

# TRUST ISSUES

## DEALING WITH DISTRUST IN POLITICS

**Harry Quilter-Pinner, Rachel Statham,  
Will Jennings and Viktor Valgarðsson**

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# SUMMARY

**Liberal democracy across the West is under strain. The causes of these democratic challenges are many and complex but there is a common thread: a decline in political trust.** This can be seen in the rise of populism (Henley 2018), growing polarisation (Boxell et al 2020), a crisis of democratic legitimacy (Foa et al 2020), a decline in political participation, and declining democratic freedom (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021). Political trust – the belief or working assumption that political actors or institutions will act in accordance with your interests or preferences even if you do not enforce it (Easton 1975) – is vital for a healthy democracy. The evidence is clear that political trust has been declining over time in the UK and in many other countries, though the UK has lower levels of trust than many. In 1944, one in three British people saw politicians as merely ‘out for themselves’. Today, nearly two-thirds share this view. Put simply: distrust in politics has become the norm.

**Growing distrust in politicians should be of particular concern to democrats and progressives.** A lack of trust matters for two main reasons. First, growing distrust can lead to a downwards spiral of democratic decline, with voters disengaging, becoming polarised, or turning to populist leaders and causes (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018). Second, it matters for social progress: a lack of trust undermines the ability of government to intervene and deliver better policy outcomes (Hetherington 2006). Progressives, in particular, should be concerned: declining trust is thought to be linked to a decline in support for income redistribution and ‘culturally open’ policy measures – particularly on immigration (ibid).

**Trust is determined by two main sets of factors.**

- 1. The performance of government:** This means the quality of outputs and outcomes that government delivers. The evidence is particularly clear that economic growth and stability, inequality, and the quality of public services are all vital in determining trust.
- 2. The processes of government:** This means how decisions that govern society are made. The type of electoral system used, the level of decentralisation, the degree to which people see themselves represented, where people get their information from, and perceived levels of political corruption all matter.

Across both sets of factors it is worth noting that the perception of citizens matters as much as actual performance or process. Similarly, the expectations of citizens matter. Declining trust may therefore represent changes in the performance or processes of government, but it could also represent changes in the perceptions of citizens or increases in their expectations.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REBUILD TRUST?

**We argue that policymakers must act on four significant social and political ‘gaps’ to arrest the decline in trust.** Growing distrust poses clear risks to society if left unchecked. Action is needed to set the UK on a new course, away from democratic dissatisfaction and towards democratic and social renewal. To support this effort, we outline four significant ‘social and political gaps’ that we argue must be closed to improve trust in the UK. We do not seek to set out definitive policy recommendations, but rather to outline four major areas of challenge for

policymakers to focus on to improve political trust. These will form areas of focus for future IPPR research and policy development in the years to come.

- 1. Between the lives people expected to lead and the lives people are experiencing.** This means reshaping our economic model to deliver both 'prosperity and justice'. We argue that this can be achieved through measures such as new public investment to create good green jobs, a new partnership with business to achieve big social missions and significant investment and devolution in the North to rebalance the country (for more, see CEJ 2018; EJC 2021).
- 2. Between the scale of the social challenges we face and the (perceived) ability of government to deliver against them.** This means rejecting the concept of the state that has dominated policymaking for the preceding decades. Instead, we must embrace a new consensus where investment in the state is the norm, where relationships rather than markets become the organisational principle of the state, and where cooperation rather than competition – both nationally and internationally – drive social progress (Quilter-Pinner, McNeil and Hochlaf 2020).
- 3. Between the principles of liberal democracy and the reality of our political system as it manifests today.** We must embrace democratic reform to ensure that citizens feel that their voice is heard and that their vote counts. Greater devolution of power (CEJ 2018), as well as reforms to our electoral system to address democratic inequalities (Lawrence 2015) must sit at the heart of this. In addition, policymakers may want to experiment with other forms of innovation such as participatory and deliberative forms of democracy.
- 4. Between the values and experiences of citizens and those who govern on their behalf.** There is a growing 'values gap' between citizens and those who govern on their behalf, which is shaped in particular by whether or not someone has had a university education. To close this gap will require efforts to improve the quality and diversity of our democratic representation at Westminster, devolved governments, and the local level. This could potentially be achieved by political parties adopting a candidate shortlisting process that puts more emphasis on selecting people from different backgrounds.

# INTRODUCTION

## DEMOCRACY UNDER STRAIN

Liberal democracy across the West appears to be under severe and increasing strain. This can be seen in the rise of populism across representative democracies. From Viktor Orban through to Donald Trump, the number of countries with populist leaders has increased (Henley 2018), the share of votes going to populist parties has gone up and populist rhetoric is now the norm even among more mainstream political parties and leaders (Hawkins et al 2018).

There also appears to have been an increase in polarisation (Boxell et al 2020). This is most pronounced in countries like the US (Pew 2014; Hetherington 2018) where Democrats and Republicans have drifted further apart (though less on policy substance and more on political identity). But there is some evidence that a similar process is occurring across many European countries (or at least politics is increasingly being seen through frames on which polarisation is greater) (Duffy et al 2019).

Much attention has been paid by commentators and political scientists to a so-called crisis of democratic legitimacy. Influential studies have pointed to data that suggests the number of people saying that they are dissatisfied with democracy has been rising year-on-year, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon nations (Foa et al 2020) – although this has been questioned by others (Valgarðsson and Devine 2021). A decline in electoral participation across the globe since the 1990s has also contributed to growing concern about the state of democracy, with people choosing not to engage with the system (Solijonov 2016). More recently, however, while turnout has increased, voters have instead increasingly opted to turn out to support anti-establishment parties and causes.

Studies also show that democratic freedom across the world – having been improving – is now in decline (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021). In 2020, countries experiencing a deterioration in democratic freedoms outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin on record. The pandemic has been a particular spur to this trend, with less democratic leaders using the pandemic to concentrate more power centrally, but it is not the cause: this trend has been present, and continual, for over 15 years.

## DEMOCRACY IN THE UK

These same trends can be seen here in the UK. In 2019, a majority share of the UK population reported feeling dissatisfied with the state of democracy for the first time since the 1970s (Foa et al. 2020). Researchers paying close attention to these trends, however, have demonstrated that the extent to which Britain appears to be a democracy in crisis can vary depending on the data source being scrutinised (Devine and Valgarðsson 2018).

Long-established ties between voters and parties appear to have been severed during the electoral shocks of the past decade; as seen by the rise of UKIP, the collapse of the Liberal Democrats, and seismic referendums on Scotland's independence and the UK's membership of the EU (Fieldhouse et al 2021). The share of UK citizens who have no political party affiliation has been rising steadily since the 1960s (Duffy et al 2019).

Brexit and its aftermath have reshaped UK politics beyond recognition. Voters have been polarised along new political identities of Leave and Remain, and populist rhetoric positioning ‘the people’ vs ‘the elite’ has entered mainstream UK political discourse (Wood and Ausserladscheider 2020).

**TABLE I.1: UK DEMOCRACY SCORECARD**

Democratic challenge	Current state	Trend
<b>Populism</b>	While populist parties have little electoral support in the UK at present, through and since the Brexit campaign populist frames that position ‘the people’ vs. ‘the elite’ and assert ‘the will of the people’ have been absorbed into mainstream politics (Wood and Assuerladscheider 2020).	Voting for populist parties in the UK has declined following exit from the EU, but mainstream parties have taken on more radical populist rhetoric (Watts and Bale 2018; Bale 2019).
<b>Polarisation</b>	While there is clear evidence of affective polarisation around Brexit identities (Hobolt et al 2020; Jennings et al 2020), the extent to which these cleavages will continue to shape political attitudes in the UK through the 2020s remains unclear. These identities are not yet clearly aligned with political parties – but realignment could yet occur along these lines.	The share of people who identify strongly with a particular party is in long-term decline (NatCen 2012; Evans and Schaffner). While Brexit identities are becoming less salient, there is evidence that polarisation has occurred around sub-state identities in some parts of the UK, particularly following Scotland’s independence referendum (McMillan and Larner 2021).
<b>Participation</b>	Turnout at UK general elections remains low, while turnout at devolved elections is rising.  People in low-skilled work and the long-term unemployed are less likely to engage in politics (Uberoi 2020).	Electoral turnout at UK level had been gradually rising since 2001 but fell in 2019 as compared to 2017. Turnout at UK general elections remains considerably lower than in the postwar period, of through the 1970s–1990s (Uberoi 2020). Non-electoral forms of political participation rose considerably between the 1980s and 2010s (NatCen 2012).
<b>Dissatisfaction</b>	In 2019 more than half of British respondents were dissatisfied with the state of democracy in the UK – the highest rate since the 1970s (Foa et al 2020).	Dissatisfaction with politicians has been rising in line with a long-term trend of declining trust in government since 1986 (NatCen 2012).
<b>De-alignment</b>	The UK electorate has undergone a process of dealignment and realignment – but it remains unclear how permanent these new attachments may prove to be (Fieldhouse et al 2020).	The share of UK citizens who have no party identification has been rising steadily since 1964 (Duffy 2019).  Recent research shows a pattern of electoral realignment by referendum across the UK – most notably through Scotland’s independence referendum and the UK Brexit poll (Henderson & Mitchell, 2018; Fieldhouse et al 2020).

Source: IPPR analysis of sources listed above

We would not want to over-state the scale of the challenge facing democracy in the UK. The UK is not Hungary, where democratic ‘backsliding’ is intensifying. Nor is it the US. Our politics is still functioning reasonably effectively: it does not appear to be at risk of severe ‘backsliding’ in the short term, and polarisation within the UK is far less intense than in the US, or other deeply divided societies. But we must not be complacent. If we have learned anything in the last decade it is that progress is



not guaranteed. If we want a strong, vibrant democracy – and we should – then we must cultivate it through careful and intentional preservation and reform.

