

Institute for Public Policy Research



# WHO DECIDES?

INFLUENCE AND INEQUALITY  
IN BRITISH DEMOCRACY

**Parth Patel**

November 2023

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IPPR  
8 Storey's Gate  
London  
SW1P 3AY  
E: [info@ippr.org](mailto:info@ippr.org)  
[www.ippr.org](http://www.ippr.org)  
Registered charity no: 800065 (England and Wales),  
SC046557 (Scotland)

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# CONTENTS

<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>2. Who does democracy work for?</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>3. Political inequality</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Who speaks? .....	15
Who listens? .....	19
Who amplifies?.....	22
<b>4. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>27</b>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

## ABOUT THE ANALYST

**Dr Viktor Valgarðsson** is Leverhulme early career fellow at the University of Southampton.

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# SUMMARY

**For first time since the birth of democracy in this country, people do not expect their children to be better off than them.** Wages are falling after flatlining for a decade. It's now far from certain a doctor or police officer will be there in our hour of need. The continent is once again at war and the planet on fire. This is the age of insecurity.

**In the face of insecurity, people naturally want control.** Most obviously in their private lives, but also in public life. Seen from this perspective, the rise of populism is less surprising; people want to 'take back control' of a political process that is not working for them.

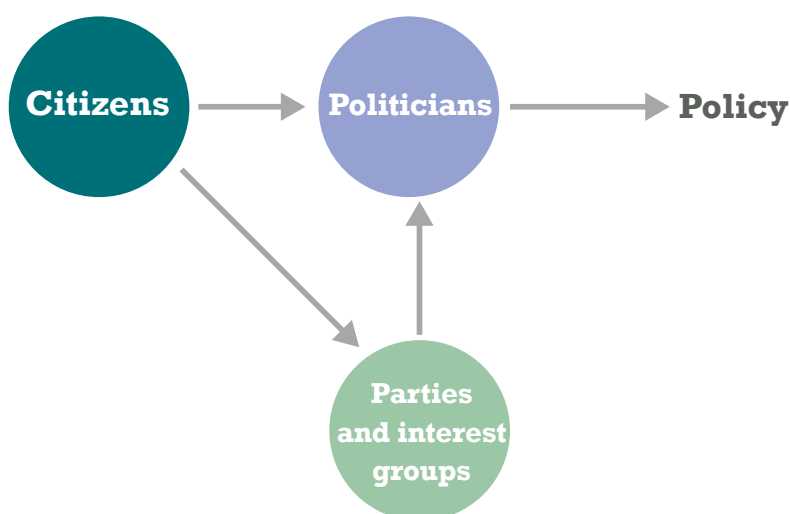
**The sense that democracy is not working is widely felt but unequally spread.** Those who did not complete secondary education are almost twice as likely as university graduates to think people like them have no say in what government does. A similar gulf exists between the bottom and top third of earners in this country.

**There are real differences in who gets their way in democracy.** Studies across a range of democracies consistently find that policy is more responsive to the preferences of those at top of the income distribution compared to those in the middle and bottom. This is one way to explain why income inequality has grown and remains high in this country, despite a majority of the lower two-thirds of earners supporting greater redistribution consistently for the last three decades, compared on a minority among the top one-third. People are not politically equal.

**Unequal influence is generated across the policymaking process.** There are three particularly important points in the policymaking process where political inequality arises.

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## A SIMPLIFIED MAP OF THE DEMOCRATIC POLICYMAKING PROCESS



Source: Authors' analysis

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### WHO SPEAKS?

Some voices are louder than others. The turnout gap between the top and bottom third of the income distribution, between renters and homeowners, and between those who did and did not attend university at general elections in the 1960s was negligible. In the 2010s, the turnout gap had grown to 18 per cent between top and bottom income terciles, to 23 per cent between renters and homeowners, and to 15 per cent between those who did and did not attend university.

Differences in who speaks in our democracy extend far beyond voting. Almost one in three university graduates has directly contacted a politician, while around one in 10 has joined a protest or lawful public demonstration. By comparison, only one in seven people without degrees have contacted a politician and fewer than one in 25 has joined a protest.



### WHO LISTENS?

An individual's experience of the world shapes their view of it. By and large, members of parliament are not representative of the country as a whole. Only 14 per cent of MPs did not attend university compared to 66 per cent of working age adults, while only 7 per cent of MPs can be considered working class compared with 34 per cent of working age adults.

The attitudes and positions of politicians also most closely mirror the views of citizens at the top end of the income distribution. If those with decision-making power come from affluent backgrounds and hold attitudes that most closely mirror those of high income and highly educated citizens, it is not surprising that policy is most responsive to the preferences of those groups.



### WHO AMPLIFIES?

Money and organisation can heighten voices in a democracy. Money is channelled into the political process through parties and interest groups. The largest 10 per cent of donations account for over half of the total donations received by the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour parties. Moreover, party funding is becoming more concentrated. The share of party donations coming from those donating more than £100,000 has grown by around 8 per cent over the past decade.

The relationship between campaign spending and votes won has also strengthened in recent years, creating greater incentives for interest groups to finance political candidates. They also financially support sitting MPs. One in five MPs has private sector earnings over £1,000, while those with second jobs earn on average around £40,000 on top of their MP salary.

**The next wave of democratic reform should be guided by the principle of political equality.** If people are to once again be authors of their own lives, to once again feel secure, they must sense they have influence in the collective decision-making endeavour that is democracy.

**The democratic machine needs rewiring more than redirection.** If there is one thing that unites people in this country, it is their disdain for Westminster. People have generally had enough of paying for the mistakes of politicians. This deeply held sentiment will not be resolved by a new set of policymakers without new relations of power. Worse, it will continue to be channelled by populists for as long as it remains a blind spot for progressives.

**Economic and political reform must march together in the new progressive project.** Progressives in the UK, US and elsewhere are now pursuing a new politics of security. They seek to overhaul the economic paradigm of recent decades with a new model based on state direction, a different kind of internationalism and a sharper focus on distribution. They are right to identify a need to reinvent our political economy. Yet reinventing political economy also requires stepping outside the domain of economics. A commensurate and clear-eyed programme of constitutional reform is due if a sense of security is to be re-created. In the coming months, IPPR will set out a reform agenda that seeks to level up influence in this country.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

We live in the age of insecurity. A planet on fire and a continent once again at war. Real wages falling after flatlining for a decade. No guarantee a doctor or police officer will be there when we need them. For the first time since the birth of democracy in this country, people do not expect their children to be better off than them.

In the face of insecurity people naturally want control. Most obviously in their private lives, but also in public life; over the political process that has allowed living standards and life expectancy to stagnate for large swathes and inequality to grow. Seen from this perspective, the rise of populism is less surprising; citizens of democracies are expressing a desire to ‘take back control’. They are challenging not the idea of democracy but the way it is practised.

If people are to once again be authors of their own lives, they must sense they have influence in the collective decision-making endeavour that is democracy. They need to feel politically equal.

“ **For the first time since the birth of democracy in this country, people do not expect their children to be better off than them.** ”

The principle of political equality is a blind spot in the progressive agenda to re-establish a sense of security. It is one that will continue to be exploited by populists, who deepen anxiety by juxtaposing ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’, until mainstream politicians bring it into view. Whether the aspiration is broad-based economic growth, rebuilding trust in democratic government, or muting the populist challenge – the pursuit of political equality is essential. Put simply, the age of insecurity will not be swept away by a change in policy direction without a change in power and politics. It ought to be the first design principle for any reform to our political and economic institutions (Allen 2023).

This report sets out a blueprint to make the UK more politically equal. It asks why policy is more responsive to some citizens than others, exploring the scale of political inequality in democracy and its relationship to economic inequality. By analysing key nodes in the democratic policymaking process, we identify process through which political inequality is generated and priorities for democratic reform.

