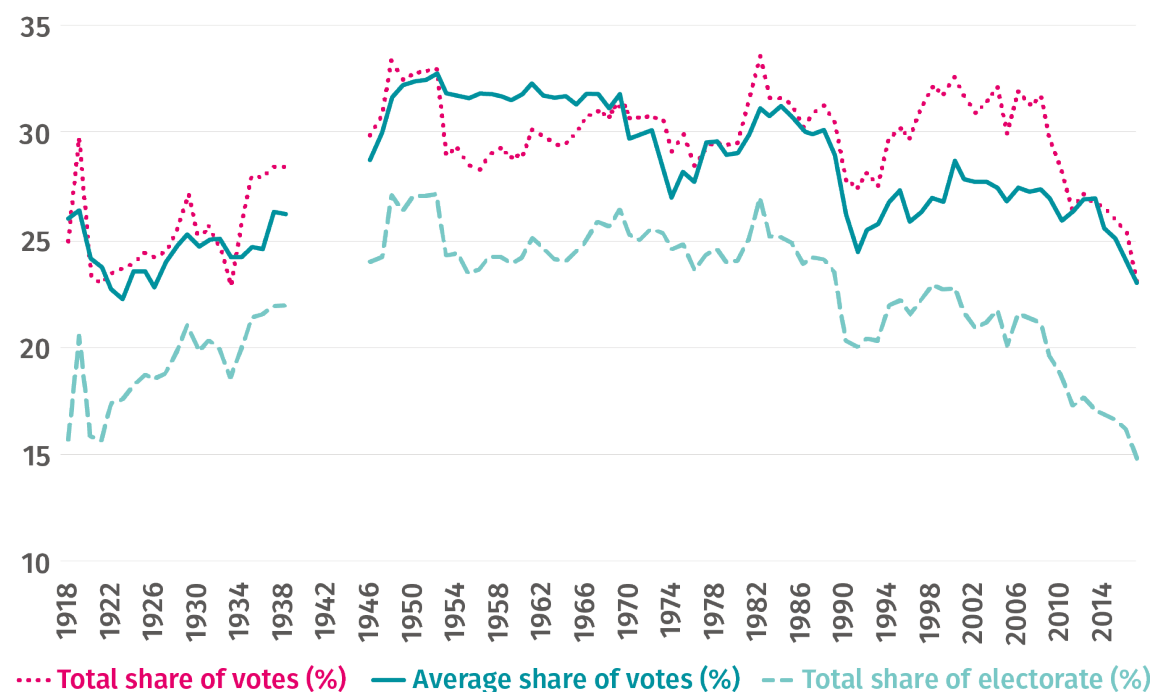
Source: Benedetto et al (2020)
Note: 'total share of votes' is the total votes cast for social democratic parties in a year divided by total votes cast. 'Average share of votes' is the average of the national vote shares won by social democratic vote shares in each country. 'Total share of the electorate' is the total votes cast for social democratic parties in a year divided by total eligible voters.

This is partly because they have focussed on the symptoms of the protest rather than its causes. In response to the rise of right-wing populist parties, many mainstream parties – both on the left and right – have copycatted nativist positions of their opponents (Han 2015, Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). Across Western Europe, centre-right parties have adapted or accommodated their policy positions, particularly on sociocultural issues such as immigration and diversity, in attempt to suppress the far-right challenge (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021). Sometimes this imitation goes beyond policy positions, and centre-right parties also begin to adopt the authoritarian behaviours of their far-right challengers and erode democratic norms. Examples include the Donald Trump's false accusations of electoral fraud and the unlawful prorogation of Parliament by Boris Johnson's government.

Some centre-left parties have also accommodated their policy positions in response to the surge of right populism. Sometimes this is dramatic, such as when the Danish Social Democrat Party supported legislation to confiscate valuables from arriving migrants and asylum seekers (the so-called 'jewellery law'), but other times is more prosaic, such as the normalised use of nationalism symbols and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

This approach to manage the protest, however, does not work. If anything, it only strengthens the populist challengers, and mainstream left and right parties themselves see no benefit of this accommodation in terms of voter support (Krause et al 2022). The share of the electorate that vote for social democratic parties in Europe has fallen by a third over the past two decades. But where social democratic parties have won recently, for example Germany's SPD, it has not been because they imitated right populist positions but instead looked toward the causes of the protest against democratic politics. Olaf Scholz's message of 'respect', for example, successfully tapped into the lack of voice some groups have relative to others in democracy today.