### **JOINING THE DOTS: POLITICAL TRUST**

Such an effort must start with an understanding of the causes of these democratic shifts both locally and globally. We need to understand where things are going wrong in order to build a reform agenda that helps put us onto a better path. This is challenging: the causes of the current democratic disruption – from growing polarisation to dissatisfaction with politicians – are of course many and complex. They differ significantly between countries, over time and between the different democratic challenges we have set out above. However, there is seemingly a common thread which helps us join the dots: *a decline in trust*.

Political trust – trust between citizens, politicians, and political institutions – is vital for a healthy democracy. The leap of faith that voters make when they entrust a small group of people to govern on their behalf is incredibly powerful, but also very fragile. If voters lose trust in politicians and our political systems, they are likely to disengage or turn to less democratic alternatives. As we will show in this report, this is exactly what has happened in the UK (and across many other liberal democracies). It is vital that politicians and policymakers arrest this decline if we want democracy in the UK to thrive.

# 1. WHAT IS TRUST?

## DEFINING TRUST

Political trust is harder to define than we might think: what does it mean to trust someone and what makes trust ‘political’? Trust has been generally conceived as the belief or working assumption that someone will act in accordance with your interests or preferences even if you do not enforce it (Easton 1975). As such, the concept of political trust refers to the extent to which we trust *political* actors or institutions to act in our interests, even if left unsupervised.

Citizens place trust in a range of actors and institutions. These are most commonly considered to include the national legislature and executive government as well as political parties and politicians, but can also refer to local government, the judiciary, civil service and law enforcement (Uslaner 2018; Zmerli & Van der Meer 2017). They can also relate to institutions of global governance, such as the UN, NATO, or the World Health Organisation. More broadly, political trust has been defined as citizens’ feelings about the institutions and actors governing their polity (Citrin & Stoker 2018) or their ‘basic evaluative or affective orientation towards government’ (Miller 1974). It is also closely related to more diffuse types of political *support*, such as satisfaction with the way democracy works and attachment to the political community and its principles (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011).

For the purposes of this report, it’s also worth making some further distinctions: between *political* trust and *social* trust; between lack of trust, distrust, and mistrust; between trustworthiness and perceived trust; and between trust in people and trust in systems and institutions. Political trust – that is, trust placed in political institutions and actors – is distinct from *social* or *generalised* trust in people in general (Newton et al 2018). Recent research suggests that social trust builds political trust rather than the other way around – but although political and social trust are related, social and political trust are distinct attitudes (Newton and Zmerli 2011).

What’s more, a lack of active trust in politicians or public institutions may not be the same as active *distrust*. Distrust comes in different forms: while you might not believe that political actors will act in your interest, you might not necessarily be convinced that they will not. You could be ambivalent and have no opinion on the matter, you could be sceptical of those actors and cautious in trusting them, or you could firmly believe that they would not act in your interest if they were not to be held accountable. Based on this line of thinking, researchers have recently started to make a distinction between a sceptical and cautious *mistrust* on one hand, and a cynical and disillusioned *distrust* on the other (see, for example, Devine et al 2020; Jennings et al 2021; Bertou 2019). As Citrin and Stoker (2018) put it: “Mistrust reflects doubt or scepticism about the trustworthiness of the other, while distrust reflects a settled belief that the other is untrustworthy”.

Thirdly, actors and institutions could be *trustworthy* in some objective sense, but nevertheless not be trusted or perceived as trustworthy. In other words, it is not only important that politicians and institutions do the right thing, deliver on their promises, and perform well: they must also be perceived to do so (see for example Levi and Stoker 2000; Hardin 2002). When it comes to

determining levels of trust, identities, and perceptions matter. The standards and ideals of citizens are also important: those who have higher expectations of politicians will likely report lower levels of trust than those who have lower expectations, even if the politicians' 'objective' trustworthiness is the same. Pippa Norris (2011) argues that we have, in recent decades, seen a rise of a generation of 'critical citizens': citizens who have higher democratic ideals and expectations of politicians, and are therefore less trusting of them – even if their performance and trustworthiness has not deteriorated.

Finally, it is important to distinguish between trust in people and trust in systems. Citizens may have an enduring confidence in the legitimacy and proper functioning of their political institutions and democratic systems, even if they have low confidence in politicians and other individual actors operating within those systems. From that perspective, we might see it as more problematic for the foundations of democracy if citizens lose trust in their institutions, but distrust in politicians could also lead to negative outcomes (as discussed below).

### MEASURING TRUST

Political trust has been measured through surveys of the general public by political and social scientists since the middle of the 20th century, but methods have varied considerably. The first measures of political trust in the US asked (and still ask) how much of the time people “trust the government in Washington to do what is right”, whether the government was run by a few interests or for the benefit of the people, how much it wastes tax money, and how many officials are ‘crooked’.

Later survey projects have tended to take a more direct approach to measurement of political trust, asking respondents how much trust (or ‘confidence’) they have in government, parliament, political parties, and other institutions. Still others try to get at the nuanced nature of trust attitudes by asking about different kinds of trust; for example, whether people trust government to be benevolent, to be honest, or to be competent, and what they think are the motives and qualities of politicians. Some survey questions ask people how much they trust different political actors ‘to tell the truth’, to deliver on their promises, or to handle particular issues.

Others seek to measure trust by observing people’s trusting or distrusting behaviour, such as through experimental methods (for more on this, see, for example, Bauer and Freitag 2018; Marien 2011; Zmerli & Van der Meer 2017). For instance, the ‘wallet experiment’<sup>1</sup> has become famous as a cross-national method for assessing trustworthiness of ordinary citizens. Lab experiments involving ‘trust games’ are often used to understand the relationship between trustworthiness and trust.

Recent developments in survey measurement of political trust have pointed to the importance of distinguishing between trust, mistrust, and distrust – differentiating trust from a more sceptical disposition towards political actors or information and from more instinctive or affective negativity towards them.

1 The ‘wallet experiment’, which has been conducted across a wide range of country contexts, sees researchers pose as people who have found a lost wallet, dropping them off in public places, such as banks, theatres, police stations, and museums. The wallets either contain no money, a small amount of money, or a larger sum, along with contact details for the ‘owner’. Researchers then assess rates of return to owners.

## 2. WHAT IS HAPPENING TO TRUST?

Is trust in decline? The extent to which low levels of political trust ought to be cause for concern – and indeed, whether low trust is a new phenomenon – have been sources of lively academic debate in recent years. In this chapter, we assess the state of political trust in the UK and its trajectory over time. We look back across a range of available indicators of political trust, and more widely at attitudes towards democracy in Britain.

To understand political trust – or the lack of it – and its implications, we also explore how levels of trust vary across different groups of people. We explore changing levels of trust across demographic groups, political identities, and the geography of the UK in order to assess the state of trust in the UK.

### TRUST OVER TIME

Trust in politicians is in decline (Clarke et al 2018). Perceptions of MPs (see below) are overwhelmingly negative, and levels of trust in politicians are low. This is not, however, a new phenomenon – as far back as we can measure, levels of trust in politicians in the UK have not been particularly high. It is also worth pausing to consider whether an absence of trust in politicians is necessarily a bad thing. If low levels of trust reflected a healthy scepticism on the part of citizens that fuelled democratic accountability, there may not be particular cause for concern. What is cause for concern, however, is if scepticism turns into cynicism, or distrust, and generalised perceptions of politicians are negative enough to drive disengagement with democracy or actions and attitudes that are corrosive against its foundations.

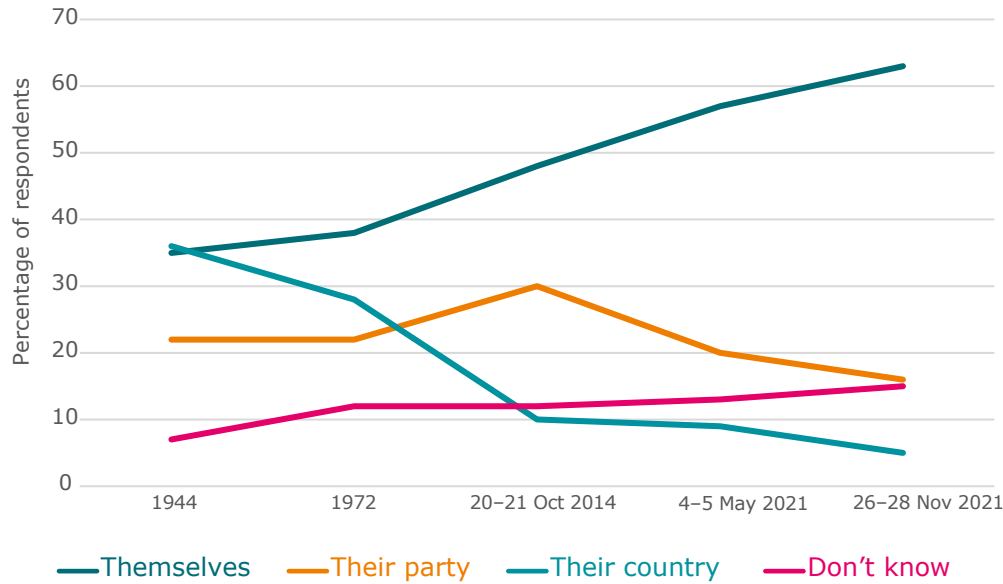
We find strong evidence to suggest that the public's perception of politicians has grown more negative over time, and that trust has fallen substantially in recent years, without making a full recovery. But how does political trust today compare to the mid-20th century, or the start of the 21st? To assess the long-term trend in perceptions of politicians, we have repeated a Gallup poll that was first run in 1944, asking people across Britain whether they think politicians are out for themselves, their party, or their country.

