Institute for Public Policy Research

IPPR

# TALKING POLITICS

## BUILDING SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM

**Parth Patel, Ryan Swift**
and **Harry Quilter-Pinner**

June 2023

## ABOUT IPPR

**IPPR**

The progressive policy think tank

# CONTENTS

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Parth Patel** is a senior research fellow at IPPR.

**Ryan Swift** is a research fellow at IPPR.

**Harry Quilter-Pinner** is director of research and engagement at IPPR.

# SUMMARY

**Dissatisfaction with how democracy works has been rising for more than a decade.** For the first time since the mid-1970s, a clear majority of people in Britain are dissatisfied with democracy. Although the public remains committed to the ideal of democracy, they are less satisfied with the way it works in reality.

**Recent scandals in British politics have added further strain.** The 'partygate' affair sent trust in politics tumbling to record lows. It also raised the salience of the issue: for the past year, the public has perceived a lack of faith in politics a more important issue facing this country than immigration levels. Declining living standards for all but the richest five per cent of households widens the democratic deficit. Only two in five people in the UK trust the 'democracy and the political system' and only one in three trusts parliament to fulfil its core function: to act in the best interests of people in the UK.

**There is considerable public appetite for an ambitious programme of 'democratic renewal'.** The IPPR-Focaldata survey finds 31 per cent believe the political system needs 'completely' reforming and 26 per cent believe it needs reforming 'to a large extent' – compared to only 6 per cent who say it does not need reforming. An MRP model (see appendix 2) finds support for democratic renewal is strongest in the former industrial heartlands of the country, including the so-called 'red-wall' constituencies.[1]

**But desire for democratic reform alone is not enough. It needs to be mobilised into political action.** This requires effective framing and politicisation. Working with Focaldata, we ran a survey experiment to assess the effectiveness of four rhetorical approaches to framing democratic reform.

1. *Elite capture*: a belief that political processes have been captured by the interests of a small group of elites.
2. *Integrity*: a belief that politicians do not act with integrity and are able to get away with it.
3. *Representation*: a belief that politicians are not representative in their views and experiences of society at large.
4. *Delivery*: the ability of political processes to produce policy outcomes in the interests of most citizens.

**Framing democratic reform as a means to deliver better policy for citizens is the most effective way to build public support.** Our survey experiment found the 'delivery' frame outperformed the others in its ability to increase support for democratic reform, raise the salience of the issue and the propensity to vote for a political party on the basis of this issue. We also found it outperformed the other frames in its ability to increase support for popular democratic reform ideas, including MP voting system reform and House of Lords reform.

**Building popular support is critical to gain legitimacy over, and entrenchment of, reforms to break out of our democratic 'doom loop'.** Politicians could enact reforms without popular support. But if the reforms are ambitious or large-scale (akin to a programme of 'democratic renewal'), they will lack legitimacy if they remain alien to the public, and could easily be reversed without the bulwark of a public mandate. The time is ripe to update democracy in the UK. Indeed, it is the only route out of the democratic 'doom loop' we are trapped in.

---

1    An interactive map is available here: https://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/reforming-the-political-system-constituency-map

# 1.
# INTRODUCTION

Recent events in British politics highlight the fragility – and failures – of our democracy. On one hand, there is the abuse of power: the 'partygate' affair constitutes an actual abuse of power by political elites, while the 'second jobs' controversy at least threatens it. Perhaps more concerning is the arbitrary exercise of power, with the UK government seeking to pass legislation (eg the Retained EU Law Bill, Illegal Migration Bill and Strikes Bill) likely to undermine human rights and civil liberties (Needleman, House and Holborn 2023).

On the other hand, there is growing inequality. Social and economic conditions have deteriorated – and have done so unequally. People in the UK are facing the biggest decline in living standards since records began in the 1950s (OBR, 2023), with only the richest 5 per cent of households are expected to see a growth in their incomes over the next two years (Brewer, Fry and Try 2023).

These events come in what has been a difficult century for democracy. Global politics in the past two decades has seen growing feelings of powerlessness and voicelessness (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022). This is fertile ground for populist parties and movements, who challenge not the principle of democracy but its organisational form, such as the constitutional arrangement of liberal democracy (Mény and Surel 2002).

Given this, it is unsurprising to see 'democratic renewal' on the agenda, particularly for opposition parties seeking a dividing line against a ruling party tainted by political scandal and a deteriorating living standards. The Labour party has committed to a programme of 'democratic renewal' that includes proposals for large-scale devolution of powers to devolved and local governments, major reforms to the House of Lords and new oversight mechanisms for MPs (Labour Party 2023). Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats, a party long affiliated with democratic reform, have emphasised their commitment to wide-ranging reforms, including voting system reform for the House of Commons (a notable difference to the Labour party's plans) (Liberal Democrats 2023). The time is ripe to reform the 'organisational form' of democracy in the UK, such that it better represents its citizens.

Put simply, democratic reform refers to any change that improves the democratic governance of the state. It structures the outcomes of all public policy. But this is poorly understood. Indeed, it was telling that journalists questioned the leader of the opposition's priorities at the launch of the Labour party's Commission on the Future of the UK, asking why democratic reform was important in a time of cost of living crisis and deteriorating public services.

Changing how decisions are made in democracy is of course not separate to the quality and legitimacy of the ultimate decision. But the puzzlement of journalists highlights an important point: developing a programme of 'democratic renewal' is one thing – building public support for it is another.

Dissatisfaction with the way democracy works does not always result in a mobilisation of that sentiment into demands for political action. This is a problem that needs resolving for any politician pursuing a programme of 'democratic renewal'. Of course, they could pursue an elite-led approach that reforms how democracy works in the UK without public support for change. In some cases, this may be

justifiable. But if the democratic reform is large-scale (akin to a programme of 'democratic renewal'), they will lack legitimacy if they remain alien to the public – and could be easily reversed without a mandate.

In that context, this report considers how political leaders can build public support for democratic reform. It considers four questions.

1. What do people in the UK think about democracy and politics?
2. Do people want to change how democracy works?
3. How to build public support for 'democratic renewal'?
4. What are the implications for politicians?

# 2.
# WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK ABOUT DEMOCRACY?

The vast majority of people in the UK think that it is important to live in a country that is governed democratically (Butt and Fitzgerald 2014). Around nine in 10 agree that "a democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government" (EVS 2011). Expectations of democracy are high: there is broad consensus among the British public that democracy, in addition to guaranteeing free and fair competitive elections and protecting civil liberties, should protect people against poverty and involve citizens in decision-making (Butt and Fitzgerald 2014).

Although the public is committed to the ideal of democracy and consider it important to live in a democracy, they are less satisfied with the way democracy works in practice (Dalton 2004, Norris 2011). Democratic satisfaction in the UK rose fairly consistently for 30 years from the 1970s, reaching a high-water mark during the Blair years at the turn of the millennium. By 2019, for the first time since the mid-1970s, a clear majority were dissatisfied with democracy (Foa et al 2020). And while democratic dissatisfaction has been rising across most advanced democracies, it has been particularly acute in the UK (ibid).

Trust in democratic institutions is also low. A new survey of 8,000 people in the UK (commissioned by IPPR and conducted by Focaldata) finds only two in five people in the UK trust 'democracy and the political system' and only one in three trusts parliament to fulfil its core function: to act in the best interests of people in the country. Both follow steep education and income gradients (figures 2.1 and 2.2). These findings support research documenting a collapse in trust in politicians and democratic institutions over the span of decades (Quilter-Pinner et al 2021).

**FIGURE 2.1: TRUST IN BRITISH DEMOCRACY FOLLOWS STEEP INCOME AND EDUCATION GRADIENTS**

Proportion answering 'strongly trust' or 'somewhat trust' to the question: 'To what extent do you trust or distrust in British democracy and the political system?'
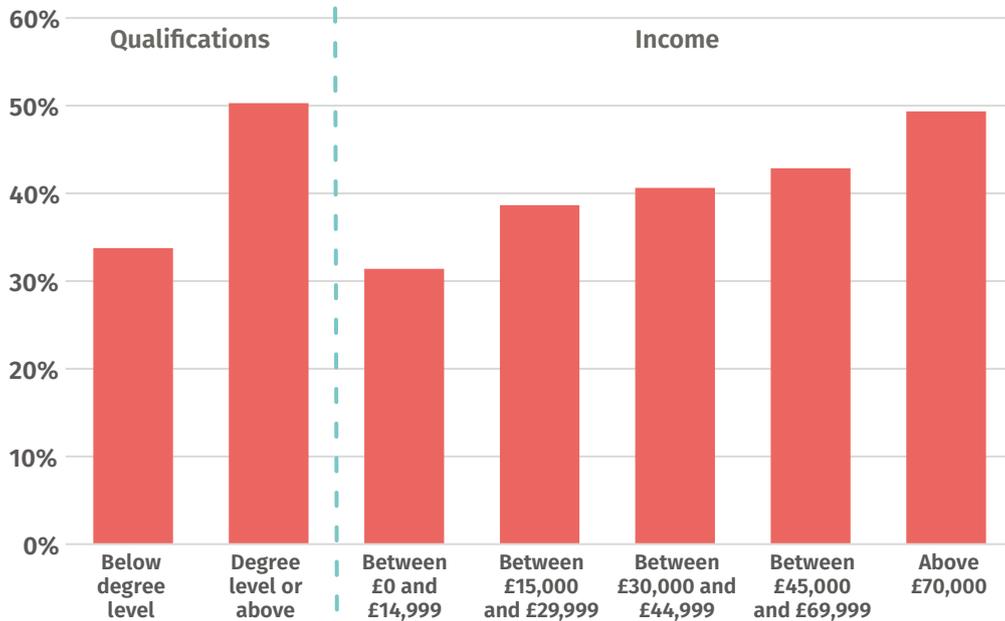


Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

**FIGURE 2.2: TRUST IN BRITISH DEMOCRACY FOLLOWS STEEP INCOME AND EDUCATION GRADIENTS**

Proportion answering 'strongly trust' or 'somewhat trust' to the question: 'To what extent do you trust or distrust the UK parliament to act in the best interests of people in the UK?'
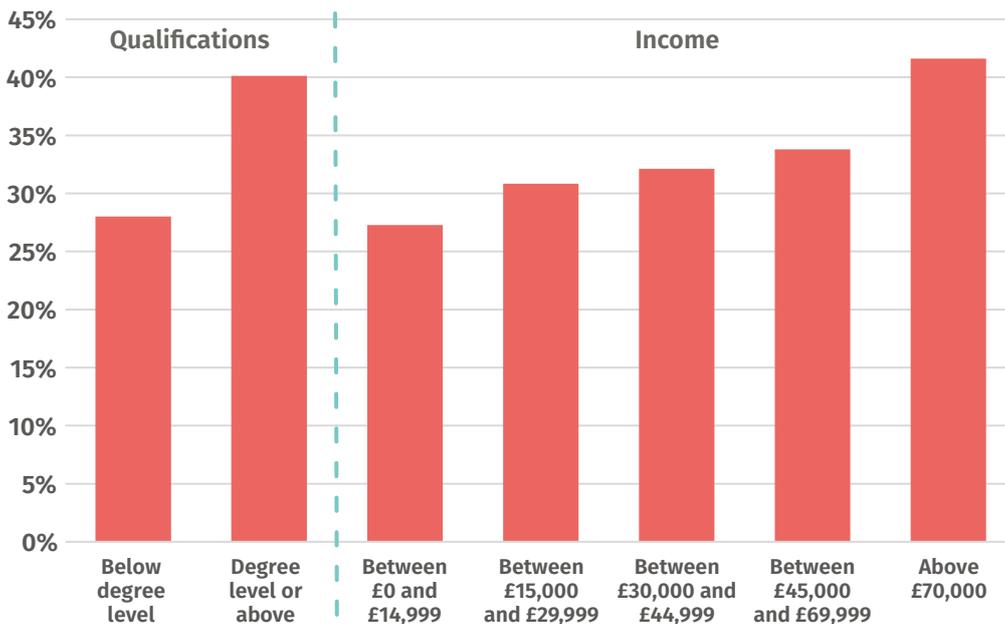


Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

The behaviour of senior politicians during the pandemic heaped additional pressure on the legitimacy of the political system. The proportion of the UK public that perceive politicians to be "merely out for themselves" has rapidly accelerated since the Covid-19 pandemic (figure 2.3).

