



# The Future of Democracy in the UK

**Public Attitudes and Policy Responses**  
Final Report of the Democracy in the UK  
after Brexit Project

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Alan Renwick, Ben Lauderdale,  
and Meg Russell

November 2023



DEMOCRACY IN THE  
UK AFTER BREXIT

The Constitution Unit

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# Executive Summary

Over the last three years, a Constitution Unit team has conducted detailed research into public attitudes to democracy in the UK. This has comprised two large-scale surveys of the UK population, conducted in summer 2021 and summer 2022, and the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, which met over six weekends in late 2021. Previous reports have set out the findings of each part of the project. This final report pulls these findings together, supplementing them with extensive new analysis. It also reflects on policy implications.

Chapter 1 examines perceptions of **how democracy is performing in the UK at present**. It finds high levels of dissatisfaction: most people want to see significant change. Both survey respondents and citizens' assembly members felt inadequately represented in the corridors of power, and that politics lacks honesty and integrity. Confidence in politicians was especially low. Such views were shared widely across the population, though somewhat less so among those who voted Leave in the 2016 Brexit referendum or Conservative in the 2019 general election.

Chapter 2 looks at **attitudes towards democracy in the round**. The overwhelming majority of people in the UK support democracy – though for most this is contingent on democracy delivering effective government. At the time of the research, support for 'strongman' leadership was lower than in some other recent studies. Research participants said that democracy should be representative of the public and responsive to their wishes. They wanted honest, serious political discourse, and said that people should have the information to make their own decisions. They valued freedoms of thought and speech. There is some variation between more 'populist' and more 'liberal' conceptions of democracy, but the population as a whole is not polarised on these matters.

Chapters 3–6 examine three central themes: standards in public life (Chapter 3); roles of core state institutions (Chapters 4 and 5); and the roles of the public (Chapter 6).

Chapter 3, on **standards in public life**, shows a strong desire for politicians to be honest, own up to mistakes, and act within the rules. Honesty is seen as requiring more than just not lying: people are very exercised by spin and dissembling too. Participants wanted independent regulators to be able to investigate allegations of wrongdoing. They thought that stronger action than at present is needed where wrongdoing is demonstrated. They rejected the view that holding politicians to account should be left solely to voters.

Chapter 4 focuses on **government and parliament**. People expect parliament to play a strong role in policy-making, as it represents everyone, rather than just those who voted for the governing party. Both survey respondents and citizens' assembly members thought it should play a stronger role than at present, having greater control over its agenda and timetable, and scrutinising all changes to the law. They wanted MPs to be more responsive to and representative of the public at large. There was significant support for reforming the system by which MPs are elected. Respondents were divided on whether they wanted an elected, appointed, or mixed second chamber, but there was wide support for reforming the current system of appointments to the House of Lords. The principle of a neutral, permanent civil service was widely endorsed.

Chapter 5 turns to the **law and courts**. There was wide support for the rule of law and the protection of human rights – particularly core democratic rights such as the freedom of speech. Most people wanted the courts to have a role in protecting human rights, including by intervening where new laws might violate such rights. This applied across a wide range of claimed rights. Support for the courts' role weakened somewhat when reference was made to the Human Rights Act, the European Convention on Human Rights, or the European Court of Human Rights. But most respondents still thought the courts should at least be able to send a law back to parliament for reconsideration. There was also wide agreement that the courts should adjudicate disputes over the powers of the executive.

Chapter 6 explores attitudes to **the role of the public**. Though there were strong expectations around responsiveness to public opinion, most survey respondents did not want to take part in politics more than they already did. Assembly members proposed steps to enable public participation, including better education, information provision, and media coverage. There was strong support for freedom of speech; views on freedoms of association and protest were somewhat more muted or mixed. Assembly members



wanted a greater role for petitions. Views on referendums were more ambivalent. Members of the citizens' assembly strongly endorsed greater use of such assemblies, though only to inform debate and advise elected representatives; survey respondents backed the same view more mutedly.

Chapter 7 considers **whether people care about political processes**, rather than just outcomes. Survey respondents said that the health of democracy in the UK mattered to them as much as issues such as housing, crime, and immigration, though less than the cost of living or the NHS.