With snapshots from 1944, 1972, 2014, and 2021, we can observe a long run decline in trust in British politicians to represent the interests of the nation before their own (see figure 2.1).

We find that in 2021, a majority of the British public (57 per cent) saw politicians as merely out for themselves for the first time. In November of 2021, the share of the British public that see politicians as out for themselves above their nation or their party rose further, to 63 per cent – approaching two-thirds. This share has risen dramatically from the mid-20th century, when just 35 per cent of the British public shared this view.

**FIGURE 2.1: A MAJORITY OF THE BRITISH PUBLIC NOW THINK POLITICIANS ARE MERELY OUT FOR THEMSELVES**

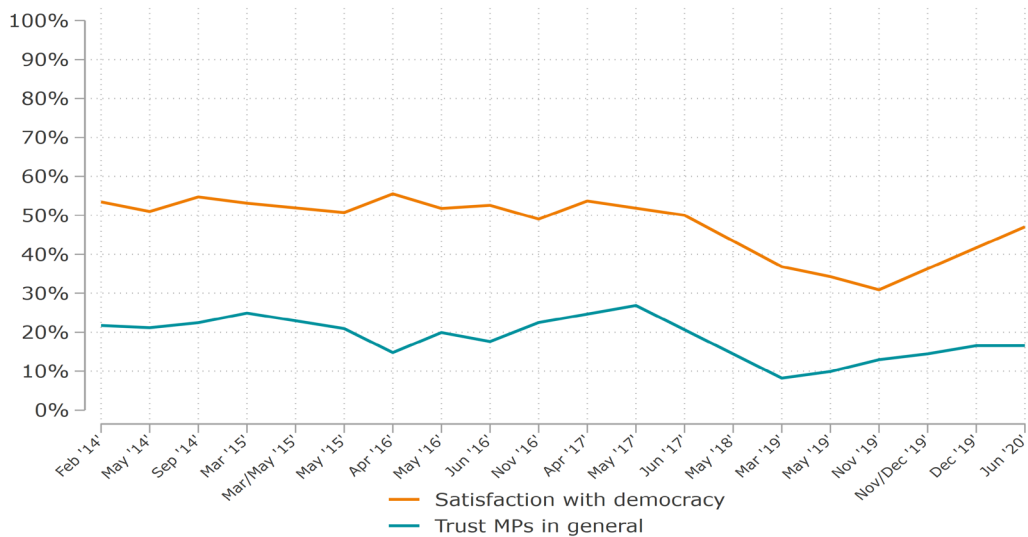
Responses to the question: “Do you think that British politicians are out merely for themselves, for their party, or to do their best for their country?”



Source: Authors' analysis of polling commissioned for this project<sup>2</sup>

**FIGURE 2.2: SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY FELL SHARPLY IN THE WAKE OF THE EU REFERENDUM, BEFORE RECOVERING AT THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION**

Trust in MPs and satisfaction with democracy among the British public, 2014–2020



Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study 2020. Analysis British Election Study panel data, 2014–2020

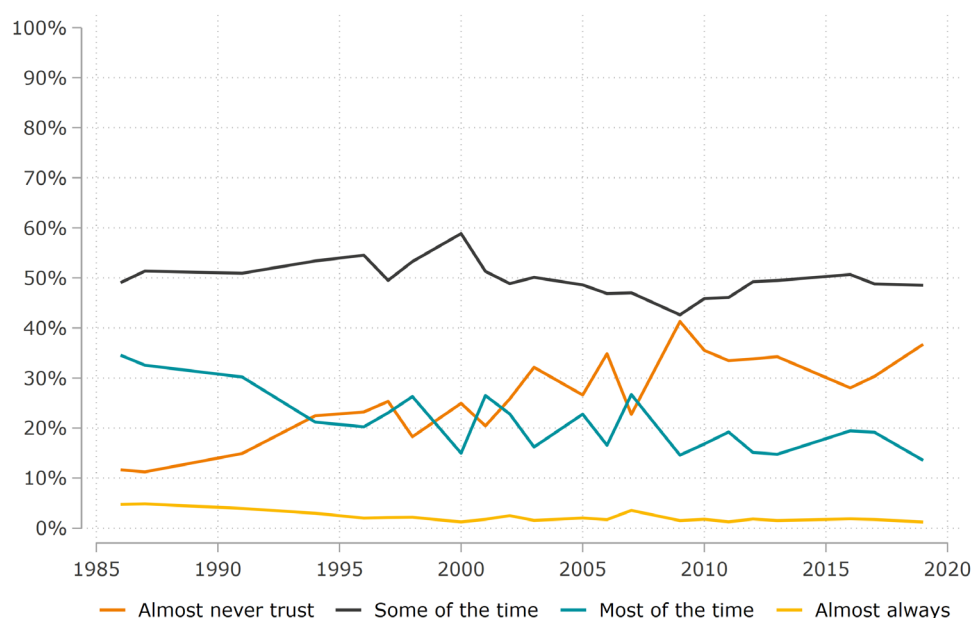
<sup>2</sup> Polling was commissioned by YouGov and conducted from 4–5 May 2021 on a sample of 1,683 adults across Great Britain. A further poll was conducted by YouGov on 26–28 November 2021 on a sample of 1,684 adults across Great Britain.

What is perhaps more concerning still is the sharp increase in the share of people who see politicians as being out for themselves between 2014 and November 2021 – a rise of 15 percentage points. What is less clear is how permanent these changes are – or how they might affect wider political attitudes or behaviours. Figure 2.2 presents data from the British Election Study Panel (conducted in 20 waves since 2014) and shows that trust in MPs in general is now around 5 percentage points lower than in 2014.

What is perhaps more concerning is the decline over time in satisfaction with democracy, and in trust in key democratic institutions.

**FIGURE 2.3: DISTRUST IN GOVERNMENT IS ON THE RISE**

Public responses to the question: “Do you trust the government to place the needs of the nation about the interests of their own political party?”



Source: Authors’ analysis of British Social Attitudes Survey 2019. Analysis uses 1983–2018 data

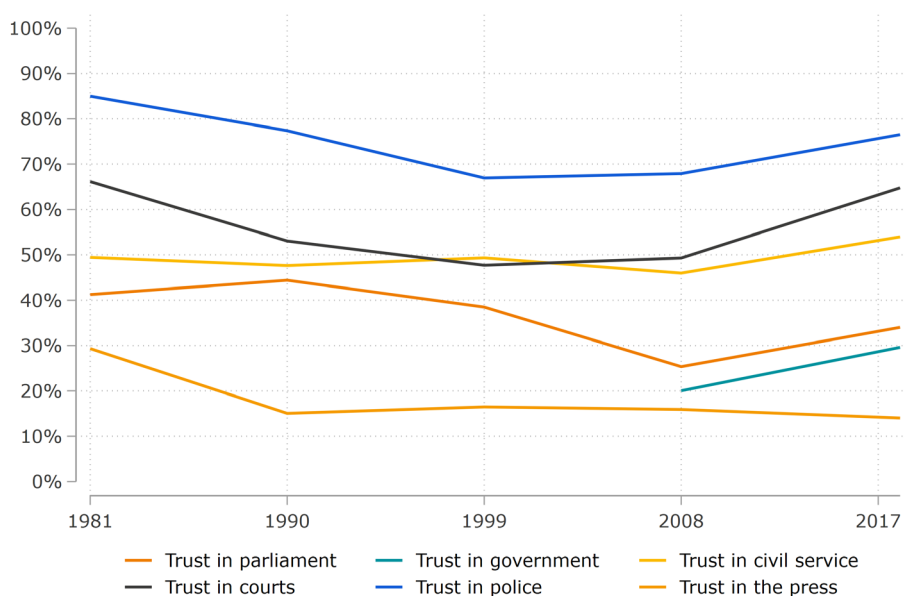
Between February 2014 and November 2019, the share of respondents who reported feeling satisfied with democracy declined from nearly one in two (49 per cent) to less than one in three (30 per cent). This suggests that, in the wake of the 2016 referendum, the UK government’s handling of Brexit was linked to declining satisfaction. Following the 2019 general election, however, we’ve seen a sharp uptick in satisfaction with democracy. While this improvement is positive, improvement in levels of trust in politicians has been more gradual, and it is still lower than it was at the start of the panel.

Looking to trust in government, we see a pattern of rising distrust. The share of respondents in the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) who feel the UK government ‘almost never’ put the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party has risen gradually since the mid-80s: from around one in 10, to approaching one in three in 2017 (see figure 2.3). Data from the newest wave of the BSAS shows that, in 2019, trust in the British government fell to its lowest point in four decades, with only 15 per cent of the public saying they trust government ‘most of the time’ or ‘just about always’ (NatCen 2020). Some 34 per cent said they ‘almost never’ trust the government.

Looking at data from the UK part of the European Values Study, it is also apparent that the British public's trust in parliament declined sharply through the mid-2000s, but has so far failed to be rebuilt to levels experienced through the 1980s and 1990s (see figure 2.4). However, if we look across other state institutions, the trends are less clear and there are some bright spots. In addition, trust in the media has increased through the pandemic by 8 percentage points – though it remains 14 percentage points below 2016 levels, reflecting perceptions that the press fostered division through and following the Brexit referendum (Newman 2020). While the UK's trust in the courts declined between 1981 and 1999, it has since recovered, while trust in the civil service has improved. Meanwhile, trust in the police has been improving since the financial crisis.