**FIGURE 2.3: THE PROPORTION OF PEOPLE WHO THINK POLITICIANS ARE 'OUT FOR THEMSELVES' HAS SHARPLY RISEN**

**Responses to the question: 'Do you think that British politicians are out merely for themselves, for their party, or to do their best for their country?'**



— Themselves    — **Their party**    — Their country    — Don't know
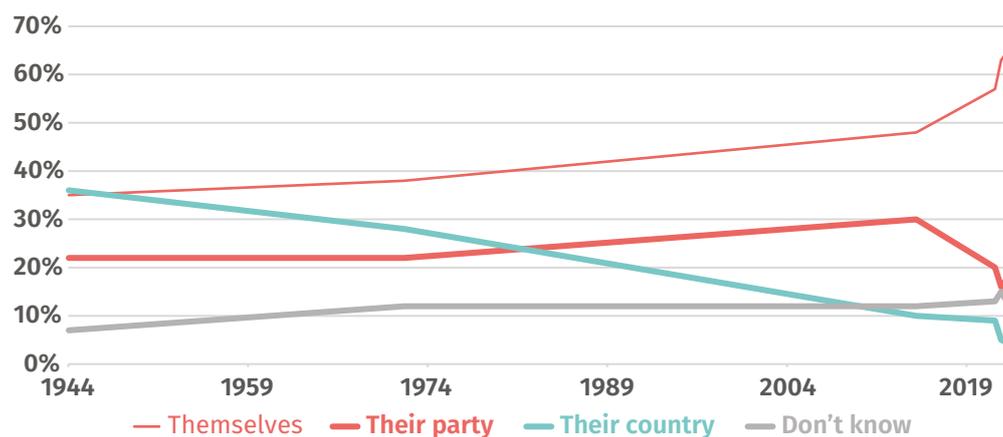
Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

These events have also raised the salience of the issue. 'Lack of trust in politicians/politics' was perceived a more important issue than 'immigration' for the UK public for most of 2022 – and almost as important as the problems in the NHS until the winter began (figure 2.4).

**FIGURE 2.4: LACK OF TRUST IN POLITICS IS A SALIENT ISSUE FOR THE UK PUBLIC**

**Answers to the question: 'What do you see as the most/other important issues facing Britain today?'**



— Inflation    — Economy    — NHS/hospitals    — Immigration    — Lack of faith in politics/politicians
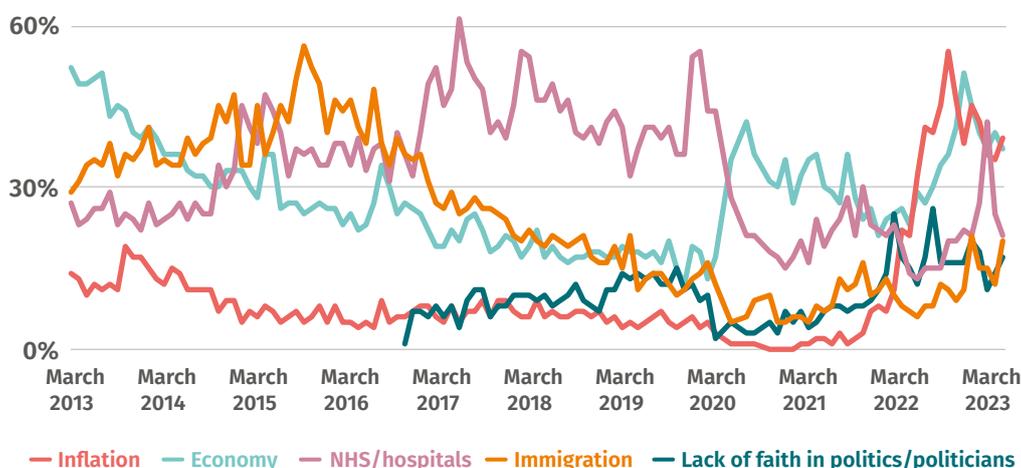
Source: Ipsos (2023)

These surveys of public opinion tell us two things. First, while there is support for democratic principles in theory, there is broad-based dissatisfaction with how democracy works in practice. Second, the salience of democratic reform – or at least a particular dimension of it – is tractable. This has a crucial implication: it should be possible to mobilise public support for democratic reform.[2]

Examining survey responses to broad questions can only tell us so much about public attitudes to democracy. Knowing that people are dissatisfied with the political system is not particularly informative in the absence of information about why they are dissatisfied or how they think the situation might be improved.

But there is less research unpacking dissatisfaction and distrust to democracy in the UK.[3] Two notable exceptions are More in Common (2021), which draws on focus groups with citizens across the UK, and Renwick et al (2022b), which describes the findings of a citizen's assembly tasked with exploring what kind of democratic system people in the UK want.

**BOX 2.1: FOCUS GROUPS METHODS**

We carried out four focus groups in in Winchester, Hartlepool, Birmingham Erdington, and High Peak between November and December 2022. We chose to focus on England for this project as balancing perceptions of Westminster alongside the devolved institutions and the differing party-political landscapes in the other nations of the UK would have been a challenge in a project of this scope.

The sample includes constituencies from the South East, West Midlands, North East, and East Midlands. The socioeconomic make-up of the research sites vary. Birmingham Erdington is the fifth most deprived constituency in England. Hartlepool is also relatively deprived, whilst High Peak fares relatively well, and Winchester is one of the least deprived seats in the country (House of Commons Library, 2020). When it comes to Westminster representation, Winchester is currently Conservative held but the Liberal Democrats came a close second there in 2019 and previously held the seat between 1997 and 2010. Birmingham Erdington is firmly Labour. Hartlepool, long a Labour seat, is now Conservative held following the party's by-election victory there in 2021. And High Peak, while currently Conservative held, has been something of a swing seat in recent decades. Two of the research sites, Birmingham Erdington and Hartlepool, sit within devolved mayoral combined authorities, both headed by Conservative metro mayors. The other two do not. In terms of support for Brexit (based on constituency level estimates), an issue that has had an important bearing on perceptions of politics and democracy in recent years, Hartlepool voted heavily in favour of Leave. Birmingham Erdington also backed Leave, as did High Peak very marginally, while in Winchester over 60 per cent voted Remain (Dempsey 2017). Further to this, each site displays different characteristics when it comes to attitudes to political engagement (Uberoi 2021).

Participants had diverse demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, and mixed party voting intentions. The size of the groups ranged from seven to 12 across the four sessions. Each focus group lasted for three

2    While dissatisfaction with the way democracy works does not in itself mean mobilisation, it does create the opportunity to do so – as campaigns relating to Brexit and Scottish independence show.

3    There is considerable literature theorising structural explanations for rising democratic dissatisfaction. Some sociologists have argued 'status anxiety', the fear of falling behind in the context of structural economic and social changes (many relating to globalisation), drives people to vote for anti-system parties (Gidron and Hall 2017). Others have pointed to changes in political institutions, namely political parties, for hollowing out the voice of citizens in democracy (Mair 2013), who in turn participate less in the processes of democratic politics.

hours. All were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Each session followed the same format and structure. We opened with general discussions about attitudes to democracy and perceptions of our political system at present. We then went on to explore some specific themes in more detail, these included issues relating to trust, representation, inequality, and accountability and delivery (in each session we covered three of the four themes and rotated them across the different groups accordingly). Each of these sections involved a general discussion on the issues, the discussion of some statements on the themes that we presented to participants, and a brief discussion on potential policy solutions to any of the problems raised. The final section of each session focused on looking at perceptions of political messengers and exploring participants' views about the role of political elites in delivering pledges for democratic reform.

We build on this work by conducting four focus groups in Winchester, Hartlepool, Birmingham Erdington, and High Peak between November and December 2022. We ran our own focus groups for three reasons. First, to deepen understanding of citizens' perceptions of democracy and the rationale behind it. Second, to explore whether attitudes to democracy had shifted in the context of the major political scandals of recent years. Third, to identify and unpack the language and rhetoric people use when talking about the political system, to inform development of the frames that we tested.

Negative perceptions of how democracy works were widespread among participants in all four focus groups. When asked to use one word to summarise their perceptions of the state of democracy in the UK, words such as 'chaos' and 'dysfunctional' were commonly used. Many also chose the word 'corrupt', while some spoke of democracy as being 'broken'. We found dissatisfaction with the way democracy worked related to four core themes.

1. *Elite capture*: a belief that political processes have been captured by the interests of a small group of elites.
2. *Integrity*: a belief that politicians do not act with integrity and are able to get away with it.
3. *Representation*: a belief that politicians are not representative in their views and experiences of society at large.
4. *Delivery*: the ability of political processes to produce policy outcomes in the interests of most citizens.

## ELITE CAPTURE

There was a sense that our politics is dominated by, and works largely in the interests of, a small elite. Participants in our focus groups spoke of concerns about party funding and the influences of funders on political decision making. A participant in Hartlepool suggested that *'the way that the political parties are funded and donated to [is] incredibly corrupt'*. They argued that *'people's access to certain figures in the political system [is] based on how much they donate'*. Connected to this, others, across various groups, highlighted the role and influence of foreign money in our politics, with several citing donations to the Conservative party by Russian oligarchs in particular.

> ## It doesn't matter who's in power, they [politicians] just kind of nuke the system and make it work for themselves

A participant in Birmingham Erdington noted *'it doesn't matter who's in power, they [politicians] just kind of nuke the system and make it work for themselves'*. Another in Birmingham suggested that *'it feels like everyone's doing things - rather than being equal - for what's in the vested interests of the politicians'*. This is in keeping with previous research (More in Common 2021), which found more than three in five Britons 'believe that the system is rigged to serve the rich and powerful', and a 2021 IPPR survey that found only 6 per cent of people in Great Britain said voters have the greatest sway over public policy, compared to one in two who said political donors, businesses and lobbying groups (figure 2.5).