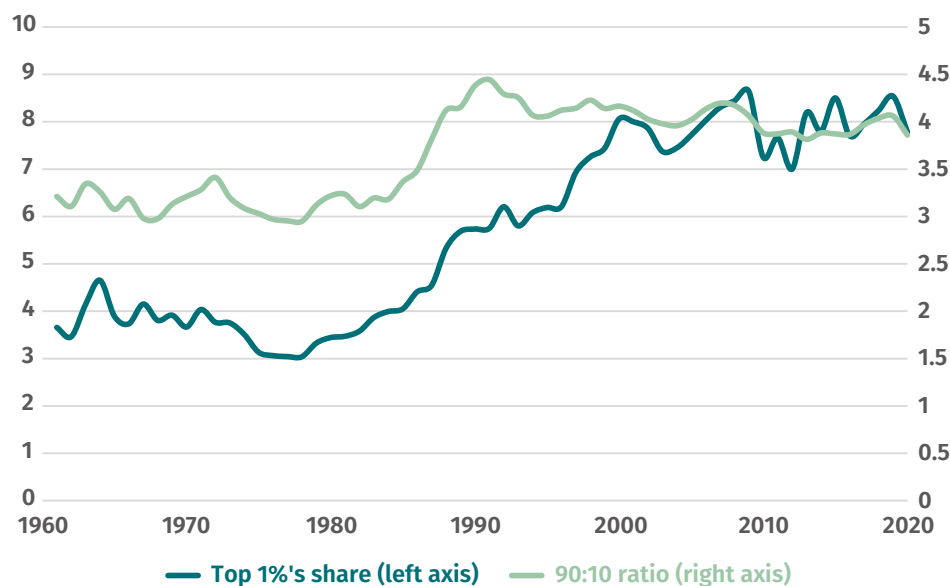


## 2. WHO DOES DEMOCRACY WORK FOR?

If democracy is a collective problem-solving endeavour, then a key design principle should be that members of that collective each have equal influence in the decision-making process (Dewey 1927; Dahl 2006). This is the principle of political equality.<sup>1</sup> It is an integral part of a just society, fundamental to human flourishing and respect, and as a means to achieving many of the other things we want in a just society, such as individual freedoms and a fair economy (Rawls 1971; Anderson 1999; Allen 2023; Pettit 1999; Scanlon 2018).

Equal influence in the political process is not the same as equal outcomes. Provided there are a plurality of views, we should expect some will not get their way in a collective decision, even if all had equal influence in the process. The problem arises when there are systematic differences in who gets their way.

**FIGURE 2.1: INCOME INEQUALITY HAS INCREASED SUBSTANTIALLY AND REMAINS HIGH**  
*Inequality in net household income in the UK*



Source: Bourquin et al 2022

One particular concern in democracies like ours is that more money translates into more influence. The apparent pro-affluent realignment of economic policy outcomes over the last 40 years makes this a central concern of modern

<sup>1</sup> This paper focusses on political equality with regard to political institutions. There is a rich school of thought that applies political equality more broadly to social and economic relations (for example, see Anderson 1999). Both interpretations of political equality are rooted in the moral judgement that all human beings are of equal worth.

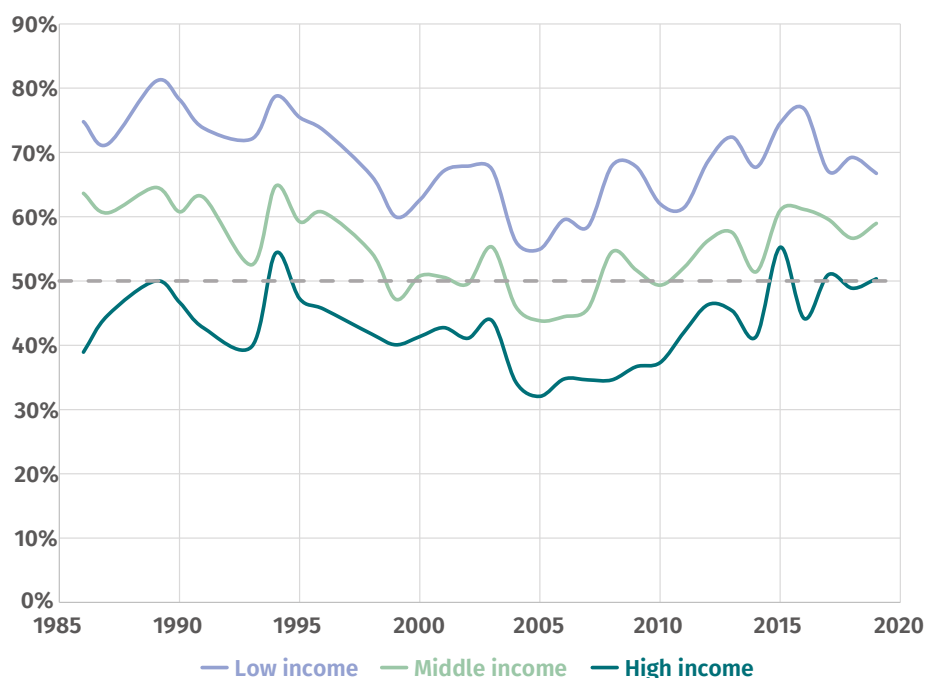
democracy. Income inequality increased substantially in the 1980s and has remained high (figure 2.1). The share of income going to the top 1 per cent of earners has doubled since 1985. This is the result not only of inadequate response to market forces but also political choices that have made the tax-transfer system less redistributive (Lupu and Pontusson, forthcoming). A similar pattern is seen with regard to wealth inequality, which fell dramatically for most of the 20th century in this country until 1980, and since has begun concentrating again (Alvaredo et al 2018).

If all citizens have equal influence in the political process, why have democracies largely allowed inequality, particularly top-end inequality, to rise and remain high?

It could be that public preferences do not line up with material interests; that people do not think inequality is too high and so there isn't a democratic demand to reduce it. But while preferences do not always align to interests (Bartels 2008), on this issue they do. Eight in 10 Britons think the income gap is too large, with low- and middle-income citizens more likely to hold this view (Pearce and Taylor 2013). Furthermore, a majority of low- and middle- income citizens believe the government should redistribute more, compared to a more even split among the top third of the income distribution (figure 2.2). Around seven in 10 people in the bottom one-third, and six in 10 of those in the middle one-third of the income distribution think the government should redistribute more, compared to an even split among the top one-third.

**FIGURE 2.2: THE MAJORITY OF LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME PEOPLE BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD REDISTRIBUTE MORE**

*Percentage of people who agree with the statement: "The government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off"*



Source: Authors' analysis of data from the British Social Attitudes Survey

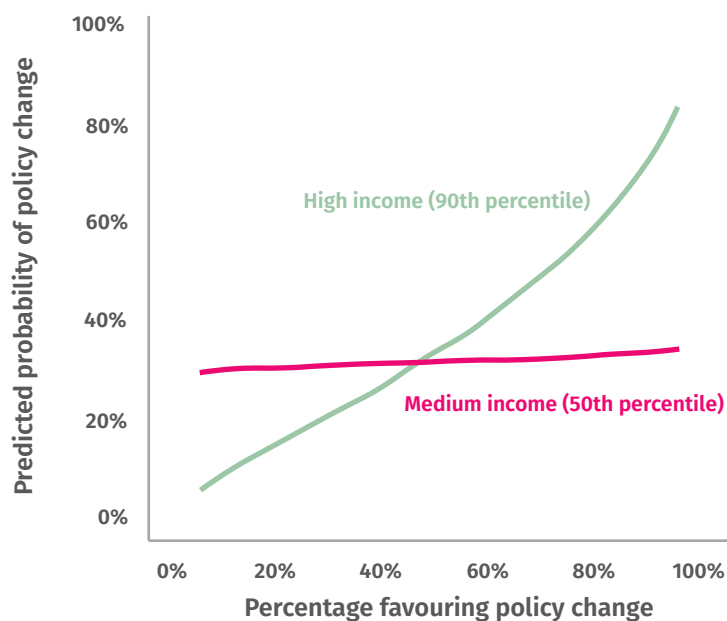
This forces us to consider a different hypothesis: that those at the top end of the income distribution have greater influence in the policymaking process than others. Are the well-heeled more likely to get their way than the worse-off?

One approach to answering this question is to consider the responsiveness of policy to the preferences of different citizens. Across a range of rich democracies, studies have found that policy is consistently more responsive to the preferences of affluent and highly educated citizens (Gilens 2012; Rosset and Stecker 2019; Schakel and Van Der Pas 2021; Elsässer and Schäfer 2023; Mathisen 2023). This policy bias was first documented in the US but has now been demonstrated across a range European democracies, including democracies that are more egalitarian than the UK.<sup>2</sup> Even in Norway, one of the most equal democracies in the world, policy choices are much more responsive to the preferences of citizens at the top-end of the income distribution when their views diverge from those in the middle (figure 2.3).

“the bottom third of earners are almost twice as likely as the top third to think people like them have no say in what government does”

**FIGURE 2.3: POLICY IS MORE RESPONSIVE TO THE PREFERENCES OF HIGH INCOME CITIZENS**

*Predicted probability of policy change for 50th and 90th percentile citizens when their preferences diverge by more than 10 percentage points*



Source: Mathisen 2023

Policy choices tracking a group’s preferences is not necessarily the same as having influence (Bartels, forthcoming). It is possible, for example, to have ‘democracy by coincidence’ (Gilens and Page 2014), where some citizens appear to get what they want only because they happen to agree with another group who are really calling the shots. And it is influence, not congruence, that we are really interested in as the democratic ideal.