**FIGURE 2.4: TRUST IN THE UK PARLIAMENT HAS NOT RECOVERED SINCE THE FINANCIAL CRASH**

Levels of trust in UK institutions, 1981–2018



Source: Authors' analysis of European Values Study, 1981–2018

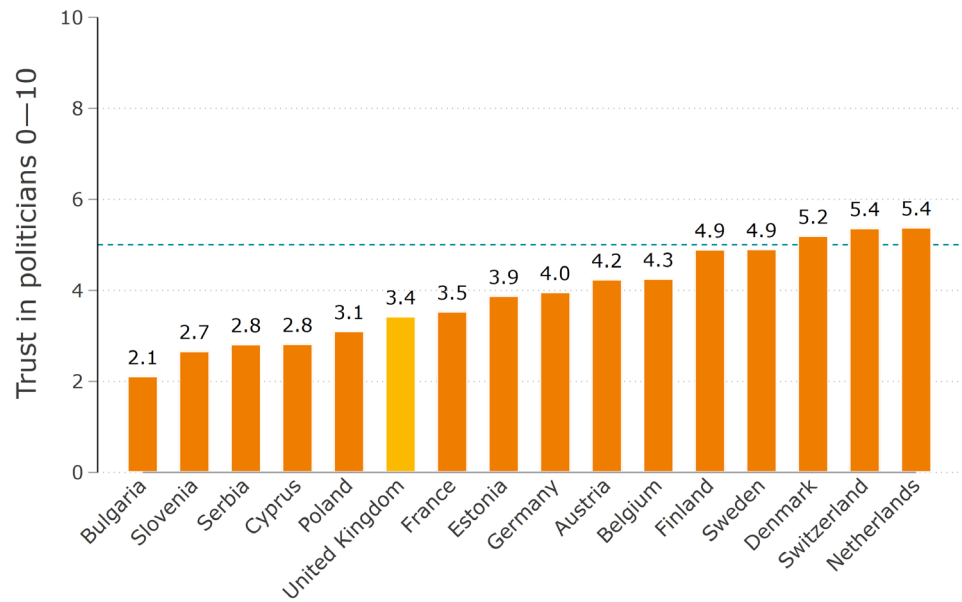
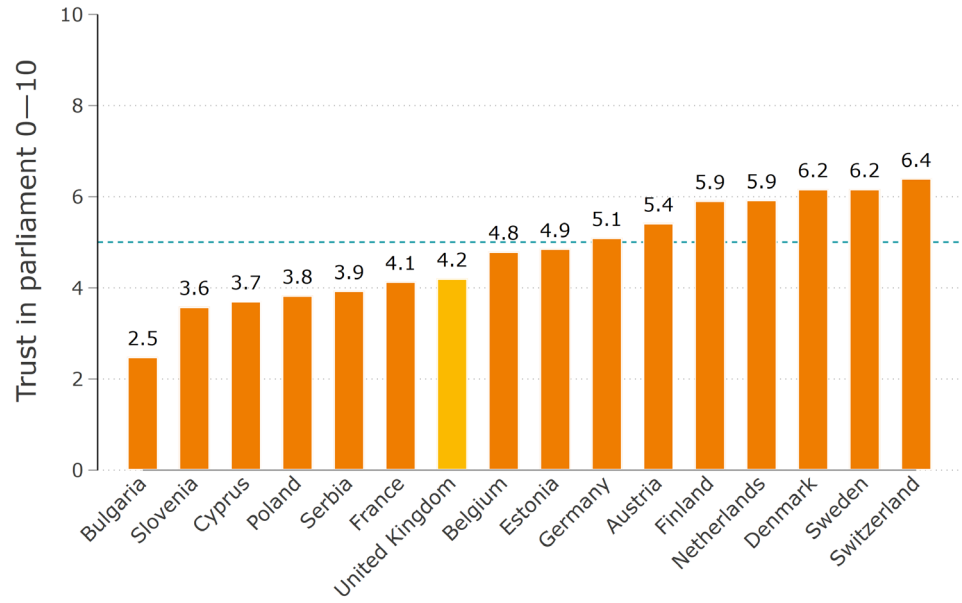
UK trust in public servants – particularly in nurses, doctors, and care workers – remains high (Ipsos MORI 2020a). And, across Europe, trust in journalists, scientists, the civil service, and professors has risen in recent years (Ipsos MORI 2020b).

Trust in elites and corporations, however, is markedly low. The Edelman trust barometer reports distrust as the norm among the UK public when considering CEOs, government leaders, and the very wealthy (Edelman 2020). The UK public tend to perceive the media as being unethical and incompetent (ibid). While businesses are the only institutions perceived to be competent, they are also perceived to be unethical, and to only serve the interests of the few (ibid). A majority (52 per cent) of UK respondents agree that capitalism as it exists today does more harm than good in the world (ibid).

If we place the UK in international context using data from the latest (2018) wave of the European Social Survey, we rank among the least trusting countries in Europe on a variety of measures, including trust in parliament and trust in politicians (see figure 2.5).

**FIGURE 2.5: THE UK RANKS AMONG THE LEAST TRUSTING COUNTRIES IN EUROPE ON TRUST IN POLITICIANS AND TRUST IN PARLIAMENT**

Reported trust in Parliament and Trust in Politicians on a 0-10 scale by country



Source: Authors' analysis of European Values Study 2018



## THE UK IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

The UK has consistently had relatively low levels of political trust as compared to other liberal democracies. In recent years, the UK – and other Anglo-Saxon countries with liberal market economies – has seen a larger decline in political trust than other nations. However, an international perspective shows us that many important democracies around the world have experienced something of a decline in trust over time, suggesting there are some common factors in play (Dalton 2004; Citrin and Stoker 2018; Jennings et al 2017; Dassonville and McAllister 2021).

## TRUST THROUGH THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Through the Covid-19 pandemic, trust has been associated with levels of compliance with public health measures, and even with how quickly countries have adopted lockdown measures. Early evidence suggests that countries with higher levels of political trust also perceived Covid-19 as less of a risk in the early stages of the pandemic – which may explain delayed action on lockdowns (Dryhurst et al 2020).

Levels of political trust in Britain rose following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, as has often been the case in a crisis (Jennings 2020). It appears, however, that this opportunity to rebuild trust may already have been squandered, with levels of trust in government falling gradually through 2020 before returning to pre-pandemic levels (Davies et al 2021). Evidence from previous epidemics suggests young people growing up through the Covid-19 pandemic may have their trust in government permanently damaged (Aksoy et al 2020).

At the individual level, academic research finds that those who have been personally exposed to the pandemic through a close family member suffering infection express lower levels of political trust (Devine et al 2020).

## TRUST CLEAVAGES

### Demography

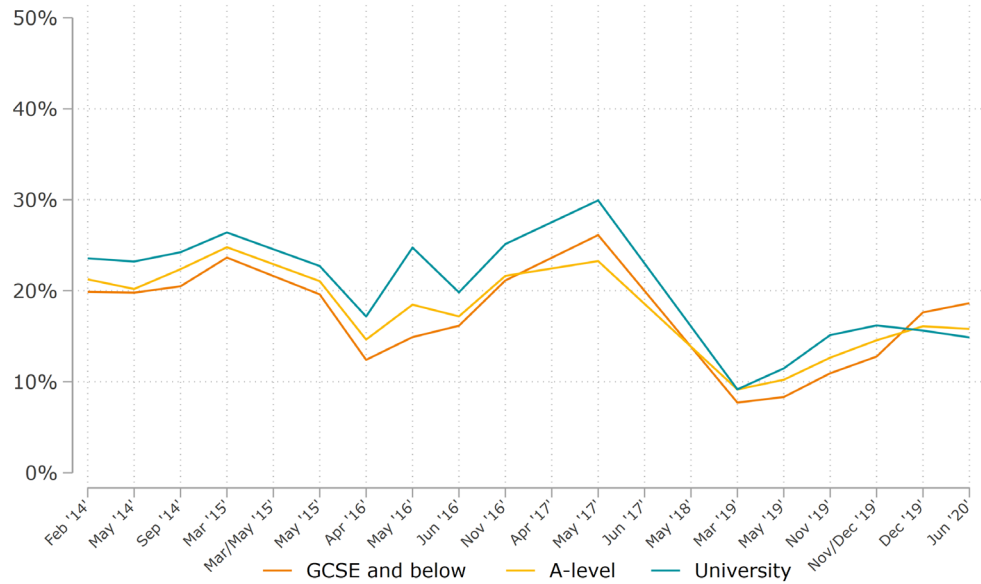
Reported levels of political trust vary across demographic groups, including along lines of gender, age, and income. People with lower incomes tend to report lower levels of political trust than those with higher incomes in the UK, the US, and across Europe (OECD 2019; Rainie and Perrin 2019; Foster and Freidan 2017). Women, white ethnic groups, and older people are particularly likely to have negative evaluations of politicians (Uberoi 2020).

Women tend to report lower levels of political trust than men – but this long-established gap appears to have closed following the 2019 general election. Looking at the data in more detail, this shift appears to have been driven by a boost to political trust among Leave-voting women – suggesting it may be temporary, rather than signalling a longer-term shift.

We also know that education has a positive effect on trust: in the UK, those with GCSE-level qualifications or below consistently report lower levels of political trust than those with A-level or equivalent qualifications. Trust is higher still among those with degree-level qualifications. This long-established trend, too, however, appears to have been reversed in 2019, when university-educated respondents reported lower average trust levels than those with fewer qualifications for the first time (see figure 2.6).