Addressing the cause of the protest – status anxiety and diminutive voices – offer betters alternatives to mainstream parties, especially to centre-left parties, to navigate out of their electoral troubles.

A social democratic response to status anxiety should rely on forming broad and inclusive policies as opposed to deepening and exploiting social and political division. That necessarily involves social and economic policies that deliver a broad base of security and prosperity.[9] But it also demands democratic reforms that increase the sway of citizens over public policy. Such reforms are of course also the instruments to treat the issue of underpowered voices.

Diverse groups across society do not have a respected voice in democracy. For some, the respect has been lost, while for others, there was has rarely been any respect to begin with. For the remainder of this paper, we consider democratic shifts that would give citizens and underpowered communities a greater voice in UK democracy using original polling commissioned for this report.[10]

Giving back control

The campaign to leave the European Union etched 'take back control' into our collective consciousness. It taps into a powerful sentiment in people with otherwise diminutive voices. But has control has been 'taken back' from Brussels only to being concentrated in Westminster instead? Scholars such Meg Russell and Catherine Barnard have argued the Johnson government is concentrating power in the executive, acting to undermine the judiciary (eg, attempts to pare

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[9] While a discussion of the politics of solidaristic policy are beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting such a policy programme is likely necessary for any structural change in the fortunes of social democratic parties. See IPPR Commission on Economic Justice for examples of such policies and see *Who Gets What? The New Politics of Insecurity* (edited by Frances McCall Rosenbluth and Margaret Weir) for further discussion of the politics.

[10] IPPR, Electoral Reform Society (ERS) and Unlock Democracy (UD) commissioned a YouGov poll of 3442 adults in Great Britain. Data was collected between 20 and 21 December 2021.

back judicial review), the legislative (eg, unlawful prorogation of Parliament) and independent institutions like the Electoral Commission.

These are not actions of a government that is looking to 'give back control' to citizens. Indeed, 'giving back control' should be a dividing line at the next general election. Any approach to renewal should look to enhance three aspects of democracy: *of* the people, *by* the people and *for* the people.[11]

Of the people	• Strengthening links between parties and civil society • Improving the representativeness of political elites
By the people	• Enhancing the power of citizens relative to organised interest groups • Levelling up the voices of different groups of citizens • Citizen participation in policy making
For the people	• Fairly distributed constitutional powers • Checks and balances against authoritarian behaviour

Of the people

The remoteness of modern political parties is a major driver of the lack of voice many citizens and communities today experience. As Peter Mair argued, it is increasingly difficult for parties to read, aggregate and translate the demands of citizens into coherent policy options. Some reasons for this, such as the fragmentation of public opinion and the mediatisation of politics, are beyond the control of political parties. But others, such as the representativeness of party candidates and the strength of the party's connections to civil society, are within their control.

The socioeconomic backgrounds of political representatives has a profound impact on how they view policy issues and the choices they make in office (Carnes 2013). The professionalisation of politics – the idea that post-war politicians are increasingly drawn from a small group of occupations and backgrounds – has meant certain groups in society have had their voices diminished. Tom O'Grady has shown the decline in working-class politicians in the British Labour party, for example, weakened the influence of working-class interests in policy choices made during the 1990s and 2000s (O'Grady 2019). In addition to the impacts on policy choices, the representativeness (or remoteness) of politicians is also an important determinant of electoral

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[11] This framework is clearly inspired by, and language borrowed from, the Gettysburg Address.

behaviour. It is therefore striking that four in five people in Britain say politicians poorly understand their lives (figure 3.3). It is difficult to see how governments today are *of* the people. Parties can and must address this if they want to represent diverse groups across the UK.