Even for some of our participants who were less convinced that politics was dominated by a small, wealthy elite, there was a sense that *'politics is really in favour of the rich'*. A participant in Winchester argued that *'they [politicians] don't actually set out to make life impossible for poor people... they just completely ignore them. They just don't care'*.

The ownership and influence of the media was also highlighted by numerous participants as being symbolic of elite control of our politics. As one participant from Hartlepool put it, *'the media is owned by certain people with a certain opinion'*.

For some, this overall sense of elite capture resulted in perceptions of corruption. This was raised by participants in all four groups. Participants in Birmingham Erdington contrasted the UK with countries where corruption is '*in your face'* and '*blatant'*. The issue in the UK was no less serious, they argued, just less obvious.

**FIGURE 2.5: MOST PEOPLE PERCEIVE ELITES TO HAVE MORE SWAY OVER GOVERNMENT POLICY THAN VOTERS**

**Responses to the question: 'Which of the following, if any, do you think has the most influence over public policy decisions the government makes?'**
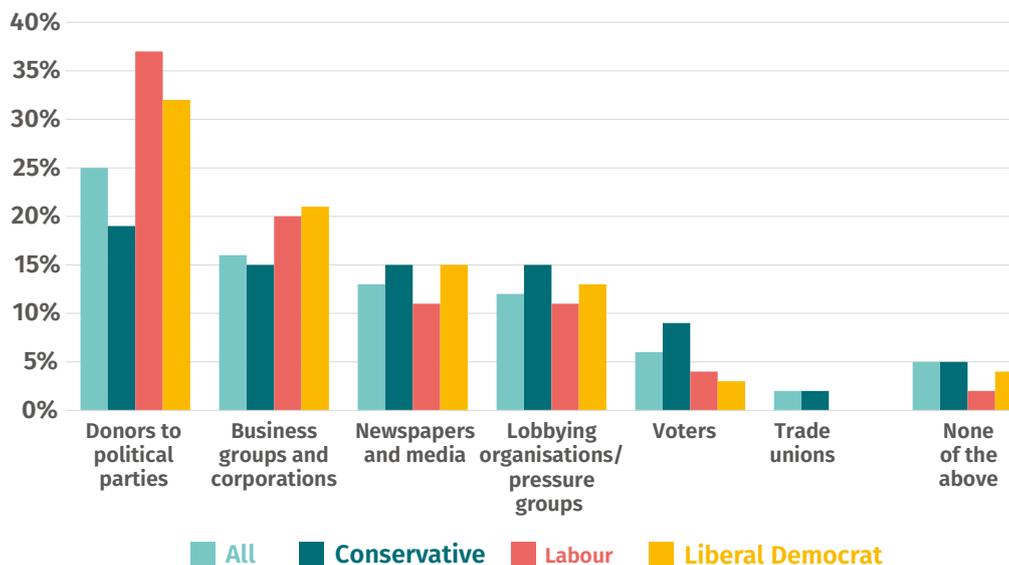


Source: Yougov polling commissioned by IPPR, ERS and UD (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022)

Concerns about elite capture, including the role and influence of the media, and questions about political and financial corruption have been highlighted in other studies exploring public perceptions of democracy (Wike et al 2021). The UCL citizens assemblies find that many citizens display '*a consistent unwillingness to concentrate power in the hands of small groups of politicians, preferring to spread it out to parliament, voters, and independent figures such as judges*' (Renwick et al 2022b).

## INTEGRITY

There was a very clear sense from our focus groups that the public perceive that many politicians are failing to act with integrity – examples of perceived financial misconduct, sexual misconduct, and the persistent telling of mistruths were all commonly invoked – and that '*we don't have accountability*' (Hartlepool participant).

> **"** ***There's a sense of entitlement … as soon as you're in that world, I think people just adopt that persona***

A participant In Birmingham Erdington claimed '*the more powerful you are… the more ability you have to get away with things*'. Another, in High Peak, suggested that '*there's a sense of entitlement … as soon as you're in that world, I think people just adopt that persona*'.

Across all four of our focus groups participants frequently suggested that politicians do not face the same consequences for misbehaviour as people in any other line of work. Highlighting the perceived misdemeanours of one former prime minister, a participant in Winchester stated that '*any one of those would have got you sacked in any other job*'. Instead, however, a number of participants suggested that many politicians who have failed to act with integrity either continue to work in politics or, alternatively, '*they'll get executive director positions and advisor position[s]*' (Birmingham Erdington participant).

While a lack of integrity by some in high office is not a new phenomenon, there was a sense among some of our participants that the ability to hold them to account had worsened in recent years. A participant in Hartlepool suggested that '*there used to be a lot more accountability, and it seems in the last 10 years, that's reduced and reduced and reduced*'.

As the Institute for Government note, 'political scandals have exposed weaknesses in systems for maintaining standards in public life' (Thimont Jack et al 2022). This serves to undermine trust in our political system. A participant in Birmingham Erdington stated, '*you lead from the front … if your government is lying and gets caught, the rest of the public think forget about it, I don't need to worry about it [lying]*'.

The importance of integrity and accountability is highlighted elsewhere. A survey conducted by the UCL Constitution Unit finds 75 per cent agree that 'healthy democracy requires that politicians always act within the rules' (Renwick et al 2022a). Similarly, another UK study find that seven in 10 'expect the government to abide by the law and follow procedures' (More in Common 2021). They want this even if it constrains government ability to act or slows down the decision-making processes.

A participant in Winchester highlighted the importance of having faith in accountability processes, noting '*trust has got to be in the system, because you're always going to get bad apples, but the system should be good enough to root them out and get rid of them*'.

Above all else, participants frequently came back to the idea that *'there needs to be a system where, if they do lie, if they do something, then there are more consequences, as in the real world'* (Birmingham Erdington participant). And that politicians ought *'to be sacked when they have displayed behaviours that you would get sacked in other professions'* (High Peak participant).

## REPRESENTATION

Many participants expressed concerns about the quality of representation in British democracy. Concerns were expressed about both descriptive representation in politics – the extent to which politicians are demographically and characteristically representative of British society, as well as substantive representation – the extent to which the current political system ensures that voters' values and preferences are adequately represented.

> **It's [politics] very elitist, and it's not representative of the general population. And it needs to change**

Again, many participants suggested that politics was dominated by an out of touch, wealthy elite that had little experience and understanding of the life and challenges of ordinary citizens and, as such, were unrepresentative of them. As a participant in Hartlepool put it, *'it's [politics] very elitist, and it's not representative of the general population. And it needs to change.'* Another in High Peak stated *'I don't feel necessarily they're representative of constituents … It's closed off … it's for the highest echelons of society'*.

Key to these perceptions were concerns about the representation of working class people in national politics, a representation gap that has 'grown and is now very wide' (Quilter-Pinner et al 2022). A High Peak participant noted *'I don't think a lot of politicians represent the working class'*. They added, *'I don't think they quite understand the issues of everyday working people'.*

In the context of the current cost of living crisis this was seen to be particularly problematic. A participant in Birmingham Erdington argued *'you can't be fair and be sitting in your castle… because you can't then put yourself in the shoes of the working class person who goes to work every morning, who has to pick up their kid, have to pay for their school uniform, has to look after their food bills … if you're the elite and you're at the top you can't comprehend that'.*

The sense that politicians are out of touch was also encapsulated for many participants in the idea of the 'career politician'. There was a sense that *'there's a lack of politicians with experience outside of politics'* (High Peak participant). A participant in Hartlepool stated, *'they've always said whoever wants to be a politician shouldn't be a politician, which is a sad thing but it's true'*.

This is reflected in other studies. A public attitudes survey by the Constitution Unit found over three-quarters of people felt 'people like them had too little influence – often 'far too little'' (Renwick et al 2022a). This was felt across all demographic groups and past voting patterns. Similarly, research from the Pew Research Centre finds that there was a sense amongst many of their UK participants that having representative voices in decision-making positions is integral to democracy (Wike et al 2021). As one participant in Hartlepool put it, *'it would be good if parliament represented the country'.*

## DELIVERY

Focus group participants spoke of the importance of politicians acting on their pledges. There was significant disillusionment with the current state of society and the economy, and a widely expressed appetite for politicians to deliver on the promises they make to voters. Yet there was a sense that too often politicians are focused on short-term solutions and driven by party political interests when it comes to delivery.

> " *They'll tell you what you want to hear to vote them in. But when they're in they're just like, 'yeah whatever'*

There was a widespread view that politicians make promises merely to get elected then fail to follow through on them once in office. This was surmised by one participant in Birmingham Erdington who suggested *'they'll tell you what you want to hear to vote them in. But when they're in they're just like, 'yeah whatever''*. Another in Winchester noted *'they make all these promises because they want to get elected and then the minute they come into power, I don't see any of it happening'*.

Previous work by IPPR highlights that delivery is essential to citizens' trust in politics (Quilter-Pinner et al 2021). There is evidence that both the objective performance of government and the perceived performance of it in a range of policy areas such as in delivering economic growth and increased living standards (Hetherington 2006, Van der Meer 2017), dealing with inequality (Uslaner 2005), and in delivering effective public services (Putnam et al 1993) can all have an important bearing on citizens' trust in it.

The perceived failure to deliver on promises was also seen as an issue of accountability. A participant in Hartlepool argued *'it all goes back to accountability, doesn't it? We need to see people follow through on what they've said they're going to do'*. Another in High Peak noted, *'I don't feel they're ever accounted to work on their manifesto'*, describing politicians as *'vote catchers'*.

Honesty about political promises and the delivery of them was widely seen to be integral to the healthy running of democracy. A participant in Birmingham Erdington suggested *'regardless of who's in charge, sticking to promises is the whole point of the democratic system'*.

While on a number of issues Renwick et al (2022a) find that voters value integrity above delivery, when it comes to honouring promises made, 'a form of integrity connected to delivery', they find that the majority want to see these delivered on.

One particular barrier highlighted by participants to effective political delivery and longer-term strategic decision making was the role of political parties. There was a sense for some that much political debate is a charade as the majority of decisions are determined by party whips. A participant in Hartlepool stated *'most of the time they get told how to vote, which way to vote. So why are we wasting time pretending ... the mudslinging; that's not making a difference'*. Another in Hartlepool noted you have to look at what does a political party want. *'Generally, they want to be in and running the country ... 'they're not actually looking how to improve the country. They're looking at basically saying what we want to hear, so we'll vote them in'*.

This was seen by many to result in a short-term, sticking-plaster approach to politics. A participant in Winchester argued *'there's nothing going on politically, because they're all rowing between each other. And then you've got scandal after scandal'*. There was a feeling amongst many that, particularly in recent years, politics has become *'more reactive than proactive'* (High Peak participant).