**FIGURE 2.6: TRUST IN MPS AMONG THOSE WITH A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IS NOW LOWER THAN THOSE WITH GCSE-LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS OR BELOW FOR THE FIRST TIME**

**Trust in MPs by educational qualifications**



Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study 2020. This analysis uses British Election Study Internet panel, 2014–2020

These identities and social positions also shape attitudes towards politicians and politics. Jennings, Stoker and Twyman find that the particular characteristics of political dissatisfaction expressed by UK citizens are shaped by demographic factors (Jennings et al 2016). They found that older people were more likely to see politicians as short-termist, while people from lower socioeconomic groups were more likely to feel that politicians did not pay attention to their interests, and to see the political class as looking out for themselves. Men were more likely than women to feel that politicians lacked leadership qualities. Younger people also tended to be less likely than older people to see politicians as 'self-serving', but more likely to disagree with the view that politics is 'a waste of time'.

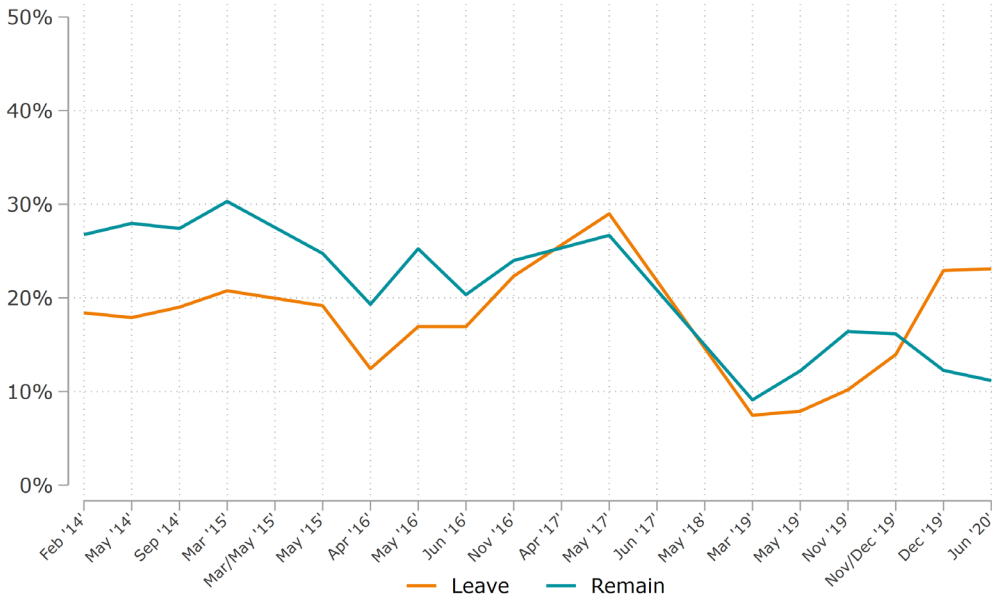
How far these perceptions are cause for concern with regards to the health of democracy itself, however, is contested. Jennings, Stoker and Twyman argue that political dissatisfaction reflects negative evaluations of politicians and their behaviour, rather than wider dissatisfaction with the democratic system itself.

**Trust and political identity**

In the UK, political identities have demonstrably shaped levels of political trust in recent years. There is robust evidence to suggest that, in the period leading up to the EU referendum of 2016 and in its aftermath, Brexit identities conditioned trust in politics and politicians (Jennings et al 2020). Looking back to 2014, panel data from the BES shows that would-be Remain voters were around 10 percentage points more trusting than would-be Leave voters – but by June 2020, this pattern had been inverted, with Remain-voters 10 percentage points *less* trusting than Leave voters (see figure 2.7).

**FIGURE 2.7: FOLLOWING THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION TRUST AMONG LEAVE VOTERS OVERTOOK TRUST AMONG REMAIN VOTERS AS TRUST WAS REALIGNED**

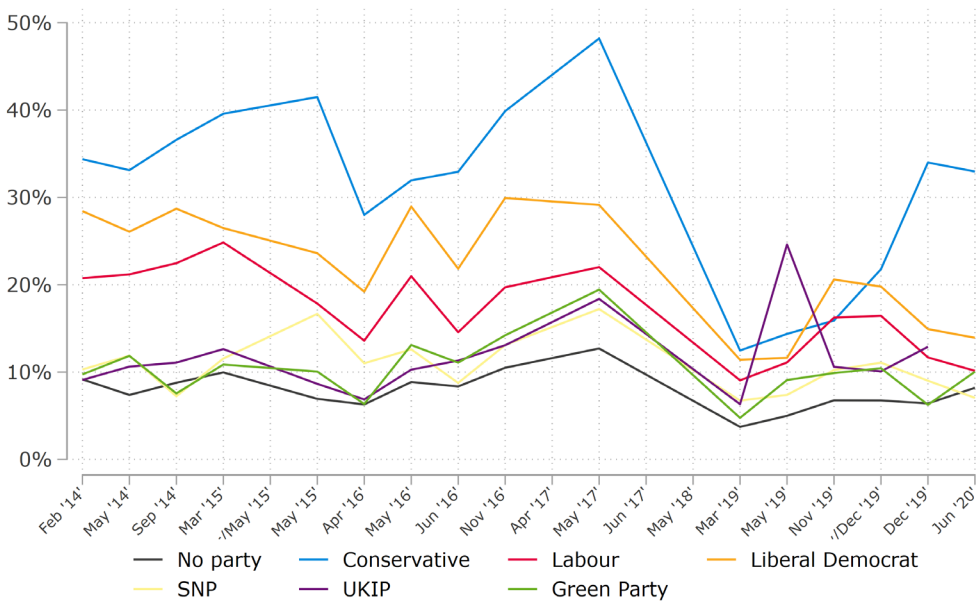
**Trust in MPs by Brexit identity**



Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study 2020. This analysis uses British Election Study Internet panel, 2014–2020

**FIGURE 2.8: TRUST IN POLITICIANS IS HIGHER AMONG SUPPORTERS OF THE PARTY IN GOVERNMENT**

**Trust in MPs by party support**



Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study 2020. This analysis uses British Election Study Internet panel, 2014–2020

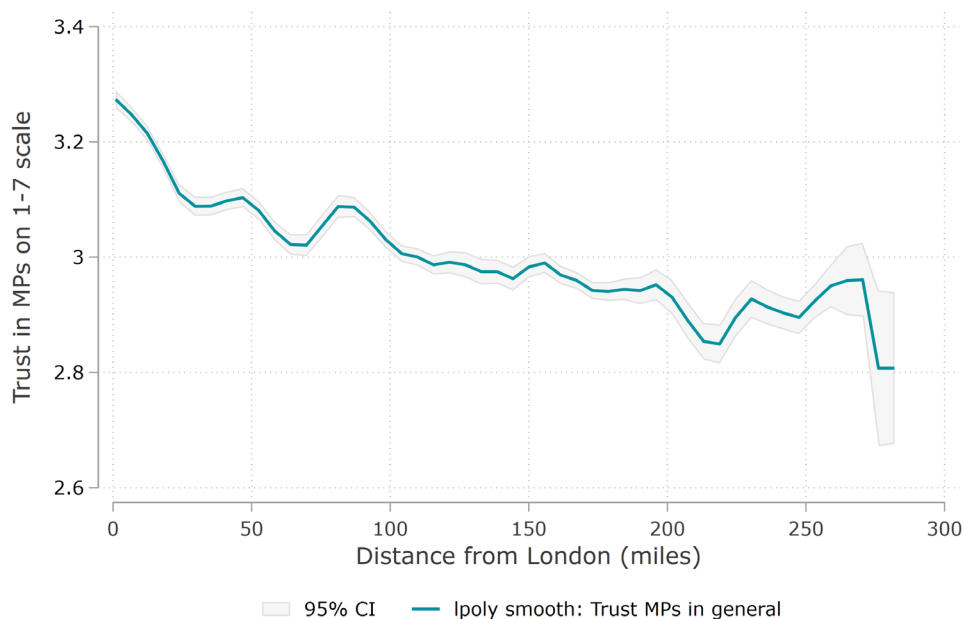
If we look at party political identities, we can see that supporters of the incumbent Conservative Party generally report much higher levels of trust in MPs, although their trust levels fell very dramatically during the Brexit standstill of 2019 (from almost 50 per cent to just over 10 per cent) and has not entirely recovered even after the UK left the EU (see figure 2.8). Those without any partisan affiliation report considerably lower levels of trust in politicians than those who are party supporters.<sup>3</sup> Both Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters have experienced substantial declines in political trust (of 10 percentage points or more) from 2014–2020. SNP and Green supporters, meanwhile, have maintained consistently low levels of trust in MPs – likely reflecting their limited representation at Westminster.

### Trust across geographies

Geography is also an important factor shaping political trust (see figure 2.9). Using British Election Study Internet Panel data with geographic identifiers, we find that distance from Westminster among respondents living in England (we do not include Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland in the graph as those regional distinctions are highly correlated with distance) is related to trust in politicians – with those who live further away from the UK’s parliament reporting lower levels of trust in the MPs that serve there.