Figure 3.3: Most Britons say politicians don't understand their lives

How well, if at all, do you think politicians understand the lives of people like you?
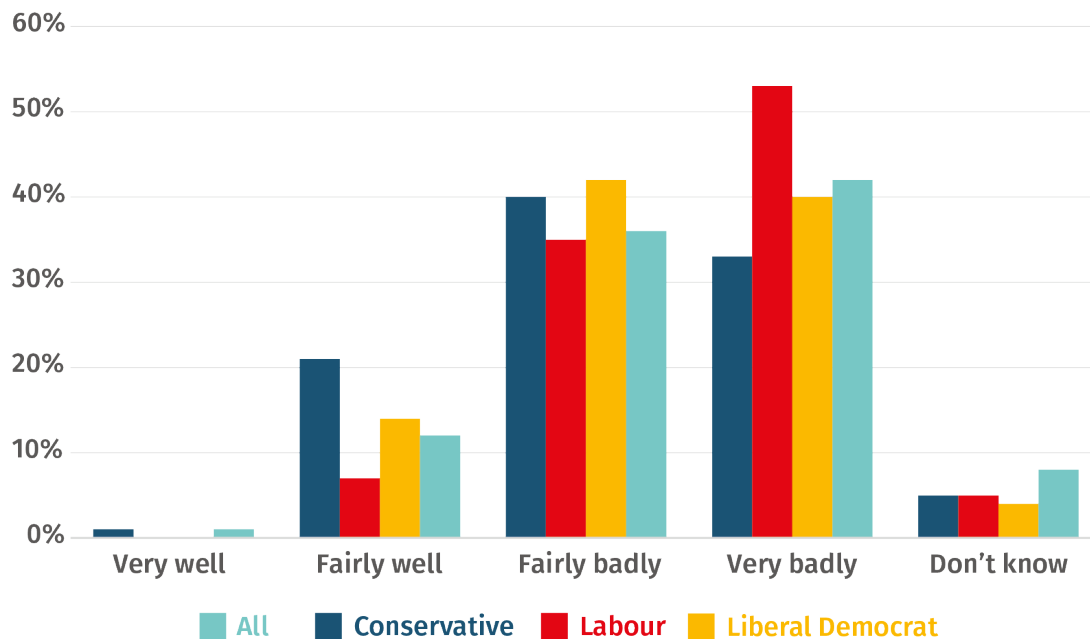
Source: YouGov polling commissioned by IPPR, ERS and UD (2021)
Note: party distributions according to vote cast in 2019 UK general election.

Changes in the party apparatus matter too. Parties seeking to provide citizens a more powerful voice should look to strengthen their relationships with mass civil society organisations, such as trade unions and religious institutions, as well seeking to create relations to modern digital civil society communities. They should also reinvest in the capabilities of the party-on-the-ground rather than simply in the capability of the party-in-public-office. On one hand, this means revitalising party memberships. But other approaches to get a better ear on the ground exist too. Parties could, for example, make use of deliberative democracy and digital participation methods that better facilitate citizens' sentiments, interests and preferences being fed into the policy development process.

By the people

Another driver of diminutive voices is the power asymmetry between citizens and organised interest groups, and between certain groups of citizens versus others.

It is no secret that citizens are only one of several political actors influencing the action of government. As described in the previous chapter, interest groups have

much greater influence over policy outcomes relative to citizens (Gilens and Page 2014, Hacker et al 2021). Interestingly, the British public are acutely aware of their limited influence over public policy relative to organised elite interests (figure 3.4). Only six per cent of people in Great Britain said voters have the greatest sway over public policy and only two per cent said trade unions (a remarkable shift since the 1970s and 1980s when concerns about overly powerful unions was widespread). In comparison, a much larger share believes elite-dominated groups and institutions, often representing or constituting powerful and wealthy individuals, have the greatest influence over public policy. That such large numbers of voters of all political stripes believe they have a diminutive voice is striking and suggestive that a large constituency of voters could be mobilised around the issue of political inequality.

Figure 3.4: Most people perceive elites to have more sway over government policy than they do