Given all of this, there was a desire amongst many of our participants for more consensus based, longer-term, delivery focused politics. As a participant in Winchester put it, *'we need to come up with some new ways of doing things and maybe be a lot more collaborative … Because'we're just not making any progress'*. Another, in Hartlepool suggested *'collaboration works better every time, rather than just being head-to-head all the time'*. There was a widespread sense, summarised by a participant in Winchester, that this could result in what many wish to see: *'long term policies that actually get seen through rather than them being chopped and changed'.*

# 3.
# DO PEOPLE WANT DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL?

There is a considerable appetite for a programme of 'democratic renewal' among the UK public. The IPPR-Focaldata survey of 8,000 people found 31 per cent believe the political system needs 'completely' reforming and 26 per cent believe it needs reforming 'to a large extent' – compared to 32 per cent who believe it needs reforming 'to some extent' and only 6 per cent who say it does not need reforming (figure 3.1).

**FIGURE 3.1: THERE IS OVERWHELMING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM**

**Responses to the question: 'To what extent do you think the political system in the UK needs reforming?'**
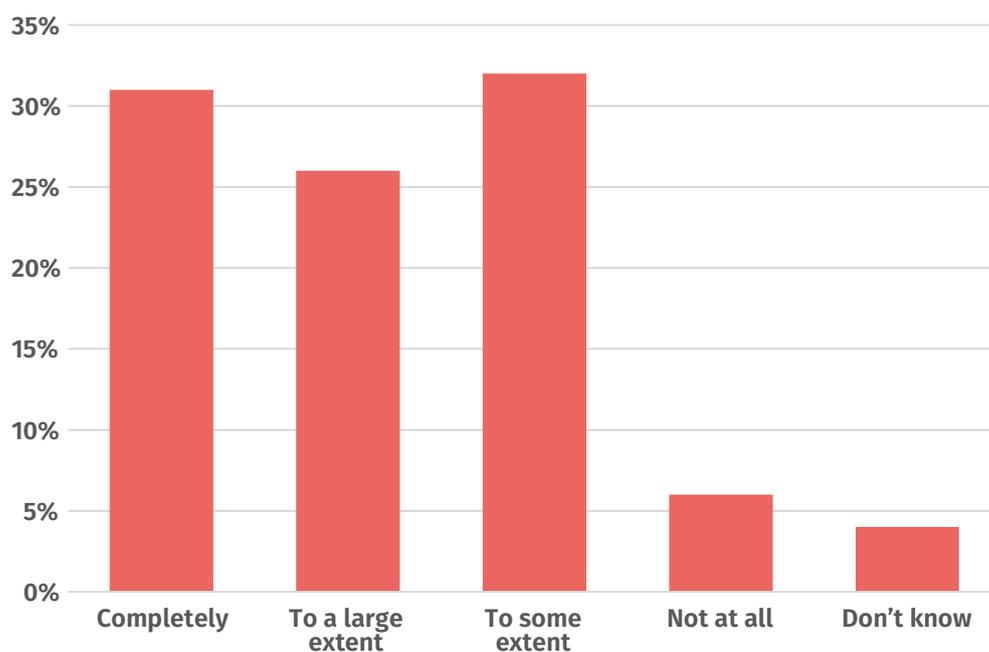


Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

Working with Focaldata, we applied an MRP model (see appendix 2) to this survey item to better understand sentiment toward democratic renewal mapped onto UK constituencies (see appendix and accompanying interactive map for full results). It finds the strongest pockets of support for democratic renewal are in the former industrial heartlands of the country (figure 3.2), including the so-called 'red wall' constituencies. It is worth noting that many deindustrialised constituencies in the UK, sometimes characterised as 'left behind' places, have also seen major shifts in voting behaviour (the most common form of democratic expression) – including high levels of vote switching and large rises in abstentionism (Fieldhouse et al 2020). Previous IPPR research argued these electoral patterns should be considered a

'protest' against the democratic status quo (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022) – these MRP findings reinforce that hypothesis. Parties competing to win voters in these constituencies should take note of their overwhelming support for large-scale democratic reform.

**FIGURE 3.2: THE STRONGEST SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM IS IN FORMER INDUSTRIAL HEARTLANDS**

**MRP modelling of answers to the question: 'To what extent do you think the political system in the UK needs reforming?'**
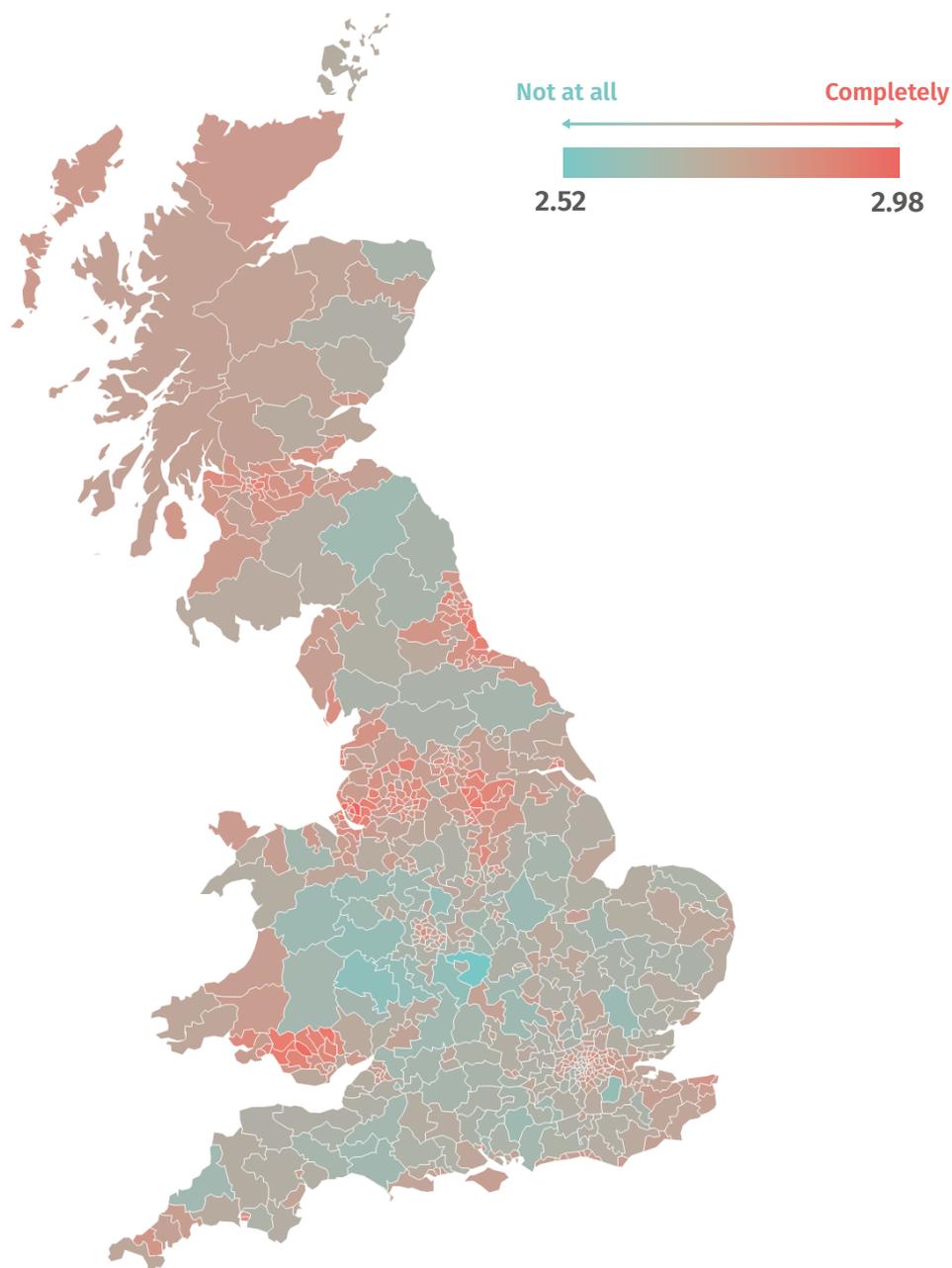


Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

Note: Created with Datawrapper. An interactive version of the map is available at IPPR's website here.

> ## The only way to describe it is broken. It just needs reform everywhere

### WHAT KIND OF DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL DO PEOPLE WANT?

A focus group participant in Hartlepool said *'there's far too many areas that need work. The only way to describe it is broken. It just needs reform everywhere'*. Another participant in the same focus group responded, *'I think it's heading for reform. That's the only good thing. It's that bad now that we've got no choice'*.

But what kind of 'democratic renewal' do people want to see? Polling suggests House of Lords reform, changes to the voting system for the House of Commons, and further devolution of powers all enjoy some degree of popular support (table 3.1), as does enhancing scrutiny and accountability mechanisms for MPs.

**TABLE 3.1: PUBLIC OPINION ON KEY DEMOCRATIC REFORMS**

| Reform | Public opinion | Source |
|--------|----------------|--------|
| House of Lords members | 49 per cent believe that the House of Lords should be made up entirely of elected members | YouGov (2023b) |
| Voting system (House of Commons) | 51 per cent favour reform to the voting system for elections to the House of Commons (up from 27 per cent in 2011 and 43 per cent in 2017) | BSA (2022) |
| Devolution | 47 per cent believe more decisions should be made by devolved and local governments | YouGov-IPPR (2022) |

Source: Authors' analysis

Recent polling by YouGov finds 66 per cent have either 'no confidence at all' or 'not very much confidence' in the House of Lords (YouGov 2023a). In terms of the composition of the second chamber, they find 49 per cent believe that the House of Lords should be made up entirely of elected members, while 25 per cent believe that the House of Lords should be made up of a mix of both elected and appointed members and only 7 per cent believe the chamber should remain mostly appointed (YouGov 2023b).

On the voting system, polling suggests that there is notable support for electoral reform. The latest British Social Attitudes survey found around half of Britons want a change to the voting system (Butt, Clery and Curtice 2022). 51 per cent now favour reform to the voting system for elections to the House of Commons, up from 27 per cent in 2011 and 43 per cent in 2017. While 44 per cent believe the voting system should remain as it is, down from 66 per cent in 2011 and 49 per cent in 2017. Similar results were found in other surveys (Renwick et al 2023), with almost twice as many people supporting the idea that 'the number of MPs … matches more closely the number of votes' as opposed to the idea 'there is normally a clear winner and voters decide who forms the government'. Support for elected reform does appear to differ significantly based on party support, with Labour and Liberal Democrat voters almost twice as likely to back reform when compared to Conservative voters (Renwick et al 2023).

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, ranging from 40 per cent in the south of England to over 60 per cent in Scotland (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022). On the vast majority of social policy issues such as schools, transport, policing, social care, planning, training and skills, and culture, the public want to see more decisions taken locally (RSA 2020).

When it comes to integrity and accountability, research finds that there is support for reform (Renwick et al 2023). They find that there is clear support for the idea that in any allegations of misconduct against politicians 'whatever the nature of the alleged wrongdoing, an independent regulator should be able to launch an investigation themselves'. Indeed, almost twice as many were likely to take this view as opposed to believing that such matters such be left to the prime minister or to parliament.

There is also considerable public concern about the role of monied interests in politics and the impact that this has. Only 13 per cent believe there is sufficient transparency around of the spending and funding of political parties/campaigners (Electoral Commission 2022). This has declined from 37 per cent in 2011. A 2021 survey found three in every four people are concerned about corruption in British politics (Savanta ComRes 2021). There appears to be a sense that public perceptions on these issues have worsened in recent years. Today's politicians are seen as less honest, less selfless, and more corrupt, than those of previous generations (YouGov 2022).