Chapter 8 summarises the findings, places them in context, and reflects on **implications for policy-makers**. It focuses on three key themes: the need to uphold ethical standards in public life; the value of checks and balances; and ways of enabling effective public participation.

- Fostering greater honesty in political discourse requires not just politicians and campaigners, but also those in the media, to reflect on their responsibilities. Regulatory processes could also be strengthened, and several proposals for this are already on the table.
- Likewise, proposals exist to give MPs greater control over their agenda, improve legislative scrutiny, and reform appointments to the Lords. Any moves to weaken the BBC's impartiality, the neutrality of the civil service, or the ability of the courts to check abuses would not find public favour.
- Enabling effective and widespread public participation is hard. Areas for further consideration include improved education, better media coverage, and greater use of deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies.



# Introduction

Public attitudes to our democratic system matter. Democracy works best when many people are actively involved; but people are less likely to take part if they feel the system does not represent them or serve their needs. Effective policy-making often requires careful trade-offs and compromises among competing considerations; but that is harder if the individuals and institutions at the heart of politics are not trusted to act in the public interest.

Over the last three years, a team at the Constitution Unit, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), has therefore conducted detailed research into the state of public attitudes towards the democratic system in the UK. The project – called *Democracy in the UK after Brexit* – has examined attitudes to the system as a whole and to its various components parts. It has also explored what roles people think should be played by different elements of the system – including parliament, government, courts, and the public – and how these should be configured. We have asked about perceptions of how these components currently work, how they should work, and how they might be reformed. For each of these elements, the project has sought to uncover attitudes of the public at large and how these views vary across different parts of the population. We have also sought to compare what people say in response to survey questions with what they say once they have had a chance to learn and think about the issues and discuss them in some depth. The project thus provides an exceptionally rich and varied set of insights into public perceptions on these vital matters.

The Constitution Unit team has previously published three reports presenting the findings from different aspects of the research: two on large-scale surveys of public opinion, conducted by YouGov in the summers of 2021 and 2022; and the report of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, which met over three months in late 2021 (Renwick et al. 2022; Renwick et al. 2023; Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK 2022). The present report is the final one from the project. It adds to the existing publications in two main ways.

First, it pulls together the key findings from all elements of the project. In part, that involves repetition of material already published in disparate places: some of the charts shown in the following pages are reproduced from the earlier reports. But drawing these elements together allows us to identify many patterns in public attitudes more clearly than before. And significant amounts of new material are added, including responses to survey questions for which we previously lacked space, and additional analysis of the deliberations within the citizens' assembly.

Second, while the previous reports have set out survey findings and assembly conclusions with little or no commentary from us, this report reflects on what we should take away from the evidence. What do the findings, when put together, really mean? How should information about public attitudes to the democratic system influence debates about possible reforms to that system? What does that information suggest about the desirability of different reform options? We offer some reflections on these points chapter by chapter, and then develop them more fully in the concluding chapter.

## Report structure

The report begins in Chapter 1 by examining general attitudes towards the health of democracy in the UK today. It sets out what people say when they are asked about their feelings towards the system as a whole and, in particular, what they think about politicians. It also looks at variation in these attitudes across the population and considers what we can say about the underlying drivers of such views. Chapter 2 then steps back to examine how people think democracy as a whole *should* work. It begins with the question of whether people value democracy at all. Then it considers what values people think democracy should uphold – and how, therefore, they think democracy in the UK could be improved.

The subsequent four chapters investigate attitudes towards particular parts of the democratic system. The evidence from the early chapters suggests that many people are especially exercised by what they perceive as low standards of honesty and integrity among politicians, and so Chapter 3 focuses on standards in public life. It looks at what standards people expect and how they think these standards should be upheld. Chapter 4 then turns to the core institutions of the system of representative democracy: government and parliament. It examines how people think power should be distributed between these, what roles they think



MPs should perform, how they think the House of Commons should be composed and its members elected, and what views they have on the role and composition of the House of Lords. It also briefly addresses attitudes to the civil service. Chapter 5 turns to the law and the courts: what people think of the rule of law and, particularly, of human rights, and what role they think the courts should play. Chapter 6 focuses on the public. It highlights two features of public attitudes that may be in tension: people want the system to be responsive to their needs and wishes; but most people don't particularly want to have to take part actively themselves. The chapter then examines public views on how wider engagement in politics might be enabled. It explores attitudes to the media, to core democratic liberties, and to mechanisms for participation, such as petitions, referendums, and citizens' assemblies.