**FIGURE 2.9: TRUST IN MPS FALLS THE FURTHER AWAY FROM WESTMINSTER YOU TRAVEL WITHIN ENGLAND**

Trust in MPs by distance from London



Source: Authors’ analysis of British Election Study 2020. Analysis uses British Election Study Internet panel, 2014–2020

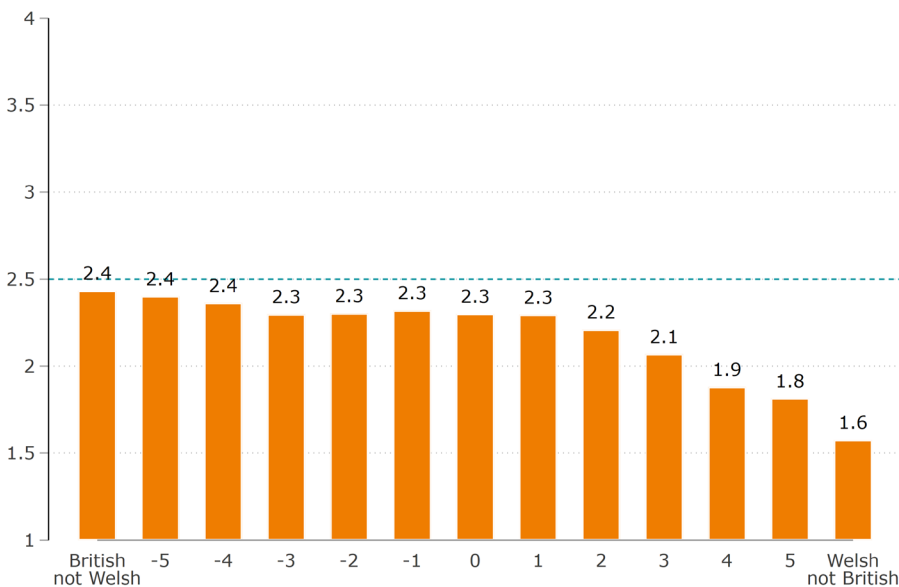
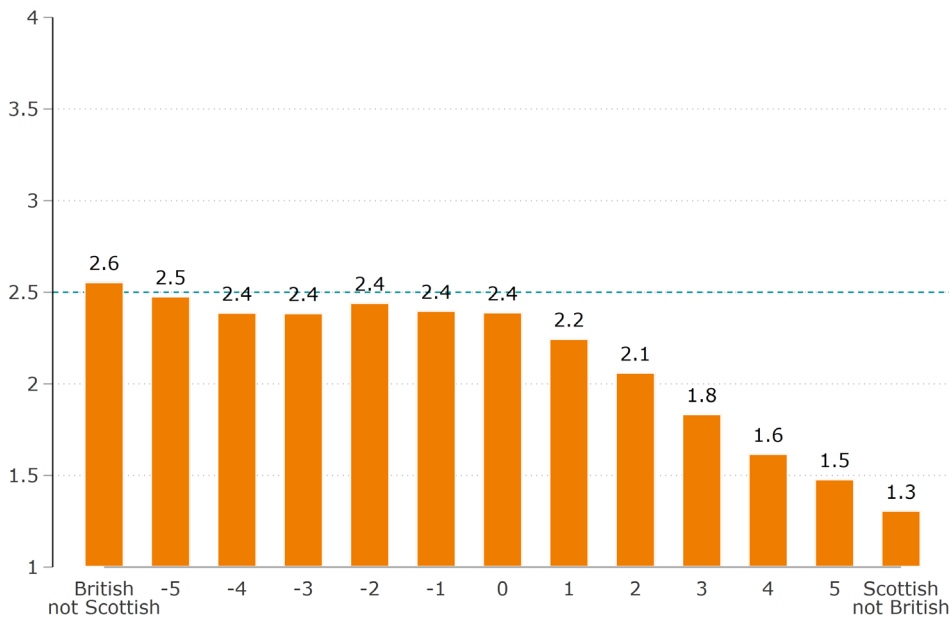
Note: The dependent variable (y-axis) is on a scale from 1–7, but the range of the scale has been limited here for clarity. The independent variable (x-axis) indicates the number of miles that respondents in England (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not included in this graph) live away from London. The effect of distance is smoothed with a kernel-weighted local polynomial regression. 95 per cent confidence intervals are shaded in grey.

<sup>3</sup> Partisan refers to affiliation with a particular political party.

This suggests that alongside dissatisfaction expressed through constitutional demands in devolved nations or a desire to 'level up' England's regions, there is a broader trend of political dissatisfaction associated with living outside of London and the south of England.

**FIGURE 2.10: THOSE WHO FEEL MORE SCOTTISH OR MORE WELSH THAN BRITISH ARE LESS SATISFIED WITH THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE UK**

Satisfaction with the state of democracy in the UK by national identity



Source: Authors' analysis of British Election Study 2020. Analysis uses British Election Study Internet panel, 2014–2020

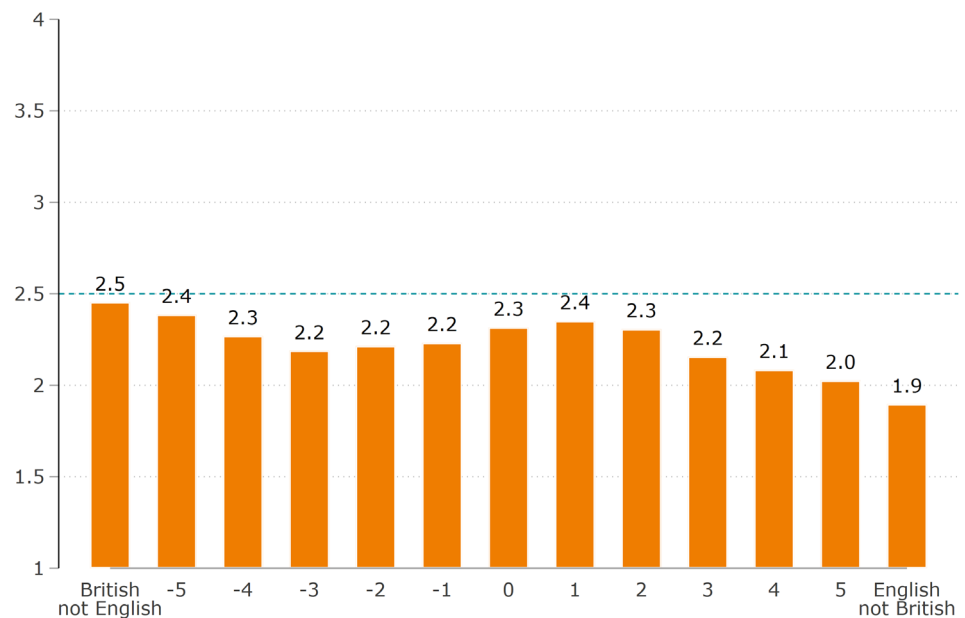
We also find that national identity is associated with political trust (see figure 2.10). In Britain’s devolved nations, strong sub-state identity is associated with lower satisfaction with the way democracy works in the UK. Using a measure of relative territorial identity (RTI – see Henderson et al 2020), we see that, in Scotland, those that feel more Scottish and British are substantially less satisfied with the state of UK democracy than those who feel more British than Scottish.

This presents a challenge to UK-wide government and raises questions about how the future of the union may shape or be shaped by political trust in different levels of government by different national identity groups. Through the Covid-19 pandemic, the increased visibility of devolved governments in Scotland and Wales and their distinct approaches to handling the pandemic led to marked differences in levels of trust reported in governments at Westminster, Holyrood, and Cardiff Bay. A May 2020 poll found that 70 per cent of respondents in Scotland reported high levels of trust in the Scottish government as a source of information about Covid-19, while 54 per cent of UK-wide respondents reported the same level of trust in the UK government (Survation 2020). Political trust now reflects the multi-level makeup of UK governance, with levels of trust varying across levels of government.

This challenge is not, however, contained to devolved nations. In England, those who feel more English than British also tend to be less satisfied with the state of democracy in the UK.

**FIGURE 2.11: THOSE WHO FEEL MORE ENGLISH THAN BRITISH ARE SOMEWHAT LESS SATISFIED WITH THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE UK**

**Satisfaction with the state of democracy in the UK by national identity**



Source: Authors’ analysis of British Election Study 2020. Analysis uses British Election Study Internet panel, 2014–2020

As figure 2.11 demonstrates, those who feel most strongly English report lower levels of democratic satisfaction than those who report feeling strongly British. This suggests a challenge in perceptions of democratic representation at Westminster that extends across Britain.

# 3.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

### DEMOCRACY AND PROGRESS

Given the extensive academic literature defining trust and tracking its trends and levels, evidence about its consequences remains “remarkably scarce” (Van der Meer 2017). However, through consulting the theoretical literature and the evidence that is available, we can identify two key reasons why declining trust in the UK and across the world should be a concern. First, we argue that declining trust undermines liberal democratic norms and culture; and second, we find that it is a potential barrier to economic and social progress. Together, we believe these arguments justify greater action to arrest and reverse the decline in trust seen over recent decades.

### TRUST AND DEMOCRACY

As set out in the introduction, the causes of the democratic challenges we face today in the UK – and across the world – are many and complex. Shifts in trust alone cannot explain the changes we are experiencing (as discussed in table 3.1 below). If we are to tackle them it will require change in our politics, economy, and culture. But, as table 3.1 shows, the academic evidence is increasingly clear that distrust has been associated with populism, polarisation, participation, dissatisfaction, and de-alignment, and must form part of any response from policymakers in liberal democracies.

In particular, growing distrust in politicians and institutions is linked to less support for long-established ‘insider’ parties and greater support for anti-establishment and populist political parties and causes (Hooghe 2018; Petrarca et al 2020). This makes intuitive sense: populism tends to manifest as a deep suspicion – or distrust – of the prevailing establishment. This is also linked to the political realignment that is being experienced in many liberal democracies, including in the UK and US, with distrust leading to greater electoral volatility as voters abandon traditional party loyalties (see, for example, Dassonville and Hooghe 2017).