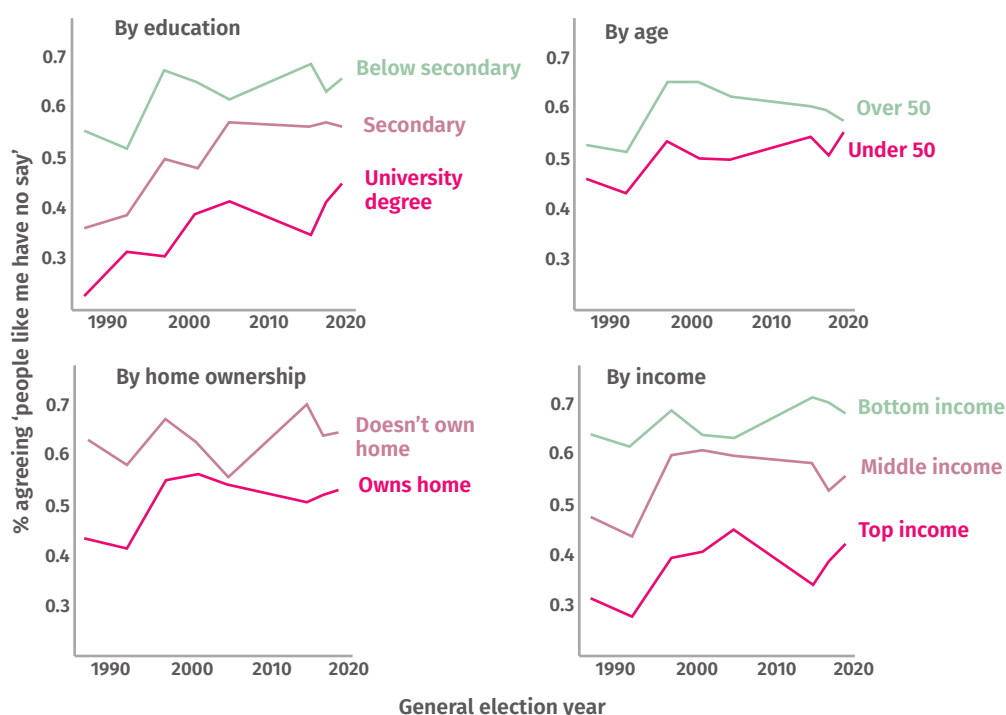
We can look to perceptions of influence and trust in collective democratic institutions as another indicator of political inequality. Here there are wide inequalities among the British public. People with fewer qualifications, lower

<sup>2</sup> To the best of our knowledge, there is no similar empirical study of policy responsiveness in the UK. However, given differential responsiveness has been found in capitalist democracies as diverse as the US, Germany and Norway, we believe it is more than reasonable to expect a similar policy bias in the UK, particularly when triangulated with qualitative policy shifts and perceptions of influence among UK citizens.

incomes, less wealth and of an older age are more likely to believe they have no say in the what the government does (figure 2.4). Around seven in 10 of those who did not complete secondary education think people like them have no say in what government does, compared to four in 10 university graduates. Similarly, the bottom third of earners are almost twice as likely as the top third to think people like them have no say in what government does. It is also noteworthy that perceptions of political influence have been improving for older people and homeowners but deteriorating for young people and renters.

**FIGURE 2.4: PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE VARY WIDELY BY AGE, EDUCATION, INCOME AND WEALTH**

Percentage of people in Great Britain responding ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ to the statement that: “People like me have no say in what government does”, 1987–2019



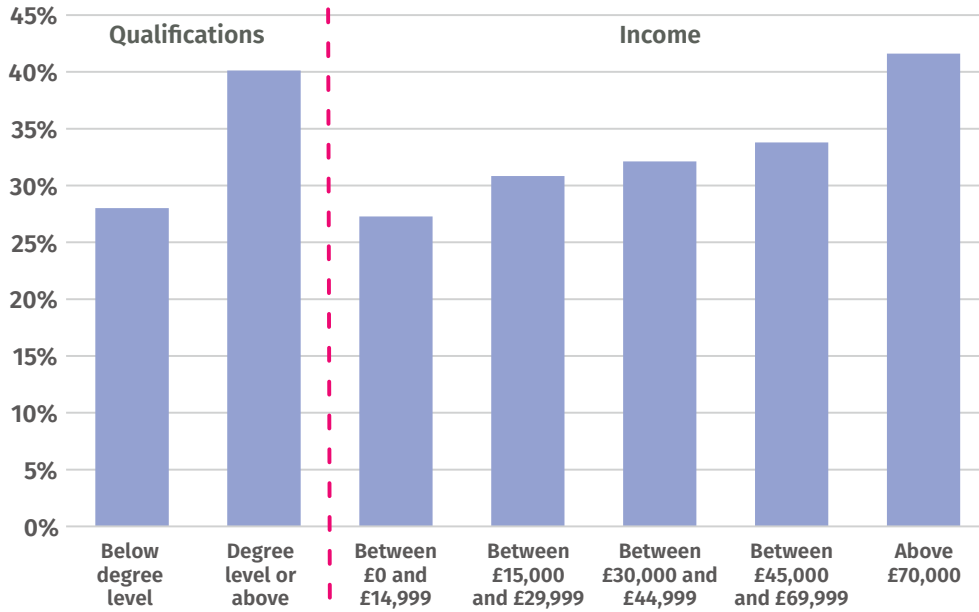
Source: Ansell and Gingrich 2022

This is mirrored by disparities in how people relate to our collective political institutions. For example, there are wide inequalities in the extent to which people trust parliament to act in their best interests (figure 2.5). University graduates are 43 per cent more likely to trust parliament to act in the public interest than those who do not have degrees, while those earning over £70,000 are 56 per cent more likely than people earning under £15,000.

Bringing together findings on perceptions of influence, policy responsiveness and material policy outcomes, it is reasonable to conclude there are systematic differences in who gets their way in British democracy. To understand why, we must consider how political inequality is generated across the policymaking process.

**FIGURE 2.5: TRUST IN PARLIAMENT TO FULFIL ITS DEMOCRATIC FUNCTION IS HIGHER AMONG THE AFFLUENT AND EDUCATED**

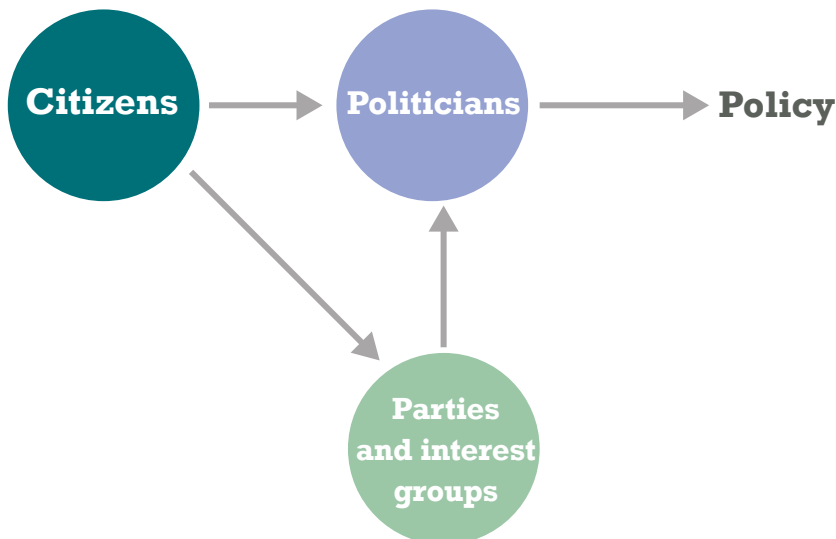
Percentage of people responding ‘somewhat trust’ or ‘strongly trust’ when asked: “To what extent do you trust or distrust the UK parliament to act in the best interests of people in the UK?”



Source: IPPR-Focaldata survey of 8,000 UK residents from Patel et al 2023

Figure 2.6 is a simplified version of the democratic policymaking process. At each point political inequality can arise.<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 2.6: A SIMPLIFIED MAP OF THE DEMOCRATIC POLICYMAKING PROCESS**



Source: Authors’ analysis

<sup>3</sup> We are not claiming these are the only points at which political inequality arises in the policymaking process. For example, there is considerable research on the role of the media in public and elite opinion formation and policymaking. There is also research on the constraints on politicians, such as gilt markets and international law, may also affect the responsiveness of policy. Discussion of these additional hypotheses is beyond the scope of this paper.