All of this suggests that there is public support for a number of different democratic reforms. This is illuminating, yet polling can only tell us so much. As noted already, the underlying motives behind support for democratic reform cannot be gleaned from polling alone. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that the public are just as supportive, if not more so, of behavioural change in the political system compared to institutional change (Renwick et al 2023). As such, when it comes to understanding public support for democratic reform, it is important to take a holistic view of wider perceptions of democracy and the political system of which they are rooted within.

Some existing studies have sought to do this. Most notably, the UCL citizens' assembly sought to understand what the public wants from our democracy (Renwick et al 2022b). The assembly focused on three key themes namely, the role of government and parliament, the public in the democratic system, and on ways of upholding rules and standards. From these discussions, citizens produced a number of resolutions setting out what they would like to see. They appeared to place a strong emphasis on accountability and scrutiny. Ninety-five per cent thought that there should be mechanisms in place, and 'greater involvement of independent regulators' to ensure that politicians are acting 'honestly and selflessly'. Meanwhile, 92 per cent were in favour of parliament 'play[ing] a stronger role in scrutinising the actions of government'.

Further to this, the assembly were supportive of a number of methods that would enable citizens to have a greater influence in political decision-making. This included support for the use of petitions being extended, support for referendums as 'an important tool for direct democracy that can add to a good democracy in the UK by handing important decisions back to the people', and support for the extended use of deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies in order to ensure that the 'views of the public' are heard by those in power.

While our focus groups were largely focused on understanding citizens' perception of the democratic system rather than on policy solutions, it was the case that participants

commonly proffered ideas for democratic reform throughout the course of our discussions. Many of the ideas put forward by our participants chime with both the polling evidence and much of the citizens assembly findings described above.

> ❝ *The only vote I felt as if I've actually had as my own was the Brexit vote*

The House of Lords regularly came up as a concern with many participants with the unelected nature of the chamber being a key source of grievance. As a participant in Winchester put it, the '*House of Lords is appointed or hereditary... it's not democracy*'. Another in Hartlepool, noted '*it is absolutely ridiculous that in this day and age, we have a group of people making decisions for us who are totally unelected*'. Indeed, as well as being seen as undemocratic, the Lords was seen by some as symbolising an archaic system: '*I think the whole infrastructure needs to be looked at, and they need to like be replacing these peers and peerages, and the knighthoods, and all these little things that they all have. They're all part of the political landscape. So, all of them need to change in line with what's happening today in modern Britain*' (Birmingham Erdington participant).

There was also notable support among our participants of reform to the voting system with many expressing grievances about the need to vote tactically or of having a 'wasted vote' in 'safe seats' under first past the post. As one participant in Winchester put it, '*if I voted the way I wanted to, it will be a wasted vote*'. Another in Hartlepool noted, '*I've never felt as if I've voted for who I wanted to vote for because it was a waste of time... a lot of the time, I decided not to vote. I thought, what's the point?*'. They stated, '*the only vote I felt as if I've actually had as my own was the Brexit vote*'.

Numerous participants across all of our groups brought up the idea of having a more proportional voting system and argued in favour of it. Some acknowledged that this could potentially result in slower, less decisive government, but many perceived the benefits it would bring in terms of improving party representation as outweighing these. It was argued that many more people's views would be represented under a proportional system. A participant in Hartlepool suggested that '*there's a broad enough spectrum [of political parties] to represent everyone, just the system means that they don't, they're not represented in parliament*'. In terms of government, a Winchester participant noted that, under a more proportional system, '*you could end up getting like maybe 60 per cent of the population getting some form of representation*'. As such, another participant there argued '*proportional representation … is the only way to participate fully in the process*'.

While it seemed that, on the whole, despite some notable exceptions, many participants were likely to view local politicians more positively than national ones, devolution rarely featured during the course of our focus group discussions. The only place in which it did was Hartlepool where there has been a metro mayor in place since 2017. Despite mixed views about the current approach of the mayor, the idea of devolution was viewed positively in terms of brining decision-making closer to citizens. Speaking of the case for devolution, a participant stated '*that's where the North-South divide sort of thing comes in because we've got people making decisions about an area of the country which is just worlds apart. I used to live in London myself and it's just completely different*'.

> **They need to be working for what we need as a country, [not] just working for themselves'**

There was significant concern among many of our focus group participants about the influence of money in our politics as well as broader perceptions of corruption. Across several of our groups, participants expressed concerns about the processes of government contracts being handed out, particularly during the pandemic. In this context, a participant in Birmingham Erdington suggested that we need more robust 'conflict of interest policies'. Meanwhile a participant in Hartlepool prioritised the need for behaviour change amongst certain representatives, arguing that the focus amongst some politicians must shift away from *'how much money can you get yourself'*. They added, *'they need to be working for what we need as a country, [not] just working for themselves'*.

Finally, chiming with the findings of the UCL citizens' assembly (Renwick et al 2022b), integrity and accountability were seen to be particularly important with a number of participants speaking of the need for enhanced scrutiny mechanisms and greater consequences for those judged to have behaved inappropriately. While few specific policy ideas related to this were discussed, participants frequently came back to the idea that *'there needs to be a system where, if they do lie, if they do something, then there are more consequences, as in the real world'* (Birmingham Erdington participant). And that politicians ought *'to be sacked when they have displayed behaviours that you would get sacked in other professions'* (High Peak participant).

# 4.
# HOW TO BUILD PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM?

It is clear there is large-scale public appetite for an ambitious 'democratic renewal' offer. How can politicians and political parties mobilise it?

Drawing on insights from political communications literature, we suggest that the way in which politicians frame democratic reform, and the extent to which they mobilise these frames politically, is key to mobilise public support on this important and timely issue.

## FRAMING

Framing an issue essentially involves 'select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and make[ing] them more salient in a communicating text' (Entman 1993). Typically, frames will seek to 'promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman, 1993). Frames can therefore be seen to 'diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe'.  As such, the process of framing 'can be conceived as the packaging of an element of rhetoric in a way that encourages certain interpretations and discourages others' (De Blasio 2013).

Political entrepreneurs and political parties in general play a key role in framing (Jacoby 2000). There are a number of factors that influence parties' decisions in taking certain approaches to framing an issue and a number of benefits that they may stand to gain by doing so.

First, framing can provide parties with legitimacy on specific issues. In selecting issues to frame and the 'particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' associated with them, parties can demonstrate to voters clearly and effectively their position on an issues and their proposed remedies. In doing so, parties can 'strengthen their general programmatic and ideological profile' (Wonka 2016).

In this way, framing also plays an important role in political agenda setting (Green-Pedersen 2012). In framing issues in certain ways, parties can grant issues 'access to the political agenda by defining and presenting it as a relevant problem' (Urso 2018). Framing is part of a process of parties communicating and increasing the salience of their political priorities to the electorate.

Second, framing can play a key role in strengthen support for particular political interpretations, diagnoses, and prescriptions. There is much evidence to suggest that the way in which political parties choose to frame an issue can have a significant influence on public opinion (Lefevere 2019, Slothuus 2010, Jacoby 2000).

The way in which political entrepreneurs or parties chose to frame an issue 'appears to frequently exert a powerful influence on how citizens understand issues and, in turn, how they form policy preferences' (Slothuus 2010). These so-called 'framing effects' occur when changes in the way a particular issue or

challenge is framed results in notable changes in public opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007).

Third, taking particular framing approaches may prove decisive for parties in winning public support and votes (Lefevere 2019, Wonka 2016, Jacoby 2000). Indeed, 'the more a party emphasises a topic or issue (makes it 'salient'), the more likely it is to attract voters who are concerned with this topic' (De Blasio 2013).

Given that many voters appear to have significant concerns about the political system and democracy at present, it may be that in presenting serious and compelling frames about the case for and importance of democratic reform will be electorally beneficial for parties.

## POLITICISATION

However, framing alone is seldom sufficient in acting to legitimise and strengthen support for particular interpretations and solutions. Nor are frames likely to have much impact on party support if they remain largely unknown to the public. For frames to become politically salient they must be mobilised, or politicised, by political entrepreneurs and parties (Urso 2018).

Framing can be seen as the process whereby issues are presented in a particular way to increase their salience, while politicisation is the process whereby these salient tensions are mobilised politically in order to gain the legitimacy, opinion-shaping, and potential electoral benefits outlined above (Hurrelmann et al 2015). In this process, political entrepreneurs and political parties are key given their ability to speak to both political elites and the general public (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

There are a number of studies considering constitutional change and the role of political parties in such processes. In Scottish, and to a lesser degree Welsh, devolution in 1997, the position of political parties on constitutional matters can be seen have had an impact on outcomes (Pattie et al, 1999). Nevertheless, it is not a given that party supporters will follow the lead of their party on issues of constitutional change. Lessons from previous campaigns suggests that parties must be proactive in laying the groundwork for reform and explaining the case for it (Moon and Bratberg 2014, Curtice 2013, Rallings and Thrasher 2006, Denver 2002). As such, the effective and consistent framing and politicisation of the case for and merits of democratic reform is essential for parties interested in this agenda.

Overall, the process of framing can be seen to potentially bring a host of benefits to political parties if they develop frames in a way that chime with existing narratives and understandings while also increasing the salience of particular interpretations, diagnoses, and prescriptions that align with their own political agenda. To reap these rewards, political entrepreneurs and parties must mobilise these frames through the process of politicisation in order to get their messages across to voters. In doing so, they increase public awareness and understanding of their position on an issue, gain political legitimacy to compete in that issues space, shape public opinion and the wider political agenda, and occupy ideological space that may make them out of different from alternative political options and, in turn, may bring electoral benefits.

## DEVELOPING FRAMES ON DEMOCRATIC REFORM

With all of this in mind we sought to develop and test distinct frames on the issues with the political system and the case for democratic reform that could, in theory, be utilised by politicians and parties.

We did so inductively. Drawing on the findings from our focus groups we crafted frames around the four key themes that emerged: elite capture, integrity and

accountability, representation, and delivery. As such, each of the frames can be seen to be rooted in existing narratives and popular grievances.

In terms of the structure and the content of the frames, they each contain a consistent opening that diagnoses the general problems with our political system, and they each contain a final section that contains a broad prescription for reform. In the middle of each of them, we have set out a specific causal interpretation – pertaining to the key themes them emerged from our qualitative research – and moral evaluations associated with it.

Our frames therefore follow a conventional structure, but each speak to different specific grievances and challenges in our political system (the full texts can be found in the appendix of this report).

1. *Elite capture*: a belief that political processes have been captured by the interests of a small group of elites.
2. *Integrity*: a belief that politicians do not act with integrity and are able to get away with it.
3. *Representation*: a belief that politicians are not representative in their views and experiences of society at large.
4. *Delivery*: the ability of political processes to produce policy outcomes in the interests of most citizens.