There is also evidence from the US that distrust is increasingly directed across party lines and therefore intrinsically linked with polarisation – with people much less likely to trust a government when the opposition party is in power now than was historically the case (Hetherington and Rudolph 2018). It is not clear that this relationship is universal: affective polarisation around the issue of Brexit in the UK is increasingly apparent and trust between the two camps is low, but this has not yet divided along partisan lines and so may be less likely to impact trust in government (Duffy et al 2019).<sup>4</sup>

The evidence on the link between distrust and political participation is much less clear. Some argue that it is likely to drive participation in order to hold political representatives to account (Hetherington 1998); others argue that it is more likely to drive disengagement as voters eschew the political system as a result of distrust

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<sup>4</sup> Affective polarisation describes animosity based on political identities – for example, in a US context, where Republicans perceive Democrats to be hypocritical or close minded, and do not wish to socialise across party lines.

(Hooghe and Marien 2011). The best evidence today suggest that both can be true, depending on the circumstances (Hooghe, 2018; Valgarðsson et al forthcoming).

**TABLE 3.1: LINKS BETWEEN TRUST AND DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGES**

Democratic challenge	Link with trust
<b>Populism</b>	Low levels of political trust have been associated with populist voting (Hooghe 2018). Populism relates to trust in that it tends to reflect a deep suspicion – or distrust – of the prevailing establishment. By dividing society into two antagonistic camps: ‘the (pure) people’ vs the ‘corrupt elite’, populist ideology draws divides along lines of (one or a combination of) class, ethnicity, or morality (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In doing so, it fosters deep distrust of those excluded from ‘the people’, presenting a threat to liberal democracy.
<b>Polarisation</b>	Evidence from the US shows affective polarisation is leading to a polarisation in trust along party political lines (with democrats much more likely to trust government than republicans in general, and supporters of both much less trusting of government if their ‘opponent’ is in power). This, experts argue, reduces the ability of leaders to get consensus over policy. They then struggle to put policy solutions in place. This in turn can lead to further distrust – creating a self-fulfilling cycle (Hetherington and Rudolph 2018). It is not clear that this relationship is universal: polarisation in the UK is less significant though Brexit may have started to change that.
<b>Participation</b>	Opinion is divided on the effect that a lack of trust has on political participation (Levi and Stoker 2000). Some evidence shows political trust is a significant predictor of institutionalised political participation (Hooghe and Marien 2011). Others claim, however, that distrust can drive engagement in politics as citizens seek to drive accountability (Hetherington 1998). Recent literature suggests that a lack of trust impacts on voting, but not on other forms of political engagement (Valgarðsson et al, forthcoming).
<b>Dissatisfaction</b>	Declining trust has been found to drive dissatisfaction with political leaders, suggesting that low trust creates an environment in which it is harder for politicians to succeed (Hetherington 1998). UK literature finds a lack of trust in politics tends to reflect negative evaluations of politicians and their behaviour, and was an important driver of UKIP support (Jennings et al 2016).
<b>De-alignment</b>	Persistent low trust undermines the formation of stable party preferences and thereby stimulates volatility and drives voters – particularly supporters of parties in government – to change their party preference (Voogd et al 2019). These trends also link to the evidence above on trust and populism as these voters often move from mainstream parties to populist alternatives.

Source: Authors’ analysis

## TRUST AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

Structurally low and declining trust is also important because of the impact it has on economic and social outcomes. Notably, there is substantial evidence that trust is a contributor to economic growth (Guiso et al 2009). Proponents of this claim argue that this is because it facilitates a reduction in transaction costs – meaning a reduction in regulation and monitoring required – throughout the economy including trade, consumption, and investment decisions (Dasgupta 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence that in the context of a low trust environment, citizens are more likely to ‘free ride’ in societally detrimental ways by flouting laws or regulations once they are in place (Scholz and Lubell 1998).

Trust also impacts on the ability of government to intervene and deliver better policy. Academics such as Marc Hetherington (2006) argue that distrust makes it more difficult for leaders to achieve consensus and therefore to marshal resources and state power to solve problems. As a result, government will, on average, solve fewer problems when political trust is low. This makes intuitive



sense: many reforms involve sacrificing short-term satisfaction for longer-term gains and require a consensus to be formed in order to succeed. In a low-trust climate, citizens may well prioritise immediate but incomplete benefits, inducing politicians to seek short-term and opportunistic gains (Gyorffy 2013).

The literature also suggests that there are reasons why progressive policy change in particular might suffer in these circumstances. This is because people need to trust the government in order to support more government intervention. More specifically, declining trust is thought to be linked to a decline in support for redistributive and culturally open (immigration) policy measures (Hetherington 2006). This is because these policies do not immediately benefit everybody so people need to “trust that the result will be a better future for everyone.” Hetherington argues that without that trust, people will deem the sacrifices they perceive themselves or others to be making as unfair, or even punitive.

As a result, he argues that trust is key to explaining why there has been a shift towards more conservative policy positions (at least in the US context). He shows that this is not the result of a “conservative turn in public opinion” – which most measures suggest has not occurred – but a decline in trust leading to less support for redistributive policies as enacted by government. This claim has been challenged by some studies (Peyton 2020) but corroborated by others (Rudolph and Popp 2009). On balance, we conclude that the evidence is strong enough that policymakers who care about making the UK a fairer and more prosperous country should care about the decline in trust experienced in recent decades.

## 4. WHY IS TRUST DECLINING?

### THE DETERMINANTS OF TRUST

We have now established that political trust is both important for the proper function of representative democracy and for driving social progress through effective government. We have also shown how trust in the UK – and across many liberal democracies – is low and has been declining until very recently. Unfortunately, these conclusions ask as many questions as they resolve. What are the causes of trust or distrust? Why has it been declining in the UK and elsewhere? And, what can we do to arrest the decline and rebuild trust?

Next, we explore cultural and institutional determinants of trust.

The cultural school of thought argues that political trust is based on attitudes and values that are learned early in life (Inglehart 1997; Putnam 2000). It is assumed that values are acquired early in life – largely as a result of the experiences, influences, and interactions that people have – the impact of which persists into their adult years. These values tend to largely set by the time a person reaches adulthood (Inglehart 1997). This explanation would imply that the decline in trust experienced over recent decades was largely a generational effect as younger generations with lower trust replace older generations with high trust.

By contrast, institutional theories argue that political trust is influenced by individual evaluations of institutional performance over the course of a person's life (Hetherington 1998). These attitudes are thought to vary based on knowledge and experience of institutions (Hudson 2006; Nye et al 1997), including the political system in which we operate, the effectiveness of government delivery, where they get their information from, and the conditions in which they live. This theory would imply that decline in trust is the result of deteriorating performance across government delivery and public institutions, or else an increase in the expectations of citizens with regard to these functions.

The best available evidence suggests that both models likely contain some truth (Schoon and Cheng 2011). Usefully, both point in the same direction in terms of what has been causing the decline in trust and where policymakers should look in terms of correcting it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they share the fundamental insight that both the actual and perceived performance of democracy and government and the conditions in which people grow up and live impact people's levels of trust.

Where they do differ is on the length of the 'window of influence' in which changes in social context or institutional performance can have an impact on trust formation (just during childhood or over a lifetime). However, for the purposes of this paper we assume that both are true: people are particularly shaped by early experiences but can be impacted throughout lifetime by the institutions around them and the degree to which they deliver for people.

Within these institutional determinants of trust, we make a further distinction between:

- performance of government – this means the outputs (such as public services, like local services and schools) and outcomes (such as living standards) that government delivers
- processes of government – this means the process by which these decisions are made (for example, through electoral systems, representation, and accountability).

The evidence on which precise factors within these categories make a difference are set out below.

## THE PERFORMANCE OF GOVERNMENT

We might think of political trust in part as a “thermometer reading by which we can gauge how well governments are performing in the eyes of their citizens” (Putnam 2021). This link – between the outcomes and performance of government and trust – is well established (Knack and Keefer 1997; Mishler and Rose 2005; Newton 2001; Putnam et al 1993). The literature suggests a range of specific factors that might impact on trust, including economic growth, economic volatility (such as experiencing a financial crisis), economic inequality, the quality of public services, and the degree to which policymakers deliver on their political pledges (see table 4.1 for details).

**TABLE 4.1: POTENTIAL DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL TRUST**

Determinant	Evidence
Economic growth and living standards	There is a correlation between economic growth and trust (Hetherington 2006), however the causal relationship has been contested. Subjective perceptions of macroeconomic performance have been reliably shown to influence political trust, findings regarding objective macroeconomic outcomes have been less consistent (Van der Meer 2017).
Financial crisis	A study of four economically and democratically advanced countries that experienced unusually sharp falls in political trust between 1970 and 1990 found a link with recession, tax deficits, inflation, currency devaluations, cuts in public services and falling real incomes (Newton 2006).
Inequality	Uslaner (2005) has argued that growing inequality contributes to a decline in trust because it “leads people to believe that leaders listen far more to the rich than to others in society” and because it drives declines in social trust which are in turn linked to higher corruption.
Public service quality	Putnam et al (1993) had demonstrated that government efficacy matters for fostering trust. Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2008) argues that while perceptions of public service quality have been linked to a decline in trust, but this is often not the only factor in play.
Pledge fulfilment	Thomson and Brandenburg (2018) argue that mistrust and distrust affect citizens’ evaluations of pledge fulfilment – but find that evaluations of specific promises tend to be fairly accurate. More concerningly, however, the same study finds that <i>distrust</i> appears to affect performance evaluations regardless of actual performance. Additional literature suggests heuristic shortcuts such as partisanship strongly affect citizens’ evaluations of pledge fulfilment (Péty and Duval 2017).