We form three hypotheses.



**1. Who speaks?**

There are systematic differences in how citizens express their preferences.



**2. Who listens?**

There are systematic differences in the opinions and interests represented by legislators.



**3. Who amplifies?**

There are systematic differences in how citizens indirectly influence the policymaking process.

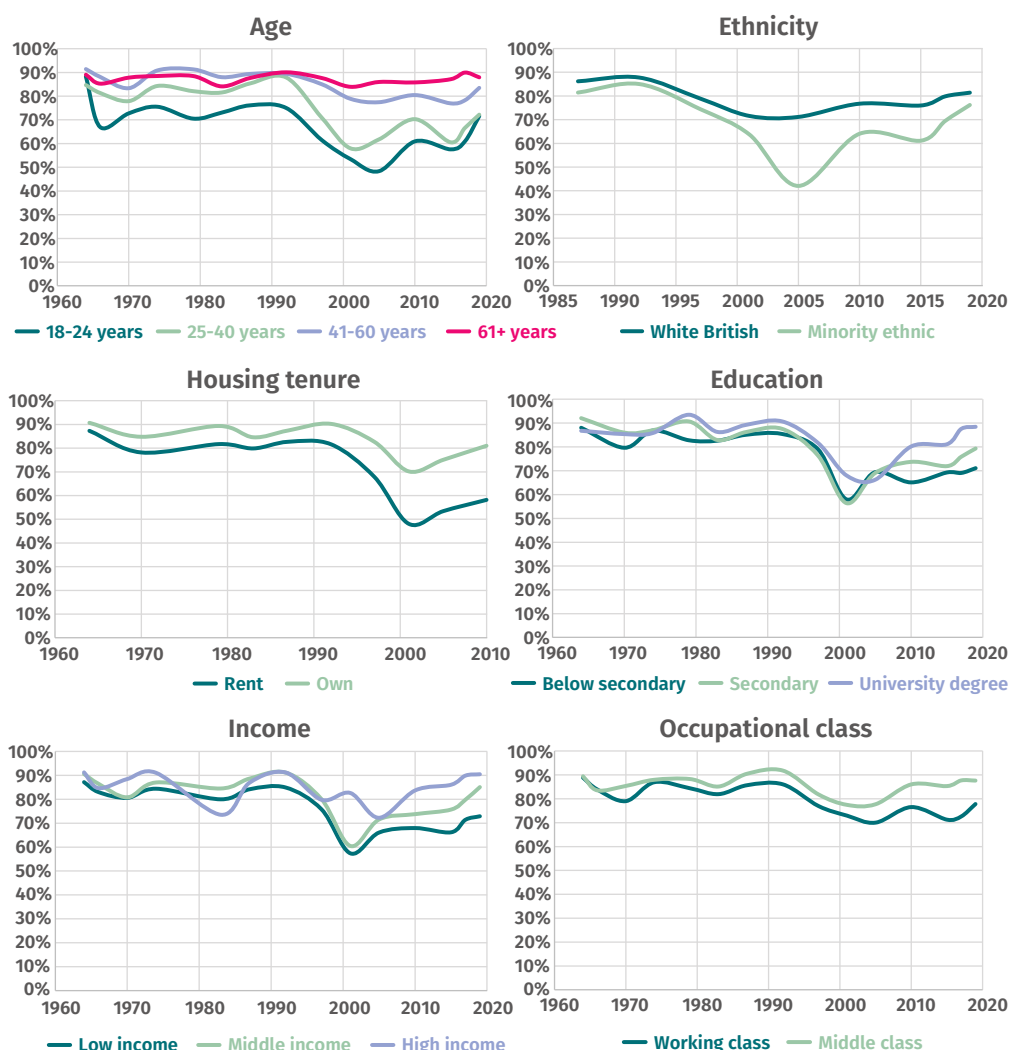
# 3. POLITICAL INEQUALITY

## WHO SPEAKS?

Research has found that policy decisions in advanced democracies are skewed toward the preferences of affluent and highly educated citizens (Gilens 2012; Rosset and Stecker 2019; Schakel and Van Der Pas 2021; Elsässer and Schäfer 2023; Mathisen 2023). One possible explanation is unequal political participation. That is, these citizens are more effective at expressing their preferences and interests to politicians than the poor and the lower educated. Indeed, we see considerable differences in political participation patterns among the British public. This is true for both institutionalised (such as voting) and non-institutionalised (such as protesting) forms of political participation.

**FIGURE 3.1: INEQUALITIES IN TURNOUT AT UK GENERAL ELECTIONS HAVE WIDENED**

Percentage of people who voted at a UK general election (self-reported)

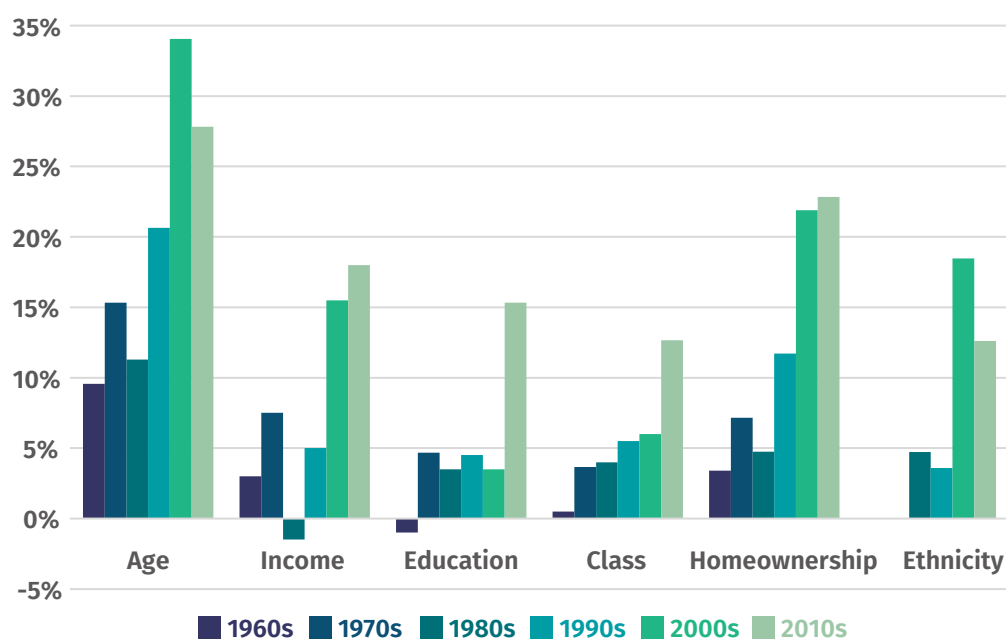


Source: Authors' analysis of data from the British Election Study

Inequalities in turnout at UK general elections have grown across virtually all dimensions over the past half century (figure 3.1). Nine in every 10 people in the top one-third of the income distribution voted in the two most recent general elections compared to only seven in the bottom one-third. Similarly, nine in every 10 university graduates voted in those elections compared to seven in 10 people who did not complete secondary education. The turnout gap has grown especially quickly since the turn of the century in terms of income, education, and homeownership (figure 3.2).

The turnout gap between the top and bottom third of the income distribution, between renters and homeowners, and between those who did and did not attend university at general elections in the 1960s was negligible. In the 2010s, the turnout gap had grown to 18 per cent between top and bottom income terciles, to 23 per cent between renters and homeowners, and to 15 per cent between those who did and did not attend university. As inequalities in turnout have grown, the strength of association between these factors and the probability of voting have strengthened considerably (Ansell and Gingrich 2022).

**FIGURE 3.2: THE TURNOUT GAP HAS GROWN**  
Average 'turnout gap' in elections held in that decade



Source: Authors' analysis of data from the British Election Study

Note: the age gap is calculated as the difference in turnout between 61+ year old and 18–24 year olds. The income gap is between top and bottom third of income distribution; education gap between university graduates and non-graduates; class gap between working class and middle-class occupations; homeownership between renters and owners; ethnicity between white British and minority ethnic.