Chapter 7 steps back from the detail again to consider the broad question of whether people actually care about political processes. It is often said that the public care about outcomes, not how those outcomes are produced. The chapter considers the evidence on whether that is really true.

Chapter 8 draws out conclusions. It summarises the project's findings, asks what weight such evidence should carry in debates about democratic reform, and, finally, sets out what we believe the key implications to be.

The evidence in the report confirms that many people in the UK feel deeply disillusioned with the state of politics today. Trust in politics and politicians has long been low, but it has been further battered by the divisive debates and weaknesses of leadership seen in recent years. People do care greatly about how politics is conducted. While they may not have much interest in the details of particular institutions, they are affronted by what they see as low moral standards in politics. They think that those in public life are too often dishonest, disrespectful of the wider public, and insufficiently motivated by pursuit of the public good. In contrast to some previous research findings, the evidence here indicates little support for 'strongman' leaders who can dispense with the niceties of law or procedure. Rather, most people have a clear instinct that power should not be unduly concentrated in the hands of a few: that, they fear, would lead to corruption, and prevent the diverse voices of all parts of society from being heard. Thus, most people want parliament, the courts, regulators, and the public all to play strong roles – and often stronger roles than they hold at present.

As discussed in Chapter 8, we do not necessarily think the public are always right when it comes to evaluating options for democratic reform. Indeed, as the report shows, the public themselves do not think the public are always right either. But the evidence does carry clear lessons for democratic reformers, and we think it important that these are fully heard.

## Research design and political context

As already noted, the project examined public attitudes to democracy in the UK through two surveys and a citizens' assembly. Surveys are standard tools of social research and provide reliable snapshots into the state of public opinion across the UK. Citizens' assemblies may be less familiar, and they elicit the views of far fewer people; but they allow us to burrow much deeper into people's thinking and to tap people's views once they have had a chance to consider the matters in hand and learn about different arguments and options.

The surveys were conducted online by YouGov. The first, with a sample of over 6000 respondents, representative of the UK voting-age public, was conducted online in July 2021. The second, with a sample of over 4000 respondents – all of whom had completed the first survey – was conducted online in August and the first days of September 2022. These two surveys allowed us to track changing views among the same set of people over time on a number of the most key questions.

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK had 67 members who were, again, representative of the UK voting-age population: the appendix sets out in detail what this meant in practice. The assembly met over six weekends between September and December 2021 – meetings that took place online because of ongoing Covid constraints. Members examined a range of aspects of the UK's democratic system, discussing these among themselves, hearing from experts, and considering options in depth. As set out in the following chapters, they developed a set of principles by which they thought the democratic system should operate, as well as specific resolutions and recommendations on particular parts of that system.



Research on public opinion never takes place in a vacuum. Interpreting the results set out over the following pages requires awareness of the context in which the surveys and the assembly took place. Three aspects of the broad context deserve note: the Conservatives had been in power at Westminster for more than a decade; the battles over Brexit were still fresh in many minds; and the UK was emerging from the Covid pandemic.

The first of these naturally coloured how survey respondents and assembly members viewed the political system. As we will see, Conservative voters tended to be more positive about the status quo than were others, presumably at least in part because their preferred leaders were in office. Whether there are also underlying differences between Conservative and Labour supporters independent of which party is in power will be possible to know only by repeating the surveys at future times with different governments in office.

Understanding democratic attitudes post-Brexit was one of the central purposes of the research – hence the project's title. In particular, the appropriate roles of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches had all been hotly debated during the preceding years, as had the role of the public directly voting in a referendum. The research therefore focused particularly on some of the institutional questions that had been raised during these debates: what the balance of power should be between government and parliament; how far the courts should play a role in maintaining that balance; and what role referendums should have and how they should be conducted. The following pages also examine how far people's views on Brexit map on to different perspectives regarding the democratic system.

The third contextual feature – Covid – was less visible in the research, but had a significant influence on how government and parliament operated during the preceding period.