Working with Focaldata, we conducted a survey experiment of 8,000 people (see box 4.1) to identify the most persuasive framing of democratic reform. We investigated the relative power of each frames (compared to a control message) in their ability, if any, to shift:

- support for democratic renewal
- salience of political reform
- likelihood to vote for a party on the basis of this issue
- attitudes to democratic principles
- attitudes to democratic reform policies.

**BOX 4.1: SURVEY METHODOLOGY**
The purpose of the research was to identify the most persuasive framing of democratic reform. The method we used to conduct this analysis was 'split testing', a survey method inspired by randomised control trial design, where identical groups are presented with different messages (see appendix 1), and their subsequent responses in an outcome survey measured both against a 'control' group (shown a blank message). The survey experiment was conducted on a representative sample of 8,000 resident in UK and fielded in February 2023. Social and demographic characteristics were well distributed across each fork of of the survey experiment (see accompanying publications by Focaldata for full results).

### Support for democratic renewal
Each of the four frames we tested increased support for 'democratic renewal' (measured as the proportion who believe the political system needs reforming 'completely' or 'to a large extent'). The effect size is large: being exposed to a message about democratic reform increased support by around 8 per cent for each frame (figure 4.1).

**FIGURE 4.1: BEING EXPOSED TO A MESSAGE ABOUT DEMOCRATIC REFORM INCREASED SUPPORT FOR IT**

**Responses to the question: 'To what extent do you think the political system in the UK needs reforming?' through each frame (% who responded 'completely' or 'to a large extent')**
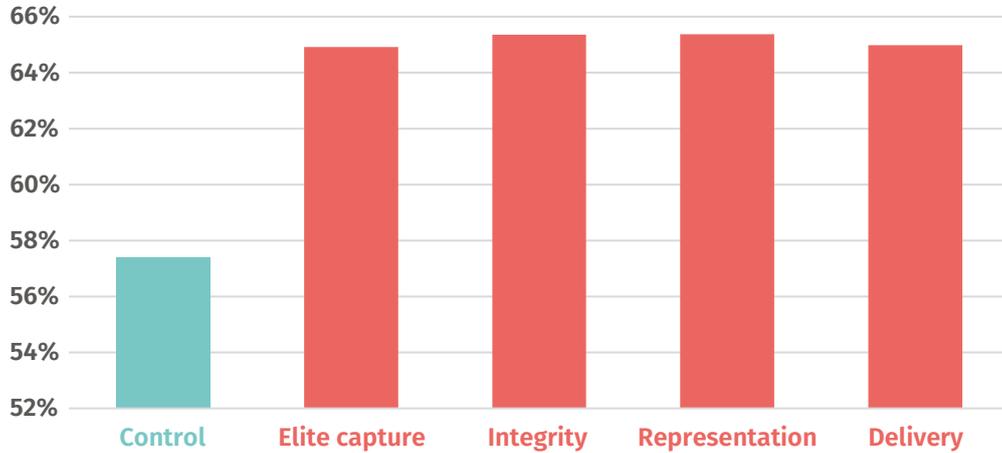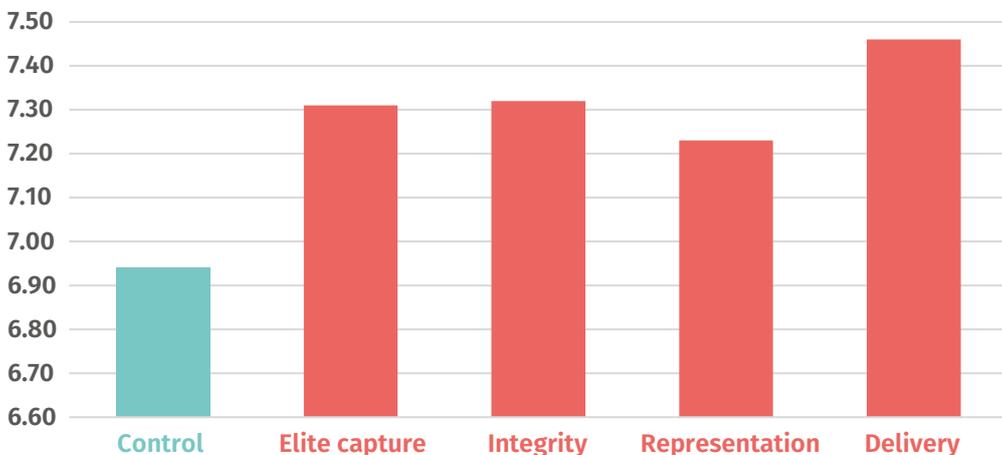


Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

Note: There is a less than 5 per cent likelihood that the observed difference for each frame compared to the control is due to chance. Please also note the y axis does not begin at zero.

### Salience of political reform

We also find it is also possible to increase the salience of political reform with rhetoric. Framing it as an issue of 'delivery' performed better than the other frames, but our survey experiment found a statistically significant difference (defined here as a less than 5 per cent likelihood that the observed difference is due to chance) for every frame compared to the control group (figure 4.2).

**FIGURE 4.2: FRAMING DEMOCRATIC REFORM AS A MEANS TO DELIVER BETTER POLICY MOST POWERFULLY RAISES ITS SALIENCE**

**Responses to the question: 'Thinking about political reform, how important an issue do you think it is for the country? Please answer on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'This is not at all important an issue' and 10 means 'This is one of the most important issues'.' (mean score)**



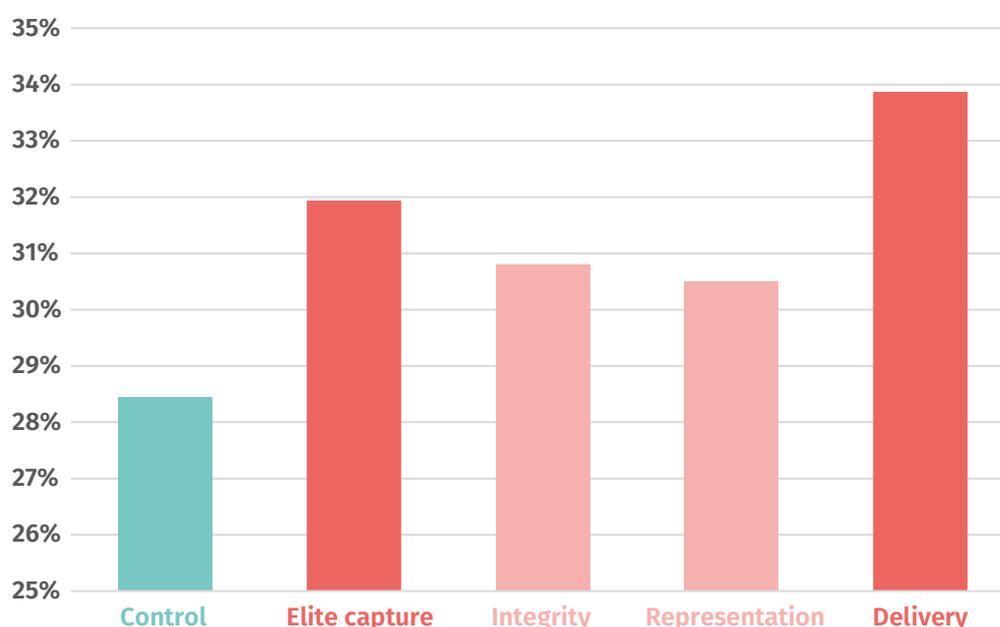Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

Note: there is a less than 5 per cent likelihood that the observed difference for each frame compared to the control is due to chance. Please also note the y axis does not begin at zero.

## Voting behaviour

A political party that makes political reform a key part of their electoral offer is appealing to the UK public – but to what extent depends on how the issue is framed. While we found each frame led to an increase in the proportion of people saying they are 'much more likely' to vote a party with a political reform agenda, the increase was statistically significant only for the 'elite capture' (4 per cent) and 'delivery' (6 per cent) frames (figure 4.3).

**FIGURE 4.3: THE 'ELITE CAPTURE' AND 'DELIVERY' FRAMES INCREASE THE PROBABILITY OF VOTING FOR A PARTY WITH A DEMOCRATIC REFORM AGENDA**

**Responses to the question: 'Imagine a political party were to make political reform a key part of their offer to voters. Would you be more or less likely to vote for this party at the next election, or would it not affect your vote decision?' (% who responded 'much more likely')**
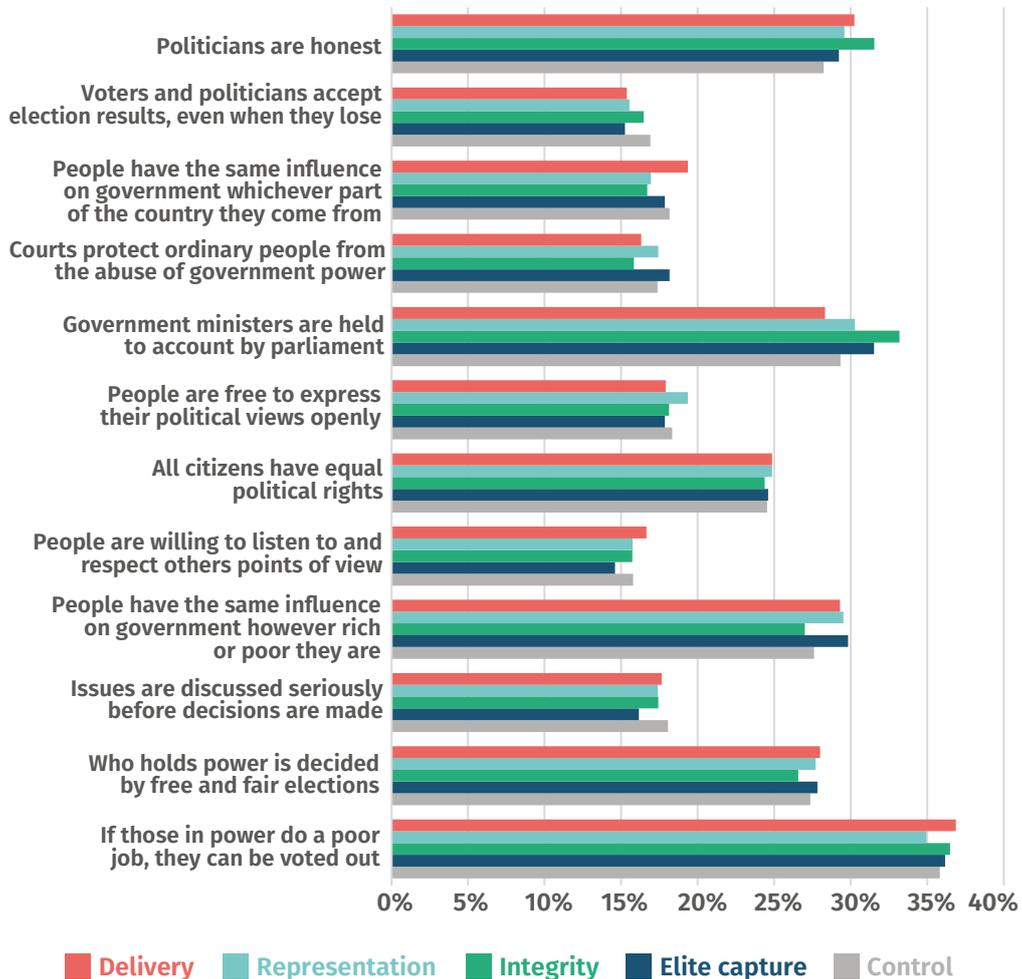


Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

Note: there is a less than 5 per cent likelihood that the higher result of the 'elite capture' and 'delivery' frames compared to the control are due to chance. The results of the 'integrity' and 'representation' frames compared to the control did not overcome this statistical significance threshold. Please also note the y axis does not begin at zero.