Which of the following, if any, do you think has the most influence over public policy decisions the government makes?
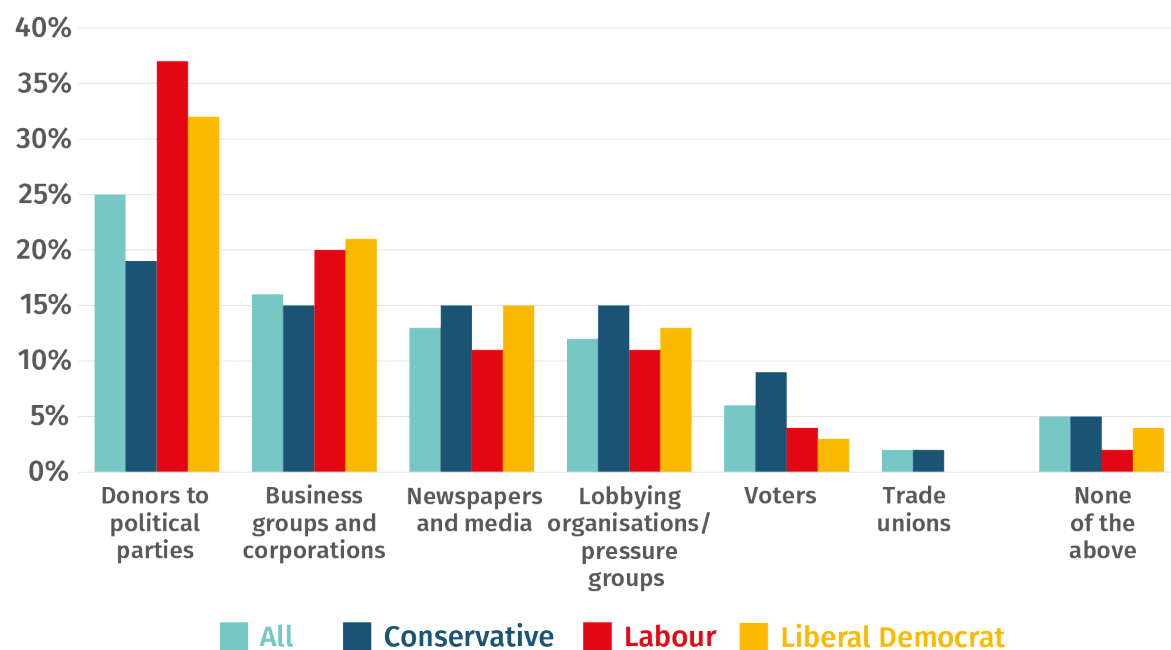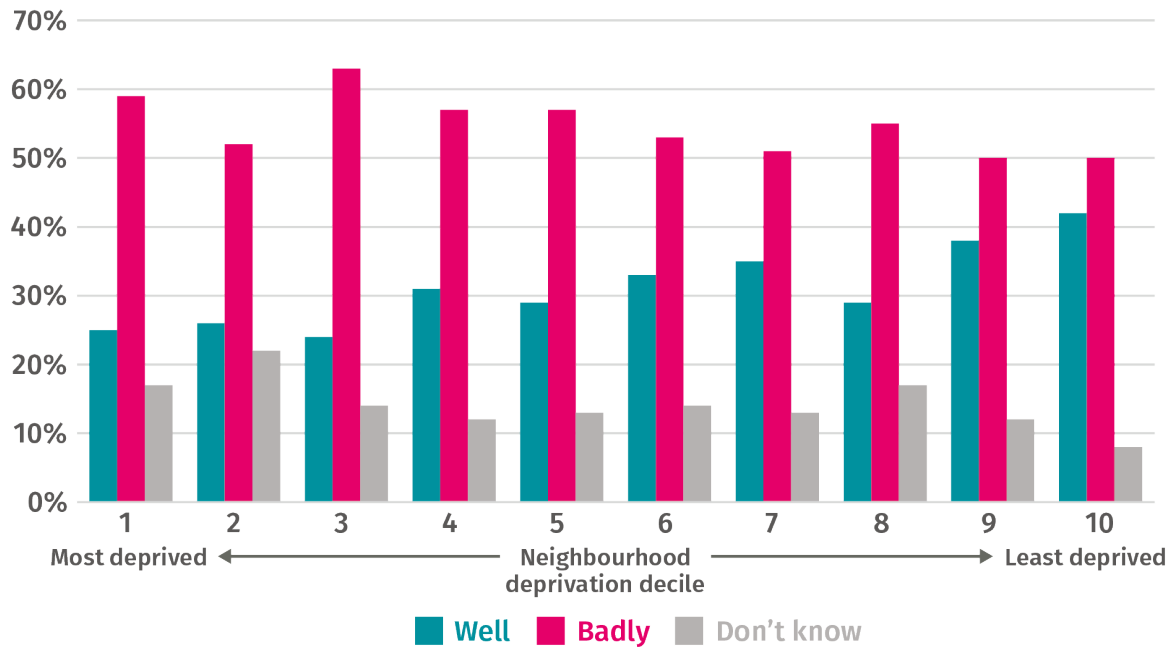

Source: YouGov polling commissioned by IPPR, ERS and UD (2021)
Note: party distributions according to vote cast in 2019 UK general election.

Political inequalities between different citizens also contribute to the phenomenon of diminutive voices. Original polling for this report shows those in the most deprived regions (figure 3.5) and young adults (figure 3.6) are least likely to say democracy serves their interests well. This lack of voice helps explain why those more deprived regions and young adults are more likely to protest, noisily and silently respectively, against democratic politics.