Beyond these aspects of the broad context, more specific events that occurred before and during the research should also be noted. Boris Johnson's style of leadership had been controversial since his entry into Downing Street in July 2019. Some saw him as uniquely able to cut through establishment blocking tactics to deliver on public priorities. Others thought that, by ejecting rebel MPs and seeking to prorogue parliament, he had shown brazen disregard for vital checks and balances. By the time our data gathering began in summer 2021, concerns that the corridors of power were a law unto themselves had been fed repeatedly, not least by the seemingly lockdown-breaking activities of Dominic Cummings and Matt Hancock – the latter of which were revealed just a month before our first survey.

More importantly still, the 'Partygate' scandal and other affairs that contributed to Boris Johnson's eventual downfall as Prime Minister took place between the first and second surveys. A crucial early link in that chain of events – the attempt to block the suspension of Conservative MP Owen Paterson – took place in late October and early November 2021, between the third and fourth weekends of the citizens' assembly. The Partygate allegations began to emerge a month later, between the assembly's fifth and final weekends. Boris Johnson announced his resignation on 7 July 2022 and left office on 6 September 2022. The second survey was thus fielded during the final two weeks of his premiership.



# Chapter 1. Views on How UK Democracy is Performing

A crucial starting question concerns how people view the performance of democracy in the UK today. This chapter first examines attitudes to the working of UK democracy as a whole, drawing on two survey questions and evidence from the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK. The second section focuses particularly on attitudes to politicians and other key actors within the democratic system. Most people view politics primarily through actors and events, rather than through formal procedures or institutions. And, as this report shows, their concerns about the state of democracy focus primarily on perceived behaviours and ethical standards among those in public life. So understanding how people think about key actors is crucial. The two final sections of the chapter then examine how perceptions of the system's current working vary across the population and the underlying drivers of these views.

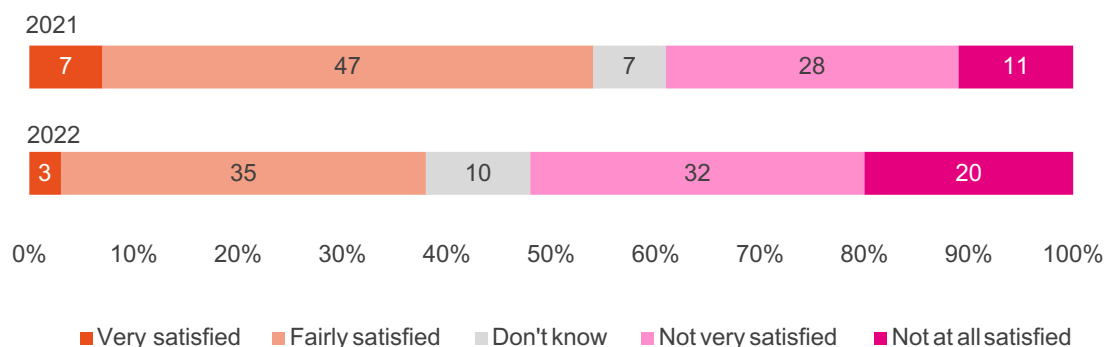
The chapter identifies high levels of dissatisfaction with the health of the UK's democratic system. Most people see politics as distant and dominated by a self-serving elite who lack integrity. These concerns are shared widely across society.

## Perceptions of the UK's democratic system

The surveys conducted for this project included two questions about views on how the UK's democratic system as a whole was working. One of these, included in both surveys, asked respondents how satisfied they were with the way democracy works in the United Kingdom. The findings from the first survey, in summer 2021, were perhaps reassuring: though few people (only 7% of respondents) said they were 'very satisfied', an absolute majority (54%) described themselves as either 'very satisfied' or 'fairly satisfied'. Views turned markedly more negative between the two surveys, however. By the second, in summer 2022, those saying they were very or fairly satisfied had dropped to 38%, while those saying they were 'not very satisfied' or 'not at all satisfied' were now in the majority, at 52% (see Figure 1.1). We cannot be certain, but it appears most likely that this change was caused primarily by 'Partygate', the other scandals that broke over the course of the year between the surveys, and the events that followed this. Perceived failings in politicians' behaviour thus had a deep effect on attitudes to the functioning of the system as a whole.