It is noteworthy that inequalities in voter turnout are starker in the UK than in other comparable countries (Boix 2021). Institutional features of a political system, such as the voting system, can affect the scale of voting inequality (Guntermann et al 2020; Skorge 2023). But more striking is the presence of a similar pattern in voter turnout inequality across all advanced democracies (Dalton 2017). The young, the poor, and those with lower levels of education vote at lower rates than their counterparts virtually everywhere. This implies common features across countries



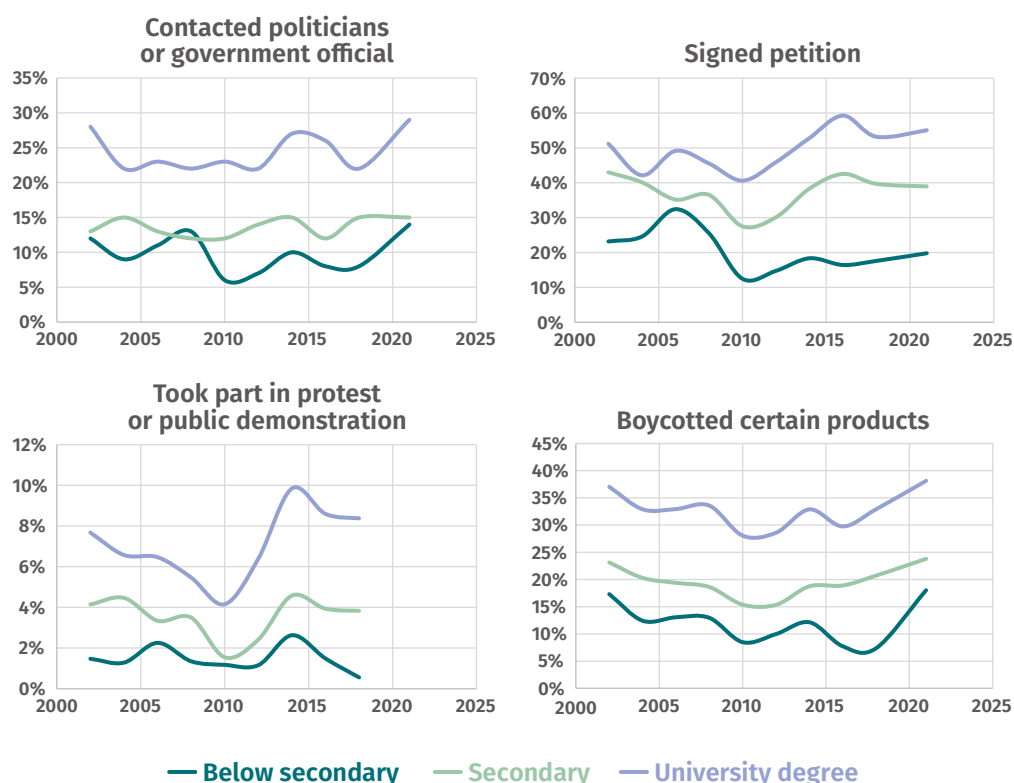
are driving these disparities, such as differences in time and resource between social groups (Beramendi and Anderson 2008; Smets and van Ham 2013; Dalton 2017) and perceptions of political efficacy (see below).

Voting is only but one form of political participation. There are many other ways, formal and informal, of expressing one's preferences in a liberal democracy. Formal routes include contacting a politician or signing a petition, whereas informal channels include consumer boycotts and public demonstrations. Here, too, we see a similar pattern of inequality. We find people on lower incomes and with lower educational qualifications are less likely to participate in each of these political behaviours (figure 3.3). Almost one in three university graduates has directly contacted a politician, while around one in 10 has joined a protest or lawful public demonstration. By comparison, only one in seven people without degrees have contacted a politician and fewer than one in 25 has joined a protest. This is in keeping with wider literature on inequalities in modes of political participation beyond voting (Marien et al 2010; Page et al 2013).

“ only one in seven people without degrees have contacted a politician ”

**FIGURE 3.3: PEOPLE WHO ATTENDED UNIVERSITY ARE MORE LIKELY TO EXPRESS THEIR POLITICAL PREFERENCES ACROSS A RANGE OF METHODS**

Percentage of people in the UK who participated in political activity, 2002–18



Source: Authors' analysis of data from the European Social Survey  
 Note: We find similar patterns of inequality across income terciles.<sup>4</sup>

To summarise, there are wide, and in some cases growing, inequalities in political participation. These inequalities mirror the patterns of unequal policy responsiveness and perceptions of political inequality documented in the previous chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Data available on request.

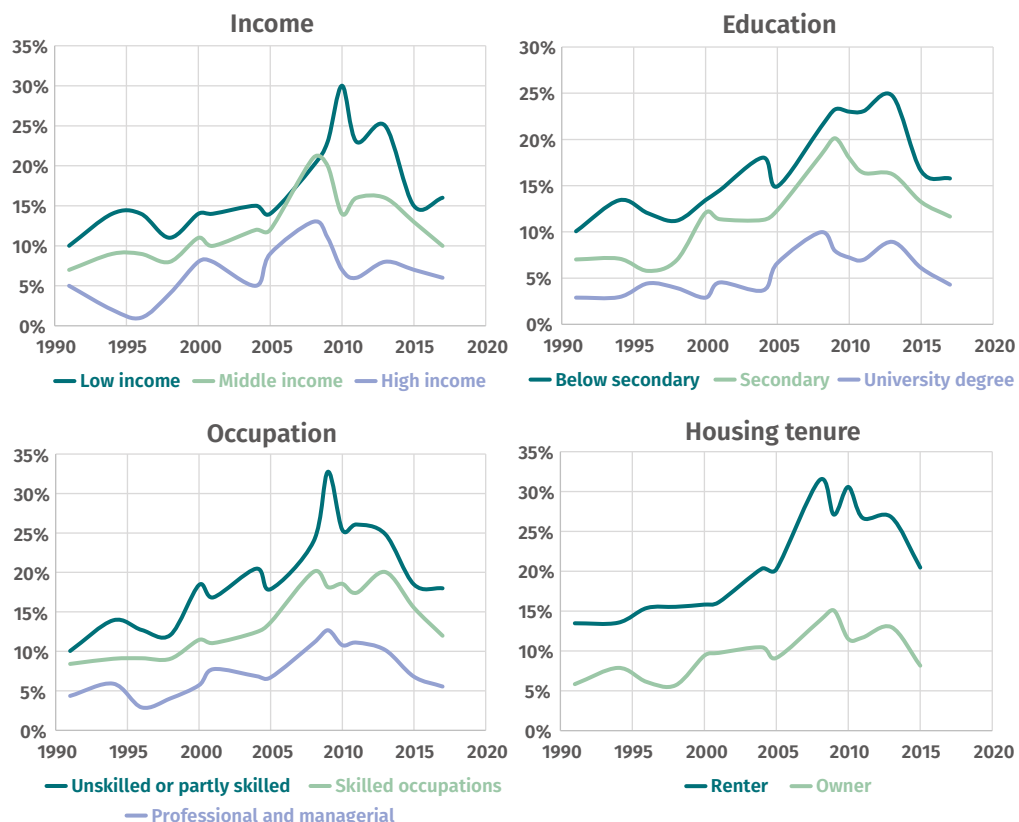
“Renters are more than twice as likely than homeowners to say it is not worth voting”

It may therefore seem logical to conclude that unequal participation is contributing to unequal responsiveness and legitimacy. But correlation is not causation. It is also plausible that if policy is not responding to one’s preferences or interests, distrust in the political system grows, and participation falls.

We find some evidence to support this interpretation. Figure 3.4 shows inequalities in the attitude that ‘it is not worth voting’ mirrors the pattern we see in voter turnout. People in the bottom third of the income distribution are around three times more likely to say it is not worth voting compared to those in the top third of earners, with a similar magnitude of difference seen between those with and without university degrees. Renters are also more than twice as likely than homeowners to say it is not worth voting. Our findings are in keeping with emerging literature highlighting the role of trust in government and perceptions of political efficacy in explaining inequalities in voter turnout (Mathisen and Peters, forthcoming).

**FIGURE 3.4: GROUPS LEAST LIKELY TO VOTE ARE ALSO MOST LIKELY TO HAVE LOW PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL EFFICACY**

Percentage of people in Great Britain who agree with the statement: “It’s not really worth voting”



Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the British Social Attitudes Survey

In truth, the relationship between participation and responsiveness goes both ways. Low levels of participation lead to skewed policy outcomes, which in turn further suppress political participation (Mathisen and Peters, forthcoming). This

may imply we are in a doom loop of declining participation and representation, one that we urgently need to break out of.

However, some studies are concluding that unequal participation is not the main reason for unequal policy responsiveness (Bartels 2008; Lupu and Warner 2022b). For that, we need to look downstream in the policymaking process. If the problem is not simply one of inequalities in who’s speaking, then we ought to consider who’s listening.