## Attitudes to democratic principles

Framing has a negligible impact on public opinion of democratic ideals. There was minimal variation across the tested frames and control message when survey respondents were asked to select up to three aspects of democracy (adapted from Renwick et al 2022a) they felt were most important (figure 4.4).

## FIGURE 4.4: FRAMING HAS A NEGLIGIBLE IMPACT ON ATTITUDES TO DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

**Responses to the question: 'Thinking about the idea of political reform, which aspects do you think are the most important? Please select up to three.'**



Delivery · Representation · Integrity · Elite capture · Control

Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

Note: The 'integrity' frame led to a 3 per cent increase in the perceived importance that 'government ministers are held to account by parliament' and 4 per cent increase 'politicians are honest' compared to the control message, both of which overcame our threshold for statistical significance (less than 5 per cent likelihood the results are due to chance). Otherwise we found no statistically significant difference in how any of the frames performed against any of the other democratic principles tested.

### Attitudes to democratic reform policies

The power of framing to shift attitudes to policy is more variable. The 'integrity' frame appears the weakest and the 'delivery' frame the strongest. The greatest effect size is seen in attitudes to electoral reform, where exposure to the 'delivery' frame increased support for proportional representation by 7 per cent (figure 4.5). There was also a statistically significant increase in support for proportional representation in those exposed to the 'elite capture' and 'representation' frames. A similar pattern is seen in attitudes to replacing the House of Lords with an elected chamber and greater devolution, although the effect sizes are smaller and not all differences overcome our threshold for statistical significance.
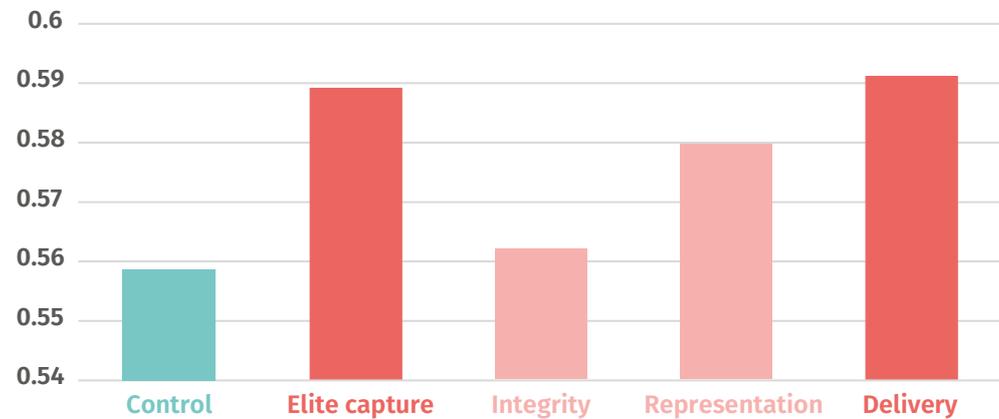
**The first-past-the-post voting system for UK parliamentary elections should be replaced by a proportional voting system (net support)**



**The House of Lords should be replaced by an elected upper chamber (net support)**



**More powers should be given to devolved and local governments (net support)**



Source: IPPR/Focaldata survey

Note: there is a less than 5 per cent likelihood that difference compared to control for the solid coloured bars are due to chance. The difference between the lighter shaded bars and control group did not overcome this statistical significance threshold.

## 'DELIVERY' IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO FRAME DEMOCRATIC REFORM

While testing different frames against a range of individual survey questions is valuable, it is limited in its ability to inform us of the persuasiveness of a particular frame overall in mobilising public support around democratic renewal.

As such, working with Focaldata, we developed a 'democratic reform index' to compute the aggregate effect of each frame. This provides an aggregate measure of enthusiasm for democratic reform across several questions and so creates a more information-rich measure of the ultimate outcome of interest: propensity to mobilise the public around a democratic reform agenda.

This index is a composite measure of the political potency of democratic reform, which combines three elements: 1) level of appetite for reform, 2) the salience of the issue in people's minds and 3) likelihood to vote for a party on the basis of this issue (see box 4.2). This is a better representation of people's real-world attitudes towards democratic reform than any one question - which reduce the issue to any one of the above dimensions (eg while lots of people may want to reform the system, if it's not actually salient or a vote mobiliser, then it has no political potency).

As figure 4.6 shows, this process resulted in important differences between the frames. The 'delivery' frame is the more powerful to build public support for democratic renewal.

> ### BOX 4.2: DEMOCRATIC REFORM INDEX
>
> Working with Focaldata, we developed a 'democratic reform index' to provide a more mathematically robust way of measuring the effect of each frame across multiple questions and so provide an aggregate measure of public mobilisation around a 'democratic renewal' agenda.
>
> To develop the index, Focaldata initially conducted an exploratory factor analysis to examine how responses were clustered around these 14 questions and the degree of correlation between them. This identified as cluster of three questions that felt the closest to a comprehensive, coherent measure of enthusiasm for democratic reform - degree of appetite for reform (Q14), issue salience (Q15) and propensity of the issue to act as a driver of voting behaviour (Q22).
>
> Focaldata then ran PCA (principal component analysis) on the three questions to identify the primary component or dimension that best 'explains' the data associated with these three questions. In mathematical terms, what PCA does is summarise the data by linearly transforming it into a number of simpler dimensions while preserving as much variability as possible. Having done this, we extracted the first dimension - the single dimension which best summarises the data while retaining as much variation as possible - and made this our index. In terms of weighted contribution to the index, Q14 contributes 40.0 per cent, Q15 41.0 per cent and Q22 21.1 per cent. Cronbach's alpha, a measure of internal consistency or the extent to which all the items in a test measure the same concept, was 0.62, which was considered acceptable. Index scores were rescaled so that the mean for the control group is 0.

**IPPR and Focaldata's 'democratic reform index'**
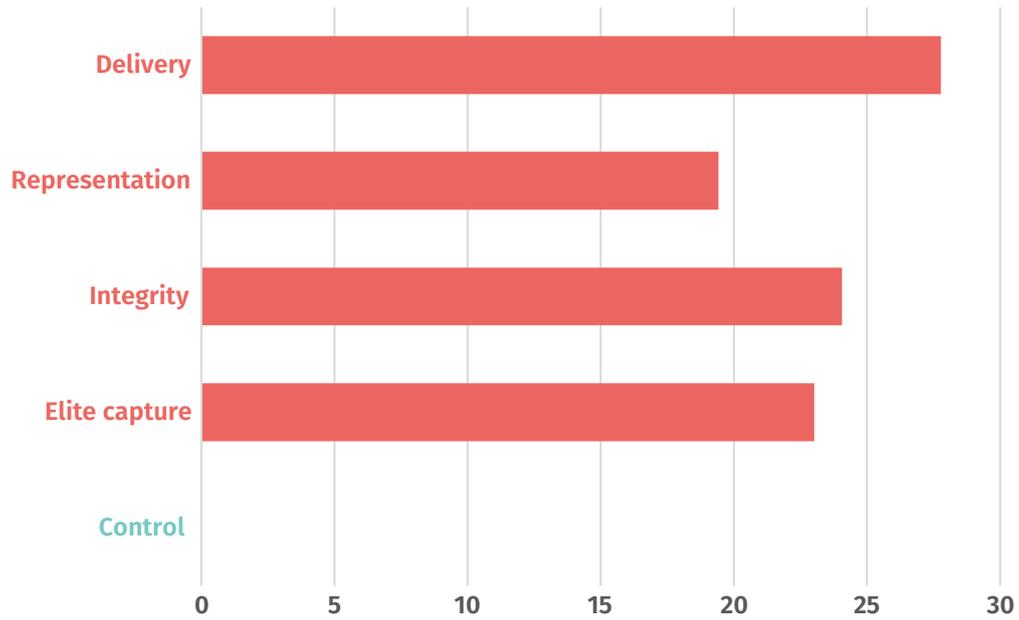


Source: IPPR/Focaldata analysis

Note: To validate this, Focaldata also performed tests on the difference between 'delivery' and other messages, and found that the probability of the mean of 'delivery' being larger than the mean of another group (Bayesian estimation) was 100 per cent (control), 94 per cent (elite capture), 88 per cent (integrity) and 98 per cent (representation).

# 5.
# IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICIANS

Public appetite for ambitious democratic reform does not in itself result in mobilisation. But if framed and politicised effectively, it can.

Populists are particularly good at this. They challenge not the principle of democracy, but the way it is practiced. Most commonly, they deploy an 'elite capture' frame to mobilise public opinion around their movement or party.

The 'elite capture' frame for reforming democracy is effective: we find it increases appetite for democratic reform; the salience of the issue and the propensity to vote for a political party on the basis of this issue. But we did not need a survey experiment to know that, we need only to look at global politics this century and the explosion of a new populist parties (most commonly radical right-wing populist parties).

The problem with populism is its rejection of democratic societies as a composite of the rule of people (who populists often define as an *ethnos* rather than *demos*) *and* the rule of the law, a counterweight to the arbitrary exercise of power by the people's representatives. Indeed, that is why most incarnations of populism today are so closely intertwined with authoritarianism and nativism.

How should democratic politicians animated by values of liberalism, egalitarianism and solidarity respond? They can no longer turn a blind eye to the mountain of democratic dissatisfaction in their societies.

The interesting – and somewhat surprising – finding of our survey experiment is the 'delivery' frame for reforming democracy is *more* effective than the 'elite capture' frame in all aspects measured. This is important: the 'delivery' frame is accessible to politicians of all stripes, whereas the 'elite capture' frame can only credibly be used by anti-system politicians and parties.

We urge mainstream politicians and parties interested in pursuing programme of democratic renewal to employ the 'delivery' frame to build mass support for their agenda. It is critical they build public support to legitimise and sustain their reforms.

Ultimately, any rhetoric must be met with commensurate action. 'Delivering' better for citizens means policy that is more equally responsive to people across the country, and stronger means to hold that that to account. That requires changing where power lies in the democratic system. It is not simply a case of finding the right policy prescription for today, it is a case of changing how policy is made tomorrow.

Future IPPR work will chart the condition of political inequality on modern Britain, and will set out a programme of reform to help democracy deliver better for its citizens.

We believe this is the only sustainable option to break out of the 'democratic deficit' doom loop we are in, of declining trust in politics and perceived democratic performance of the state. Politicians should to embrace a bold programme of democratic reform.

# REFERENCES

Brewer M, Fry E and Try L (2023) 'The Living Standards Outlook 2023'.