Source: Authors’ analysis

Across many of these determinants, the evidence suggests that it is the perception of performance as much as objective performance itself that is important in fostering trust. This may explain why trust has been declining even

as the economy has grown and social outcomes – such as living standards and life expectancy – have (by and large) improved. So, what determines people’s perceptions of performance? One factor is where people get their information about the government (which is discussed at length in the next section). But also crucial is people’s lived experience as citizens: a feeling of decline in an area or a first-hand experience of poor public service delivery is as important as tangible indicators of economic or public services (see, for example, Cramer 2016; Stoker 2019).

Another factor worth considering – which could also explain why trust has been declining despite improved economic and social outcomes – is that trust is the result of actual performance against people’s expectations of performance (Hetherington 2006). This suggests the possibility that rising expectations of performance, potentially driven by increasing education levels and greater access to information, may have been rising faster than performance.

### THE PROCESS OF GOVERNMENT

The evidence is clear that it is not the just the outcomes that government delivers for people that matters. The process by which those outcomes are achieved – the way in which government and our democracy operates – is also important (Van der Meer and Dekker 2011). As set out in table 4.2, there is evidence that the type of electoral system, the level decentralisation and the degree of democratic innovation (direct democracy) can affect levels of trust. Similarly, the degree to which people see themselves and their values represented in those who govern, the degree of actual or perceived corruption and where people get their information about government (the media) also has an impact.

**TABLE 4.2: HOW DO THE PROCESSES OF GOVERNMENT SHAPE POLITICAL TRUST?**

Determinant	Evidence
<b>Voting system</b>	There is evidence that majoritarian systems engender less trust than proportional systems (Berggren et al, 2004; Christensen, 2015; Farrell and McAllister 2006; Karp and Banducci 2008; Lijphart 1999; Listhaug et al 2009).
<b>Corruption</b>	One of the most important determinants of political trust is corruption (Zmerli and Van der Meer 2017). Existing research shows that this has an almost universally corrosive effect on political trust. Corruption scandals not only reduce political trust in the short term – they continue to have a negative effect on political trust even as perceptions of corruption revert back to ‘pre-scandal’ levels.
<b>Representatives</b>	The extent to which groups are represented in electoral democracies may also impact political trust (see, for example, Ulbig 2007). A ‘values gap’ between citizens and political elites may also be contributing to declining political trust (Valgarðsson et al 2020).
<b>Democratic system</b>	Devolution has been shown in some studies to be linked to trust (Tang and Huhe 2016). Democratic innovations like direct democracy are linked to increased support for democracy especially among those who are disaffected (Seyd, Curtice and Rose, 2018).
<b>Media</b>	Exposure to fake news has been shown to lead to a decline in trust in media – but the extent to which it leads to declining trust in political institutions appears to be conditioned by political identities (Ognyanova et al 2020).

Source: Authors’ analysis

# 5. CONCLUSION

## HOW DO WE START REBUILDING TRUST?

This report has set out compelling evidence that political trust in the UK is both low and declining. This matters. It matters for our democracy: where an absence of trust turns into active distrust – characterised by cynicism and disillusionment – it can lead to a downwards spiral of democratic decline (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018). And it matters for social progress: trust undermines the ability of government to intervene and deliver better policy outcomes (Hetherington 2006). We argue that progressives in particular should be concerned about low and declining trust: declining trust is thought to be linked to a decline in support for redistributive and culturally open (immigration) policy measures (ibid).

This report has also considered the potential drivers and consequences of trust in decline. We find evidence for two sets of factors determine trust.

1. **Performance of government:** This means the outputs (such as public services) and outcomes (such as social outcomes) that government delivers.
2. **Processes of government:** This means the process by which these decisions are made (such as how well democracy functions).

Crucially, it is both the perception of these things and the reality of them that matters.

This evidence points to a disturbing possibility: a downward spiral of trust, whereby worsening government performance and deteriorations in democracy can lead to a decline in trust. This decline in trust can contribute in turn to a worsening in governmental performance (such as lower economic growth, poorer public services, widening inequalities) and to a democratic deterioration (such as greater support for populism, more polarisation, and more scandals and corruption). This then starts the cycle again, pushing trust yet lower.

Given this, we can clearly conclude that declining trust poses clear risks to society if left unchecked. Action is needed to set the UK on a new course, away from democratic dissatisfaction and towards democratic and social renewal. To support this effort, we outline four significant '**social and political gaps**' that we argue must be closed to improve trust in the UK. We do not seek to set out definitive policy recommendations, but rather to outline four major areas of challenge for policymakers to focus on to improve political trust.

## 1. BETWEEN THE LIVES PEOPLE EXPECTED TO LEAD AND THE LIVES PEOPLE ARE EXPERIENCING

For too long, our economic and political system in the UK has not delivered against citizens' expectations for their own lives. We see this in an economy characterised stagnant living standards and growing inequality of income and wealth (CEJ 2018; 2021). Despite significant pockets of innovation and wealth across the British economy, too many people and communities feel left behind (ibid). Coming into the Covid-19 pandemic, almost half (45 per cent) of the UK public believed that young people growing up today would have a worse life

than their parents (Deloitte 2019). The pandemic is, tragically, likely to have made this worse.

To narrow this gap between expectations and reality, government must improve outcomes for ordinary citizens; this means reshaping our economic model to deliver both 'prosperity and justice'. IPPR's Centre for Economic Justice has recently argued that the pandemic offers us an opportunity to start this shift with people demanding policymakers 'build back better' (Dibb et al 2021). We argue that this can be achieved through measures such as new public investment to create good green jobs, a new partnership with business to achieve big social missions and significant investment and devolution in the North to rebalance the country (for more, see CEJ 2018 and EJC 2021).

## **2. BETWEEN THE SCALE OF THE SOCIAL CHALLENGES WE FACE AND THE (PERCEIVED) ABILITY OF GOVERNMENT TO DELIVER AGAINST THEM**

Citizens in the UK increasingly doubt that government can – or will – positively impact on their lives in the face of major challenges (see, for example, Deloitte 2019). This concern is partly justified: it is the result of the scale of the challenges we face as a society and the pace of change, including rapidly evolving technology which is reshaping work and the media, the globalisation of our economy and the looming climate and nature crisis. In many cases, government has very clearly failed to marshal the democratic power of the state to manage these shifts in the interest of citizens. Particularly on the global stage, inaction in the place of effective global cooperation risks undermining the legitimacy of government and democratic institutions.

However, in other cases the failure of government has been entirely self-induced. A decade of austerity has left many public services unable to meet the expectations of citizens (Quilter-Pinner and Hochlaf 2019). Likewise, attempts to reform the state – using targets, internal markets, outsourcing, and privatisation – have fundamentally failed to deliver better outcomes (Quilter-Pinner et al 2020). Put simply: ideology has artificially limited our use of the state to deliver for citizens. The antidote to this is a new consensus where investment in the state is the norm, where relationships rather than markets become the organisational principle of the state and where cooperation rather than competition, both nationally and internationally, drive social progress (ibid).

## **3. BETWEEN THE PRINCIPLES OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE REALITY OF OUR POLITICAL SYSTEM AS IT MANIFESTS TODAY**

For too many people across Britain, democracy is not working as it should. They understandably feel that their voice is not being heard and that their vote doesn't count. They believe that the country is no longer being governed in their interests, but in the interests of an elite. We see this discontent in support for causes like Brexit and its 'take back control' slogan, as well as in demands for a new constitutional settlement, or, in some territories, independence. We see it also in the growing mistrust that we have evidenced in this paper. The solution is both obvious but challenging: politicians and policymakers must embrace a bold programme of constitutional and democratic renewal.

IPPR is embarking on a programme of work on revitalising democracy in the coming years. This will look to set out in more detail the scale and nature of the challenge and the potential responses. However, our existing work is clear that part of the solution must be a greater devolution of power from the centre to local level policymakers – to devolved national governments, combined local authorities, or local government (CEJ 2018), as well as reforms

to our electoral system to address democratic inequalities (Lawrence 2015). In addition, our interviews for this research have highlighted the potential for more radical democratic reform such as participative and deliberative democratic innovations which can increase levels of trust, and faith in democracy (see, for example, Fishkin et al 2021).

#### **4. BETWEEN THE VALUES AND EXPERIENCES OF CITIZENS AND THOSE WHO GOVERN ON THEIR BEHALF**

Finally, we find growing evidence of a ‘values gap’ between citizens and those who govern on their behalf. Recent contributions to literature on political trust point to the high value that distrustful citizens place on the idea of ‘authenticity’ – a trait that is comparatively less valued by journalists and political elites (Valgardsson et al 2020; Stiers et al 2021; Kenny et al 2021). Paula Surridge has also described a values gap between voters and parties – whereby traditional left-right dividing lines are increasingly secondary to ‘new’ social values, as measured on a scale between liberalism and authoritarianism. These new social values are an increasingly important predictor of British political behaviour (Surridge 2021a).

This values gap is deeply concerning, and has long been linked to education, which has a large impact on social values (ibid 2021b).

But with routes into politics for those without a university education narrowing (for example, with fewer routes through trade unions), this gap may give way to a crisis of representation. Closing this gap will require efforts to improve the quality and diversity of our democratic representation at Westminster, devolved governments, and the local level. This could potentially be achieved by political parties adopting a candidate shortlisting process that puts more emphasis on selecting people from different backgrounds. Equally, there is some evidence that new forms of direct democracy – which bypass political representatives and hand more power over to citizens directly – could help engage distrustful citizens (Seyd et al 2018).

To close each of these gaps and arrest the decline in trust will require careful thought and effort to strengthen both the processes that underpin our democratic governance, and the outcomes our governments deliver. These will form areas of focus for future IPPR research and policy development for years to come.



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