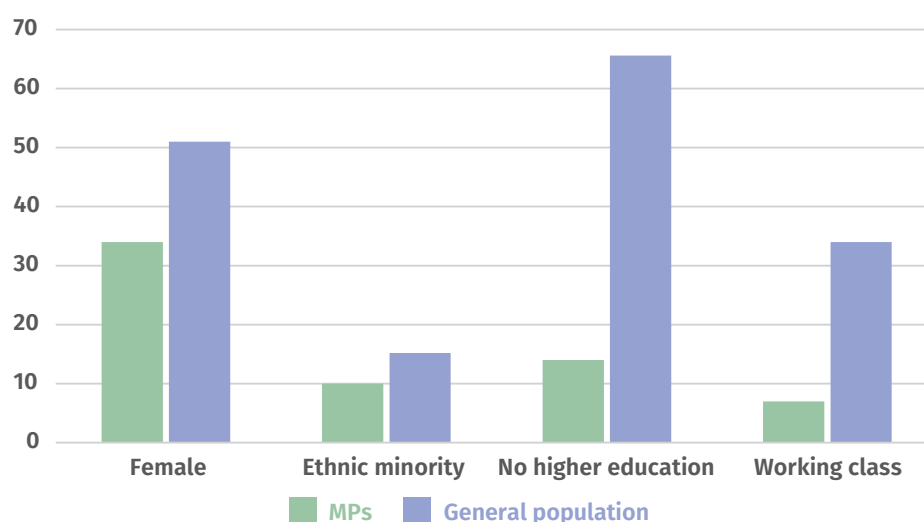
### WHO LISTENS?

Differential influence in democracy is a function not only of how citizens participate in the political process, but of how they are represented by political elites. It is increasingly apparent the representative process is a key node at which political inequality is generated (Carnes and Lupu 2023).

An individual’s experience of the world shapes their view of it. Researchers have found that politicians with working class backgrounds tend to focus more on issues relating to economic inequality compared to those from professional and business backgrounds (Carnes 2013; Hemingway 2022). Across Europe, cabinets with more working-class ministers have made more generous welfare spending decision over the past half century than cabinets with fewer working-class ministers, above and beyond the partisan hue of the government (Alexiadou 2022). The social backgrounds and experiences of politicians matters in understanding political inequality.

**FIGURE 3.5: MPS HAVE DIFFERENT SOCIAL BACKGROUNDS TO THOSE THEY REPRESENT**

*Percentage of 2019 intake MPs and the public who are women, minority ethnic, did not attend university and are working class*



Source: Authors’ analysis of Representative Audit of Britain survey 2019, Barton et al 2022, Butler et al 2021 and ONS 2021.

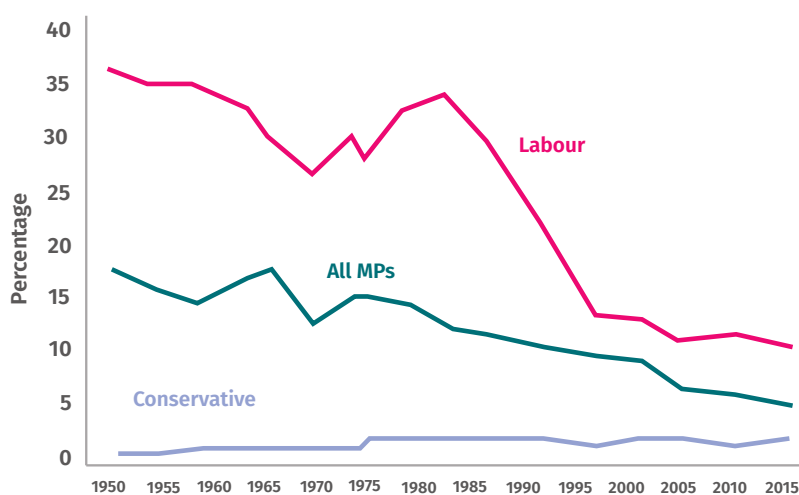
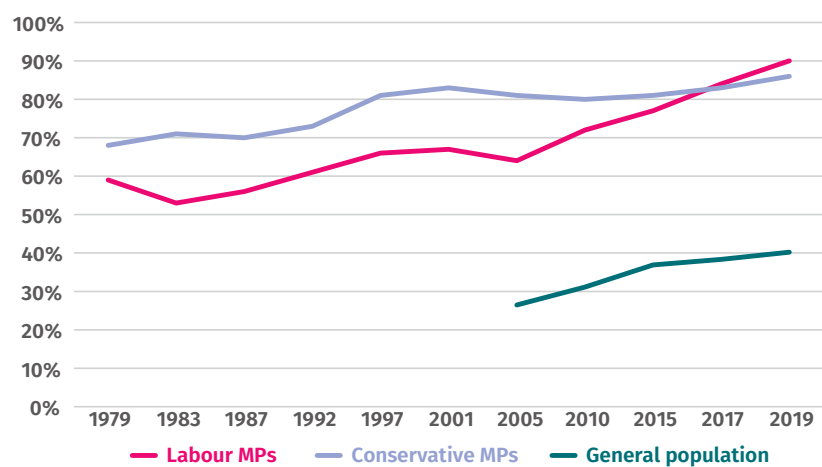
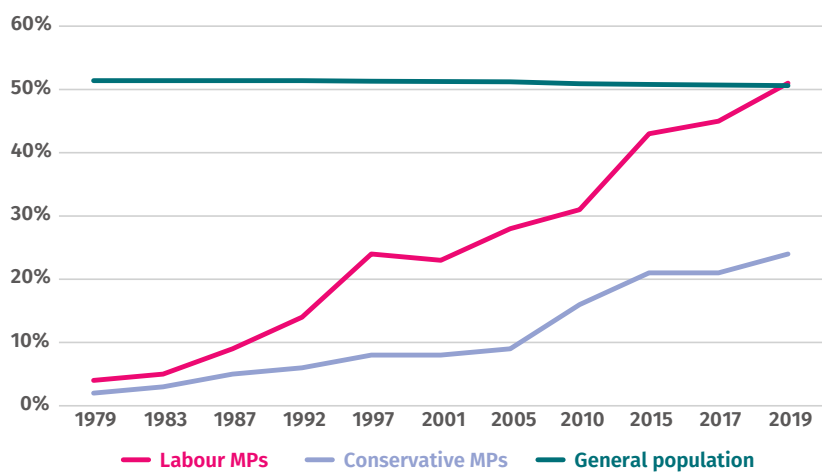
Note: Female and ethnic minority comparisons are to the entire UK population. Comparisons relating to educational attainment and social class are to the working-age adult population. Working class is measured here by current occupation or occupation prior to entering politics. Working-class occupations coded as manufacturing or manual labour jobs (such as factory workers), unskilled service sector jobs (such as care workers), and trade union employees, inkeeping with O’Grady 2019.

By and large, members of parliament are not representative of the country as a whole (figure 3.5). The greatest difference between voters and those who represent

them are in terms of education and social class. Only 14 per cent of MPs did not attend university compared to 66 per cent of working age adults, while only 7 per cent of MPs can be considered working class compared with 34 per cent of working age adults.

**FIGURE 3.6: IMPROVEMENTS IN NUMBERS OF WOMEN MPS CONTRAST WITH TRENDS IN THE EDUCATION AND CLASS BACKGROUNDS OF MPS**

*Percentage of MPs who are women, attended university and had a working-class job prior to entering parliament, 1950–2019*



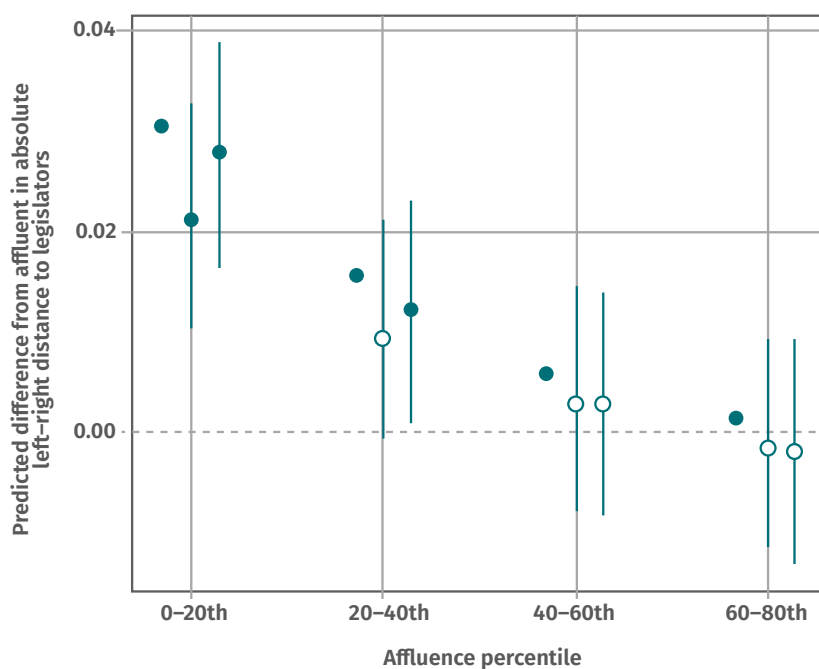
Source: Butler et al 2021, ONS 2021, Cagé 2020

Regarding sex and ethnicity, the representation gap has been narrowing (figure 3.6). In terms of attending university, the gap has been relatively consistent over the past two decades, albeit very wide. But when it comes to social class, the disparity between parliament and the public has grown. The decline in the number of MPs entering parliament from working-class jobs has fallen twice as quickly as the share of the public working in similar jobs (Quilter-Pinner et al 2022).