Butt, Clery and Curtice (2022) 'British Social Attitudes: The 39th Report.', *British Social Attitudes* [Preprint]

Butt and Fitzgerald (2014) 'Key findings',, British Social Attitudes, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-31/key-findings/britain-2014.aspx

Centre for Cities (2021) 'New polling finds the public overwhelmingly back more devolution to their cities', news article. https://www.centreforcities.org/press/new-polling-finds-public-overwhelmingly-back-more-devolution/

Chong D and Druckman J (2007) 'Framing Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10(1): 103–126

Curtice J (2013) 'Politicians, voters and democracy: The 2011 UK referendum on the Alternative Vote', *Electoral Studies*, 32(2): 215-223

Dalton RJ (2004) *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199268436.001.0001

De Blasio E and Sorice M (2013) 'The framing of climate change in Italian politics and its impact on public opinion', *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 9(1): 59-69

Dempsey N (2017) 'Brexit: votes by constituency', House of Commons Library. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/brexit-votes-by-constituency/

Denver D (2002) 'Voting in the 1997 Scottish and Welsh devolution referendums: Information, interests and opinions', *European journal of political research*, 41(6): 827-843

Electoral Commission (2022) 'Public Opinion Tracker 2022', webpage. https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/public-attitudes

Entman RM (1993) 'Framing: Toward a Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication*, 43(4): 51–58

EVS (2011) 'European Values Study 2008: Integrated Dataset' (EVS 2008) European Values Study 2008: Integrated Dataset (EVS 2008)', GESIS Data Archive. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.11004

Foa RS et al (2020) *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*, Centre for the Future of Democracy. https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/global-satisfaction-democracy-report-2020/

Gidron N and Hall PA (2017) 'The politics of social status: economic and cultural roots of the populist right', *The British Journal of Sociology,* 68: S57–S84. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12319

Green-Pedersen C (2012) 'A Giant Fast Asleep? Party Incentives and the Politicisation of European Integration', *Political Studies,* 60(1): 115-130

Hetherington M (2006) *Why trust matters,* Princeton University Press

Hooghe L and Marks G (2009) 'A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From permissive consensus to constraining', *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1): 1-23

House of Commons Library (2020) 'Constituency data: Indices of deprivation', dataset. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/constituency-data-indices-of-deprivation/

Hurrelmann A, Gora A and Wagner A (2015) 'The Politicization of European Integration: More than an elite affair?', *Political Studies,* 63(1): 43-59

Ipsos (2023) *Ipsos Issues Index: March 2023.* https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-03/ipsos-issues-index-march-2023-charts.pdf

Jacoby W G (2000) 'Issue Framing and Public Opinion on Government Spending', *American Journal of Political Science*, 44(4): 750-767

Labour Party (2023) *Commission on the Future of the UK, The Labour Party*. https://labour.org.uk/page/a-new-britain/

Lefevere J, Sevenans J, Walgrave S and Lesschaeve C (2019) 'Issue reframing by parties: The effect of issue salience and ownership', *Party Politics*, 25(4): 507-519

Liberal Democrats (2023) 'Ed Davey sets sights on political and electoral reform in IPPR speech', news article. https://www.libdems.org.uk/news/article/ed-davey-sets-sights-on-political-and-electoral-reform-in-ippr-speech

Mair P (2013) *Ruling The Void: The Hollowing Of Western Democracy*, Verso Books

Mény Y and Surel Y (eds) (2002) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403920072

Moon D and Bratberg Ø (2014) 'Why the Welsh Said Yes, but the Northerners No: The Role of Political Parties in Consolidating Territorial Government', *Contemporary British history*, 28(3): 318-340

More in Common (2021) *It's Complicated: People and Their Democracy in Germany, France, Britain, Poland, and the United States*. https://www.moreincommon.com/media/5yvfykfc/more-in-common-bosch-democracy-full-report-eng.pdf

Needleman S, House L and Holborn H (2023) 'Illegal Migration Bill House of Commons Second Reading Briefing March 2023'

Nelson T and Oxleya Z (1999) 'Issue framing effects on belief importance and opinion', *The Journal of Politics*, 61(4): 1040–1067

Norris P (2011) *Democratic Deficit*. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/democratic-deficit/C1A2A5421BBD8F96899270619407405A

Office for Budgetary Responsibility [OBR] (2023) *Economic and fiscal outlook*. https://obr.uk/efo/economic-and-fiscal-outlook-march-2023/

Patel P and Quilter-Pinner H (2022) *Road to renewal: Elections, parties and the case for renewing democracy,* IPPR. http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/road-to-renewal

Pattie C, Denver D, Mitchell J and Bochel H (1999) 'Settled will or divided society? Voting in the 1997 Scottish and Welsh devolution referendums', *British Elections & Parties Review*, 9(1): 136-153

Putnam R, Leonardi R and Nanetti R Y (1993) *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton University PressQuilter-Pinner H, Patel P, O'Grady T and Collignon S (2022) *Closing the gap: Parliament, representation and the working class*, IPPR. https://www.ippr.org/publication/closing-the-gap

Quilter-Pinner H, Statham R, Jennings W and Valgarðsson V (2021) *Trust issues: Dealing with distrust in politics*, IPPR. https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/trust-issues

Quilter-Pinner H et al (2022) *Closing the gap: Parliament, representation and the working class,* IPPR. https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/closing-the-gap

Rallings C and Thrasher M (2006) ''Just Another Expensive Talking Shop': Public Attitudes and the 2004 Regional Assembly Referendum in the North East of England', *Regional Studies*, 40(8): 927-936

Renwick A, Lauderdale B, Russell M and Cleaver J (2023) *Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics*, Constitution Unit. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution_unit/files/ucl_cu_report3_digital_final.pdf

Renwick A, Lauderdale B, Russell M and Cleaver J (2022a) *What Kind of Democracy Do People Want?*, Constitution Unit. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution_unit/files/report_1_final_digital.pdf

Renwick A, Scott K, Russell M, Cleaver J and Osborne F (2022b) *Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK: Second Report of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit Project*, Constitution Unit. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution_unit/files/report_2_final_digital.pdf

The Royal Society for Arts [RSA] (2020) 'English towns need levelling-up with cities on devolution', news article. https://www.thersa.org/press/releases/2019/rsa-english-towns-need-levelling-up-with-cities-on-devolution

Savanta ComRes (2021) 'Corruption, HoL reform, and MPs salaries – November 2021', webpage. https://savanta.com/knowledge-centre/poll/corruption-hol-reform-and-mps-salaries-november-2021/

Slothuus R (2010) 'When can political parties lead public opinion? Evidence from a natural experiment', *Political Communication*, 27(2): 158–177

Thimont Jack M, Sargeant J, and Pannell J (2022) *A framework for reviewing the UK constitution*, Bennett Institute. https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/A_framework_for_reviewing_the_UK_constitution.pdf

Uberoi E (2021) 'Political disengagement in Britain: Demographics and constituencies', House of Commons Library. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/political-disengagement-in-britain-demographics-and-constituencies/

Urso O (2018) 'The politicization of immigration in Italy: Who frames the issue, when and how', *Rivista Italia di Scienza Politica*, 48(3): 365-381

Uslaner E (2005) 'Corruption, Inequality, and Trust', in Svendsen G T and Lind G (eds), *The Handbook on Social Capital*, Edward Elgar

Van der Meer T and Hakhverdian A (2017) 'Political Trust as the Evaluation of Process and Performance: A Cross-National Study of 42 European Countries', *Political Studies*, 65(1): 81–102

Wike R, Silver L, Fetterolf J, Fagan M, Huang C, Connaughton A, Clancy L and Gubbala S (2021) *Freedom, Elections, Voice: How People in Australia and the UK Define Democracy. Pew Research Centre*. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/freedom-elections-voice-how-people-in-australia-and-the-uk-define-democracy/

Wonka A (2016) 'The party politics of the Euro crisis in the German Bundestag: frames, positions and salience', *West European Politics*, 39(1): 125-144

YouGov (2022) 'Three in four have a negative view of politics in Britain today', news article. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/02/15/three-four-have-negative-view-politics-britain-tod

YouGov (2023a) 'Confidence in The House of Lords', webpage. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/confidence-in-the-house-of-lords

YouGov (2023b) 'How should the House of Lords be made up of?', webpage. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/how-should-the-house-of-lords-be-made-up-of

YouGov (2023c) 'Should we change our current British voting system?', webpage. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/should-we-change-our-current-british-voting-system

# APPENDIX 1

Text version of the four framing approaches used in the survey experiment.

## ELITE CAPTURE

The government should be working on our behalf. For too long, ours hasn't. Westminster has neglected its responsibilities, leaving our country to slide into chaos. No wonder trust in politicians is so low.

Today, our country only works for those at the top. The rich get richer. The powerful get more powerful. Personal favours are traded for political influence. Politicians are out for themselves and not for our country. Meanwhile, the rest of us work harder and harder for less and less.

If Britain is going to change, British politics has to change. We need to clean up Westminster and better hold politicians to account. We need to move power out of Westminster and help communities take back control. It's time to repair our democracy.

## INTEGRITY

The government should be working on our behalf. For too long, ours hasn't. Westminster has neglected its responsibilities, leaving our country to slide into chaos. No wonder trust in politicians is so low.

Lies and scandal have infected our politics. From Covid lockdown parties to tax dodging to sexual misconduct. In any other job you'd be fired, but all too often MPs just carry on. This double standard has to stop. You don't get to make the rules and then break the rules.

If Britain is going to change, British politics has to change. We need to clean up Westminster and better hold politicians to account. We need to move power out of Westminster and help communities take back control. It's time to repair our democracy.

## REPRESENTATION

The government should be working on our behalf. For too long, ours hasn't. Westminster has neglected its responsibilities, leaving our country to slide into chaos. No wonder trust in politicians is so low.

The world of Westminster is detached from real life. Politicians live in their own bubble. Too many politicians don't understand what life is like for people up and down the country. We need more politicians who want to listen to us. Politicians who can better represent us.

If Britain is going to change, British politics has to change. We need to clean up Westminster and better hold politicians to account. We need to move power out of Westminster and help communities take back control. It's time to repair our democracy.

## DELIVERING

The government should be working on our behalf. For too long, ours hasn't. Westminster has neglected its responsibilities, leaving our country to slide into chaos. No wonder trust in politicians is so low.

Politicians promise the earth. But they never seem to deliver. They are more concerned with 'playing politics' than solving problems. Is it any wonder our NHS is in crisis and the price of everything is going up? Our politics puts short-term sticking plasters over massive problems – and it's not working. It's time politicians actually solve the problems we face.

If Britain is going to change, British politics has to change. We need to clean up Westminster and better hold politicians to account. We need to move power out of Westminster and help communities take back control. It's time to repair our democracy.

# APPENDIX 2

An interactive map of the MRP results is available on IPPR's website at: https://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/reforming-the-political-system-constituency-map

The full MRP results are available on IPPR's website at: http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/talking-politics

Institute for Public Policy Research

## GET IN TOUCH

For more information about the Institute for Public Policy Research, please go to www.ippr.org

You can also call us on +44 (0)20 7470 6100, e-mail info@ippr.org or tweet us @ippr

The progressive policy think tank