Figure 3.5: People in the most deprived neighbourhoods are least likely to say democracy serves them well
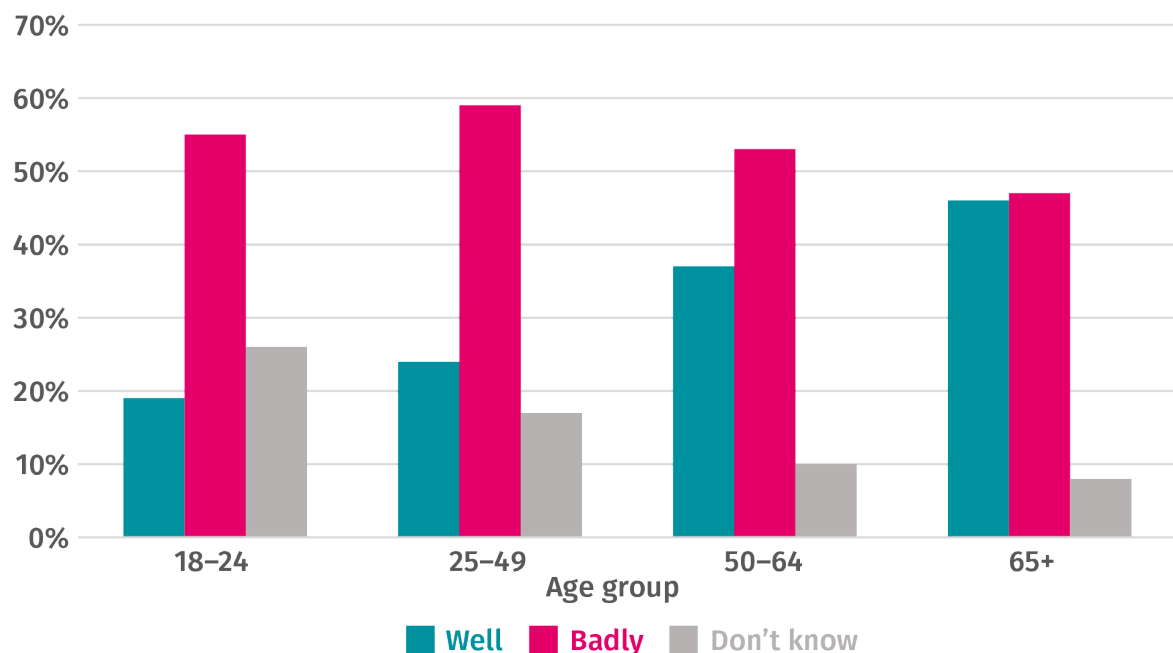
How well, if at all, do you think democracy in Britain as a whole addresses the interests of people like you?

Source: YouGov polling commissioned by IPPR, ERS and UD (2021)

Figure 3.6: Young adults least likely to say democracy serves them well

How well, if at all, do you think democracy in Britain as a whole addresses the interests of people like you?

Source: YouGov polling commissioned by IPPR, ERS and UD (2021)