### Figure 1.1. Satisfaction with democracy in the UK

Question: On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the United Kingdom?



*Note: Here and in other figures reporting results from both surveys, results reported for survey 1 include only those respondents who also completed survey 2. Results may therefore sometimes differ slightly from those set out in our first report (Renwick et al. 2022).*

*Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021, and survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

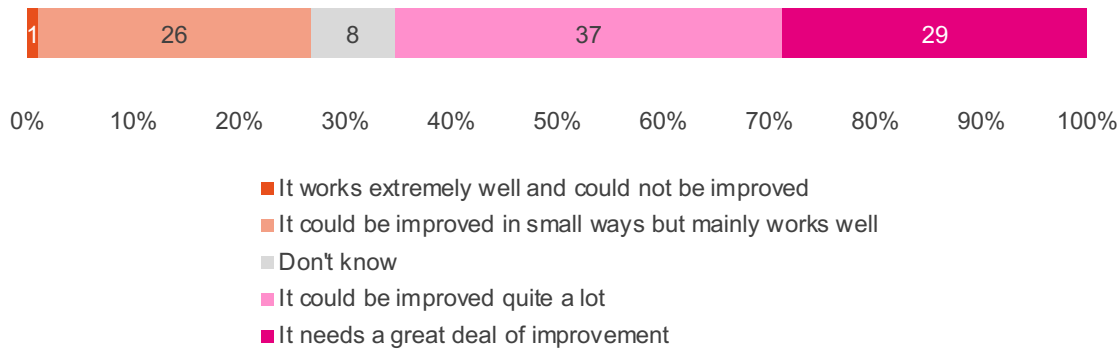




The second general question, included only in the 2022 survey, asked how far (if at all) respondents thought the system of governing the UK could be improved. As shown in Figure 1.2, the responses to this question give a still more negative overall picture than did those to the previous one. Just 1% of respondents thought the system could not be improved, and a quarter more thought 'it could be improved in small ways but mainly works well'. Almost two thirds said they thought the system needed 'a lot' or 'a great deal' of improvement.

### Figure 1.2. Views on scope for improving the UK's system of governing

Question: Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing the UK?



Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

We can gain a richer understanding of these sentiments by examining the qualitative findings from the citizens' assembly. At the final weekend, members were asked to consider their general feelings about how democracy was working in the UK. They were given a list of adjectives, balanced between positive and negative options, and asked to choose those that best expressed how they felt about the workings of 'democracy in the UK today' (with the option also to add their own adjectives if they wished). The word cloud in Figure 1.3 shows the frequency with which words were chosen. Though there were some positive words, negative sentiments predominated.

### Figure 1.3. Feelings about 'democracy in the UK today'



Note: The size of the words indicates the frequency with which these were chosen by members of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK to sum up their feelings about how the UK's democracy was working.

Source: Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, Weekend 6, 11–12 December 2021.



Assembly members then worked in groups to develop statements elaborating on the most frequently chosen words. Each group was assigned one of the words they had picked out in their earlier discussions and asked to craft a statement saying why they felt that way and what a 'good' democracy in the UK would look like. Groups could develop further statements on other words if they wished. The 11 groups produced 20 statements in all.

Two dominant concerns emerge from these statements: first, that the public are inadequately represented in the corridors of power; and, second, that there is a lack of honesty and integrity in politics. Statements falling into the first category included:

We feel **disappointed** with how democracy is working in the UK today because there are not enough 'ordinary people' in parliament and government.

We feel **frustrated** about how democracy is working in the UK today because there is a disconnect between people and the system. We do not feel listened to and there is no clear way to have influence. We need to feel that change can happen and that different voices are taken into account.

We feel **let down** about how democracy is working in the UK today because we feel disconnected, not listened to and not represented.

We feel **concerned** about how democracy is working in the UK because there is not enough diversity in the elected representatives in our current government.

We feel **disappointed** about how democracy is working in the UK today because the agenda is too often party political, rather than being about working for us.

We feel **dissatisfied** with how democracy is working in the UK today because the current system does not incentivise politicians to govern for all.

We feel **disappointed** in how democracy is working in the UK right now because, no matter which party is in power, a big part of the population is likely to be dissatisfied due to the nature of the current voting system.