In addition to descriptive differences, there is also incongruence in the attitudes and positions legislators hold compared to their publics. An impressive study analysing every publicly available survey of elected representatives in the world found legislators' preferences are consistently more congruent with those of affluent citizens (Lupu and Warner 2022a) (figure 3.7).

**FIGURE 3.7: ECONOMIC ATTITUDES OF LEGISLATORS MOST CLOSELY MIRROR THE VIEWS OF AFFLUENT CITIZENS**

*Predicted difference in economic attitudes (left-right distance) between legislators and citizens*



Source: Lupu and Warner 2022a

Note: Dots indicate point estimates with lines for 95 per cent confidence intervals. The three dots per quintile represent three different statistical modelling approaches the authors took to test to robustness of their findings.

Structural differences in the backgrounds and attitudes of the *demos* and their representatives generates political inequality. Put simply, if those with decision-making power come from affluent backgrounds and hold attitudes that most closely mirror those of high income and highly educated citizens, it is not surprising that policy is most responsive to the preferences of those groups.

But a theory of democracy that sees policymaking as simply a function of voters and legislators is, of course, too simple. People also influence the policy process indirectly, especially through political parties and interest groups. Through these institutions, certain preferences and interests can be amplified over others.

## WHO AMPLIFIES?

The indirect influence people have on the policymaking process through parties and interest groups is another point at which political inequality can arise.<sup>5</sup> Although they exist across virtually all modern democracies, their contribution to political inequality is less well studied than patterns of participation and direct representation. To understand if they increase or decrease political inequality, we should ask two questions. First, who do these organisations amplify, and second, how loudly.

### *Who is amplified?*

We can look to membership and donations patterns to understand which groups have their voices amplified through political parties. The proportion of the UK electorate that is a member of a political party has fallen from around one in 12 citizens in the 1950s to around one in 50 citizens today (Patel and Quilter-Pinner 2022). This fraction is not particularly representative of the population at large (table 3.1). Members of the four largest parties are more likely to be male, white, middle-class, and older than the average Briton (Bale et al 2019).

**TABLE 3.1: PARTY MEMBERSHIPS ARE NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PUBLIC**

*Proportion of party members who are male, middle class and white compared to the general public*

	Male	Middle class	White
Conservative	71	86	97
Labour	53	77	96
Liberal Democrat	63	88	96
SNP	57	74	97
General public	49	57	82

Source: adapted from Bale et al 2019

Note: Middle class here is measured here by the NRS social grade classification which is based on occupation. It refers to people in managerial and professional jobs.

Even within a skewed membership, not all members are equal. Because parties in the UK are to a large extent dependent on private donations as their main source of funding, citizens who donate – above and beyond membership fees – can exercise greater influence over these institutions. There is considerable literature on the relationship between political donations and influence over public policy (Scholzman et al 20212; Bonica et al 2013; Cage 2020).

Total political donations in the UK have more than doubled since the turn of the century, driven mainly by a rise in private donations (Draca et al 2022). Moreover, the funding of parties in the UK is highly concentrated. The largest 10 per cent of donations accounted for over half of the total donations received by the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour parties (figure 3.8). The financing of parties is also becoming more concentrated. Those contributing more than £100,000 (‘super

“ **The largest 10 per cent of donations accounted for over half of the total donations received by the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour parties** ”

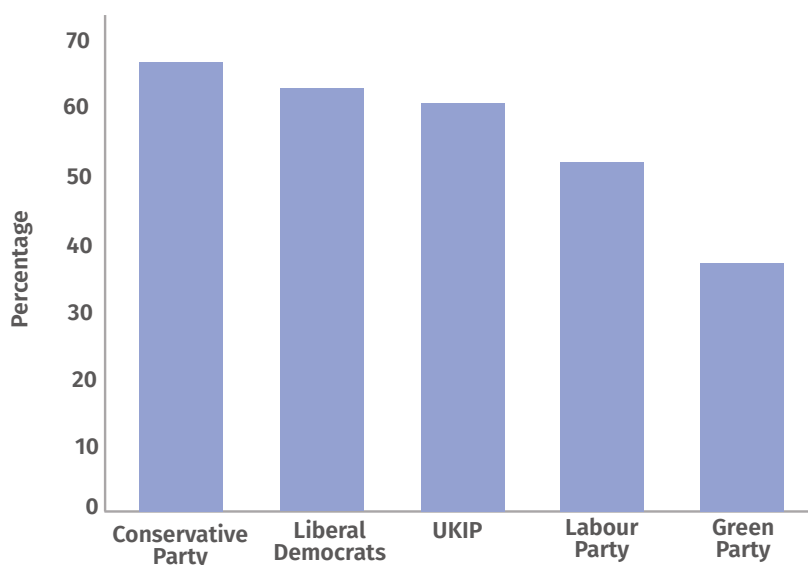
5 Interest group is a term encompassing a wide range of organisations who represent a particular interest or group of interests. They include charities, think tanks, religious institutions, trade bodies, business groups and unions, among others. They can represent economic interests (for example, business and trade organisations) or cultural interests (such as the National Trust). Although there is no up-to-date directory of interest groups in the UK, efforts to map interest groups in the UK have found the business and trade sector are the most common type of interest group in the UK (Dunleavy et al 2018).

donors’) have been a key driver of the rise (figure 3.9). The share of party donations coming from ‘super donors’ has grown by around 8 per cent over the past decade.

The narrowing of party memberships and concentration of their funders, alongside a more general withdrawal from civil society (Mair 2009), suggests parties may be amplifying a smaller group of voices than they once did. This is cause for concern; political parties are central institutions to modern democracy.

**FIGURE 3.8: FUNDING OF UK POLITICAL PARTIES IS HIGHLY CONCENTRATED**

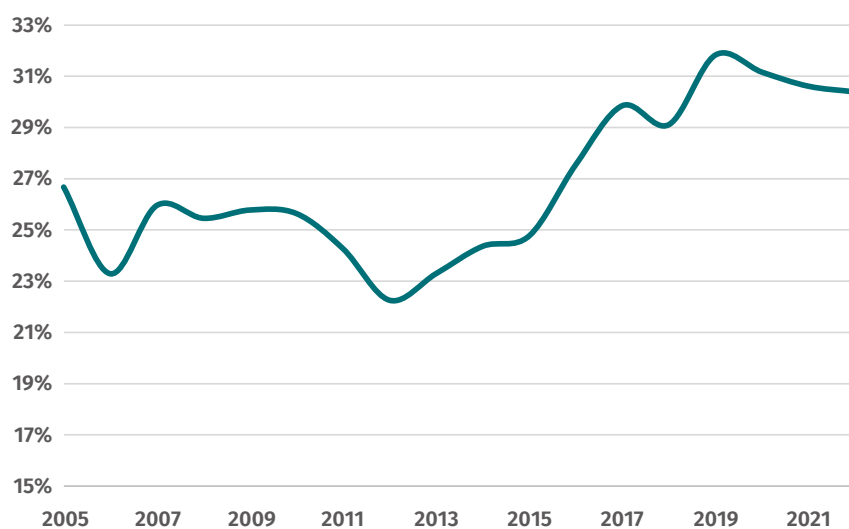
*The largest 10 per cent of donations as a share of total donations, by party*



Source: Cagé 2020

**FIGURE 3.9: WEALTHY INDIVIDUALS ARE ACCOUNTING FOR A GROWING SHARE OF PARTY FUNDING**

*Share of party donations from super donors (individuals giving over £100,000), five-year moving average*



Source: author’s analysis of Draca et al 2022

It is more difficult to analyse representation inequalities in interest groups for two reasons. First, a lack of data. There is no ‘directory’ of interest groups in the UK, although some have attempted to create one (Jordan et al 2012), nor is it not straightforward to ascertain membership and financial details of many groups. Second, the heterogeneity of interest groups (which include trade bodies, business groups, unions, charities, think tanks and religious institutions, among others) and the political interests they represent is incredibly wide ranging. On one hand, this pluralism is a strength. On the other, that business groups are the most common type of interest group in the UK is potential cause for concern from the perspective of political inequality (Dunleavy et al 2018). While trade unions appear to reduce political inequality (Becher and Stegmueller, 2021), business interest groups appear to have the opposite effect (Becher and Stegmueller, forthcoming).