The policy toolbox to reduce these inequalities and enhance the voice of citizens and marginalised groups is broad. Policies to increase the voice of citizens relative to other influences on the policy choices range from changes to political donation rules, limits to corporate lobbying, media regulation and thoughtful mechanism for citizens to participate in policy making. Policies that look to level up the voices of different groups of citizens include electoral reforms that more fairly representation people across all constituencies.
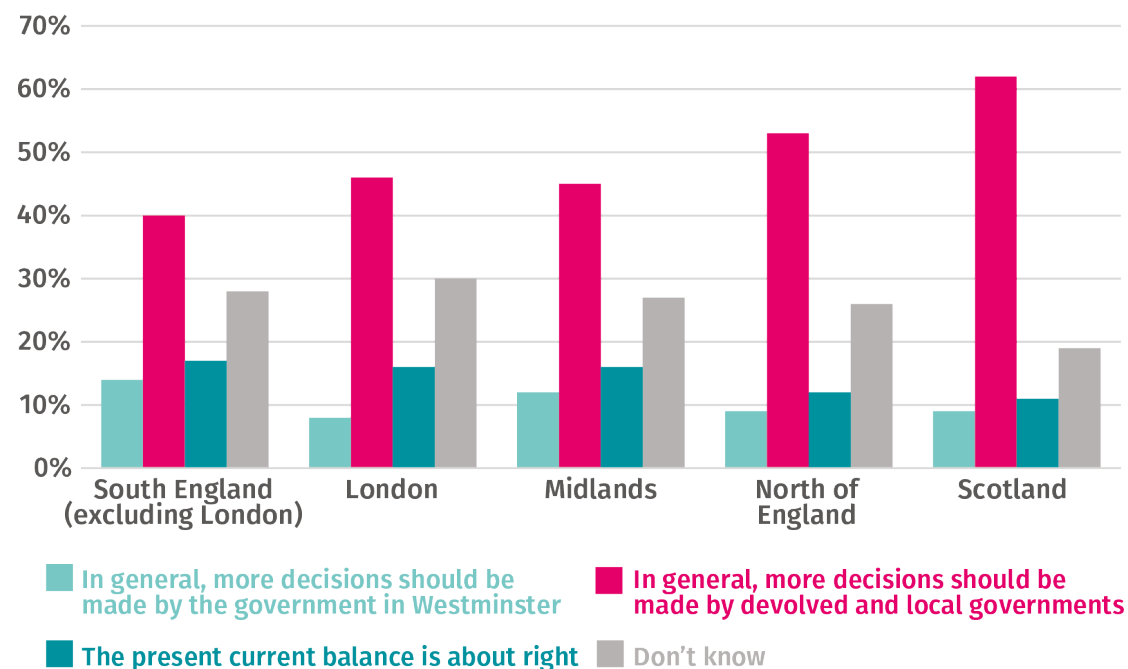
For the people

Governing *for* the people refers to the constitutional rules of democracy. The complicated constitution of the UK, one of the most centralised advanced democracies in the world, creates diminutive voices in several territories.

One obvious difference is the relative voice of each nation of the UK. With a majority of two UK nations voting leave and a majority of the other two UK nations voting to remain, Brexit turned up the heat on an already fragile UK union. It has, among other things, added fuel to Scottish nationalist and Irish reunification movements. At the same time, questions around England's voice (or lack thereof) and the ongoing West Lothian question is further destabilising the union.[12]

Figure 3.7: There is support for greater devolutions across the UK

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

- In general, more decisions should be made by the government in Westminster
- In general, more decisions should be made by devolved and local governments
- The present current balance is about right
- Don't know

Source: YouGov polling commissioned by IPPR, ERS and UD (2021)

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[12] The West Lothian Question refers to the perceived imbalance between the voting rights in the House of Commons of MPs from Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland constituencies and those of MPs from English constituencies following devolution.

Related is the issue of devolution across nations and regions. There is broad public support across Britain for more decision-making powers to be devolved away from Westminster – although support is stronger the further you move away from Westminster (figure 3.7). While all mainstream parties in the UK are committed to devolution, differences arise in the form and scale of that devolution, important variations that will decide who gets a voice and how powerful it is.

Finally, democratic checks and balances on the executive (including legislators and courts) help safeguard governing *for* the people and against proto-authoritarian behaviours. In particular, parliament – as elected representatives and the heart of representative democracy – is a crucial buffer on executive power. The side-lining of parliament by the current government – including briefing media before MPs, passing sweeping pandemic legislation without parliamentary censure, minimal parliamentary oversight over Brexit negotiations and the prorogation of parliament – is therefore concerning, as Meg Russell at the UCL Constitution Unit has consistently highlighted (Russell and James 2020).

Questions of constitutional reform will be high on the political agenda for years to come. At their simplest, they are questions about whose voice should be heard. It is important to not detach this from questions about who has a voice in the first place, and how powerful is it. That is to say, reforms to improve democracy *for* the people should not be separated from reforms to improve democracy *of* the people and *by* the people.

The challenge for mainstream parties

Large sections of the UK population, across diverse social and geographical constituencies, have underpowered voices in our democracy. The challenge for mainstream parties seeking to respond to the protest against democratic politics is to harness this broad base of public sentiment to drive through reforms that enhance the quality of UK democracy. This is a challenge of both communication and policy. But the party that cracks this challenge will not only strengthen British democracy but will reap electoral dividends. Indeed, 'giving back control' should become a dividing line at the next general election.

This paper is the start of a new programme at IPPR on democracy and justice. Building on the arguments in this paper, and working with citizens and underpowered communities, we will set out reforms to 'give back control' and refresh democracy in the UK for the 21st century.

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