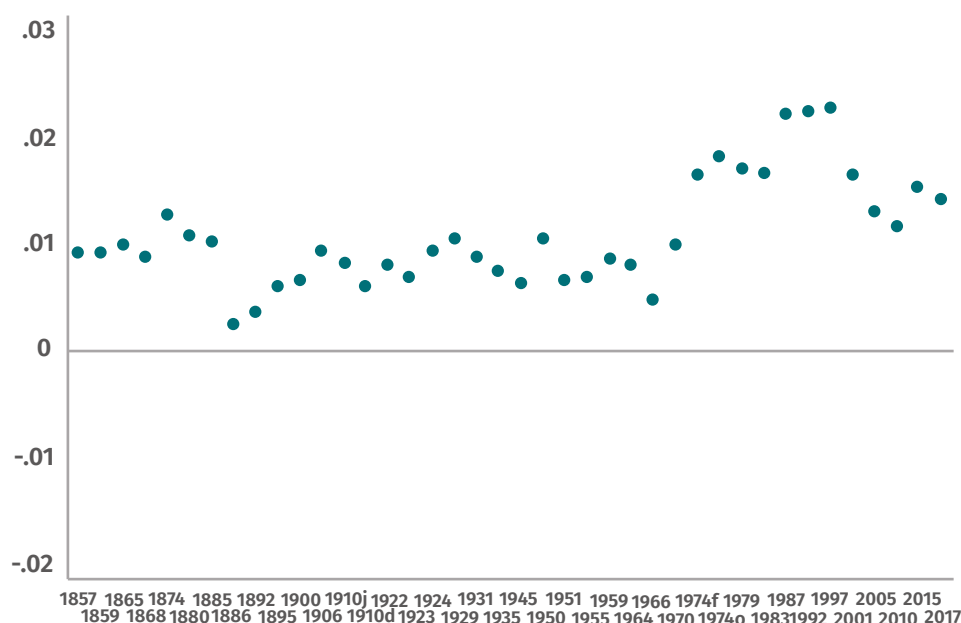
**How do they amplify?**

Being represented by a party or interest group is only as important as the power the organisation exerts on the policymaking process. There are two main routes by which these organisations have influence: in the selection of political candidates and in influencing the policy agenda.

All parties in the UK have a key gatekeeping role in selecting candidates to become MPs and prime minister, and therefore a powerful role in shaping the characteristics and attitudes of legislators (see previous chapter). Furthermore, albeit to varying degrees, members and affiliates have some influence in formation of party policy and manifesto commitments. As such, parties are critical institutions determining the scale of political inequality in a democracy.

**FIGURE 3.10: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAMPAIGN SPENDING AND WINNING AN ELECTION TO BECOME AN MP HAS STRENGTHENED**

*Regression coefficient of relationship between the candidates’ share of the constituency total spending and their vote share, 1857–2017*



Source: Cagé and Dewitte 2021



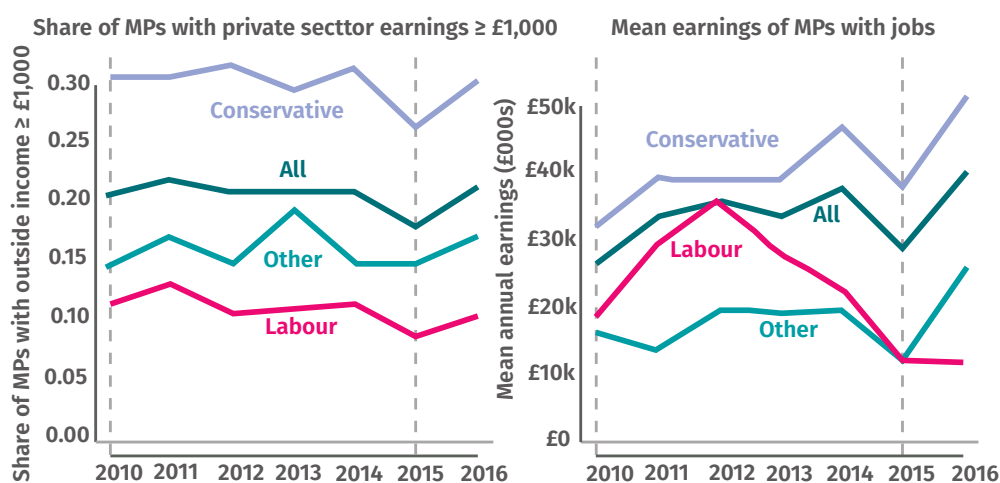
While interest groups do not have a direct role at the candidate selection stage, they can and do financially support certain candidates. This is increasingly important as the relationship between campaign spend and votes won has strengthened in recent times (figure 3.10), and the government is set to almost double the national election spending cap ahead of the next general election.

Interest groups also drive political inequality at the agenda setting and decision-making stages of the policy process through lobbying, directly or indirectly. One particularly common approach in the UK is to finance or employ politicians who may then advocate on behalf of a corporation's interest (for instance, the Owen Paterson scandal).<sup>6</sup> One study found around half of the top 50 publicly traded firms in the UK had an MP or peer as a director or major shareholder. This was the highest rate of all 47 countries study; the next highest OECD country was Italy with 16 per cent (Faccio 2006).

Another study estimates one in five MPs has private sector earnings over £1,000, while those with second jobs earn on average around £40,000 on top of their MP salary (figure 3.11). Research suggests this generates political inequality; for example MPs with second jobs are more likely to ask more written questions and participate in votes on issues related to their second jobs (Weschle 2022).

**FIGURE 3.11: ONE IN FIVE MPS HAS SUBSTANTIAL EARNINGS FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR**

*Private sector earnings of MPs, 2010–16*



Source: Weschle 2022

Overall, it is clear that parties and interest groups are likely to have some effect on political equality. With the array of interests represented it is difficult to make a single conclusion, even if we had adequate data and empirical approaches to assess influence. However, what is abundantly clear is that money is channelled into the political process through parties and interest groups. This generates political inequality: not all citizens have the means to influence the political process in this way. The question is less whether this leads to unequal policy responsiveness than how much unequal responsiveness can be explained through parties and interest groups.

<sup>6</sup> The Commissioner for Parliamentary Standards found that Owen Paterson, while a sitting MP, approached and met officials at the Food Standards Agency and ministers at the Department for International Development a number of times on behalf of two companies he was working for as a paid consultant.

## 4. CONCLUSION

People in this country are not politically equal. Put differently, the democratic principle of ‘one person, one vote’ does not hold true. Inequalities in power and influence are generated and reinforced across the policymaking process. This is at the heart of explaining the growth in economic inequality, the erosion of trust in the competence and fairness of democratic government and the rise of populism. Despite that, political inequality remains a blind spot for progressives.

To bring it into view, economic and political reform must march together in the new politics of security.

Progressives in the UK, US and elsewhere are seeking to overhaul economic paradigm of recent decades with a new model based on state direction, rewired internationalism and a sharper focus on distribution (Reeves 2023). They are right to identify the need to reinvent our political economy. Yet reinventing political economy also requires stepping outside the domain of economics.

A different kind of economics needs to come with a different kind of politics. If there is one thing that unites people in this country, it is their distaste for Westminster. People have generally had enough of paying for the mistakes of politicians. This stubborn sentiment will not be resolved by a new set of policymakers without new relations of power. If people in our democracy are to once again feel respected and in control, we need a political process where power and influence are more evenly distributed.

Realising that will require a clear-eyed programme of constitutional reform. Despite the significance of individual constitutional reforms, over the past three decades, from establishing devolved assemblies to leaving the European Union, they have as a whole coincided with a collapse in confidence in our collective democratic institutions. That is because they have largely ignored the power question.

The next wave of democratic reform must be guided by the principle of political equality. It ought to be the lodestar guiding any reform to our collective institutions. In the coming months, IPPR will set out a reform agenda that seeks to level up influence and re-establish respect in our democracy.

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