We feel **angry** about how democracy is working in the UK today because the electoral system is not representative. Within government there is a culture of nepotism and cronyism and an overall lack of respect for the public's right to challenge policy decisions.

Those in the second category included:

We feel **dissatisfied** with how democracy is working in the UK today because there is a lack of honesty and integrity in politics, combined with a lack of clear and unbiased information from both the government and the media.

We feel **concerned** about how democracy is working in the UK today because, while most MPs are honest and trying their best, they are overshadowed by the sleaze, scandal and incompetence of a few politicians which give government and parliament a bad name. This breeds unfairness and allows systems of regulation to be overridden.

We feel **concerned** about how democracy is working in the UK today because of disappointing behaviour from politicians (especially those holding positions of power), an embarrassing political culture of dishonesty and lack of serious consequences for bad behaviours.

We feel **let down** by how democracy is working in the UK today because our politicians often show a lack of honesty, openness and integrity. We expect more from them because of their position of power and authority, but currently it feels like *'do as I say, rather than do as I do'*.

We feel **distrustful** of how democracy is working in the UK today because of the blatant hypocrisy of the *'one rule for them and one rule for us'* situation that appears to be the norm in current UK politics.

Three statements expressed more general concerns:

We feel **frustrated** by a sense of British complacency that just accepts the idea that our system of democracy is the best and does not need to evolve.

We feel **concerned** about how democracy is working in the UK today because we feel it is spiralling downwards and getting worse. It doesn't feel like there is much hope in sight, as there is no real accountability or redress.



We feel **insecure** about the way democracy the UK is working at the moment and question the strength of our democratic system to withstand attempts to rewrite fundamental principles of the British constitution without consultation with the people.

Even the positive statements were tinged with worries. Three of the four referred to the existence of defences against failure:

We feel **hopeful** about how democracy is working in the UK because there are laws that protect our rights to vote and be represented.

We feel **hopeful** about how democracy is working in the UK because there'll be another General Election soon.

We feel **hopeful** about how democracy is working in the UK today because it is a democracy and we do have a vote. Because of this governments do change and come to an end.

Only one suggested a more positive overall view:

We feel **optimistic** about how democracy is working in the UK today because our democratic system is better than in many other countries. Here we can all participate in, and talk freely about, our democracy without fear of facing consequences. Also, everyone can influence change via voting, standing for parliament, joining a political party of their choice, initiating petitions etc.

These statements from the members of the citizens' assembly suggest high levels of dissatisfaction. Indeed, of the two survey questions shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, the assembly's statements align more closely with the more negative findings in the latter.

To explore these patterns further, we analysed the transcripts from a sample of the discussions that took place within the citizens' assembly (see appendix for details). During these discussions, which again took place in small groups, members shared their own perceptions and reacted to those of others; they often also reflected on the expert evidence that they heard. Whereas the agreed statements set out above were produced through lengthy deliberation among the members, the transcripts contain the raw comments of individual members in themselves. They are inevitably therefore less polished, and more tentative and partial. They should be treated with caution for that reason, but nevertheless give extra insight into how assembly members were thinking.

As set out in the appendix, the coded transcripts covered about one seventh of all the small-group discussions that took place among assembly members over the course of the meetings. Within these, we identified 1440 comments by members that were negative about how the UK's political system operates, compared with just 172 comments that were positive – a ratio of more than 8 to 1. The most frequently expressed concerns were that the system did not enable people to be informed about politics, that not everyone had equal political voice, that the system did not foster public participation or influence, and that politicians did not face consequences for personal impropriety. Examples included:

The constitution isn't taught in this country, and [...] people don't know what their rights actually are, so they don't know when they're being taken away.

It's a very dishonest system. The more money somebody has, the more influence they have. [...] It seems now, to get anywhere, to get anything voted through, or to get into these seats of power, you've got to buy your way in.

I found it interesting when [the evidence presented] looked at how many people actually got involved in their political parties, you know, it was very low. I was a bit shocked there. And I think that's sad, I think it's very sad to be honest. And that's not down to the individual. That's down to the parties I think really – not making it easy for people to help and take part, whichever party it is.

[How issues are discussed] is often made deliberately more complex – to keep you out of the debate and out of the discussion.

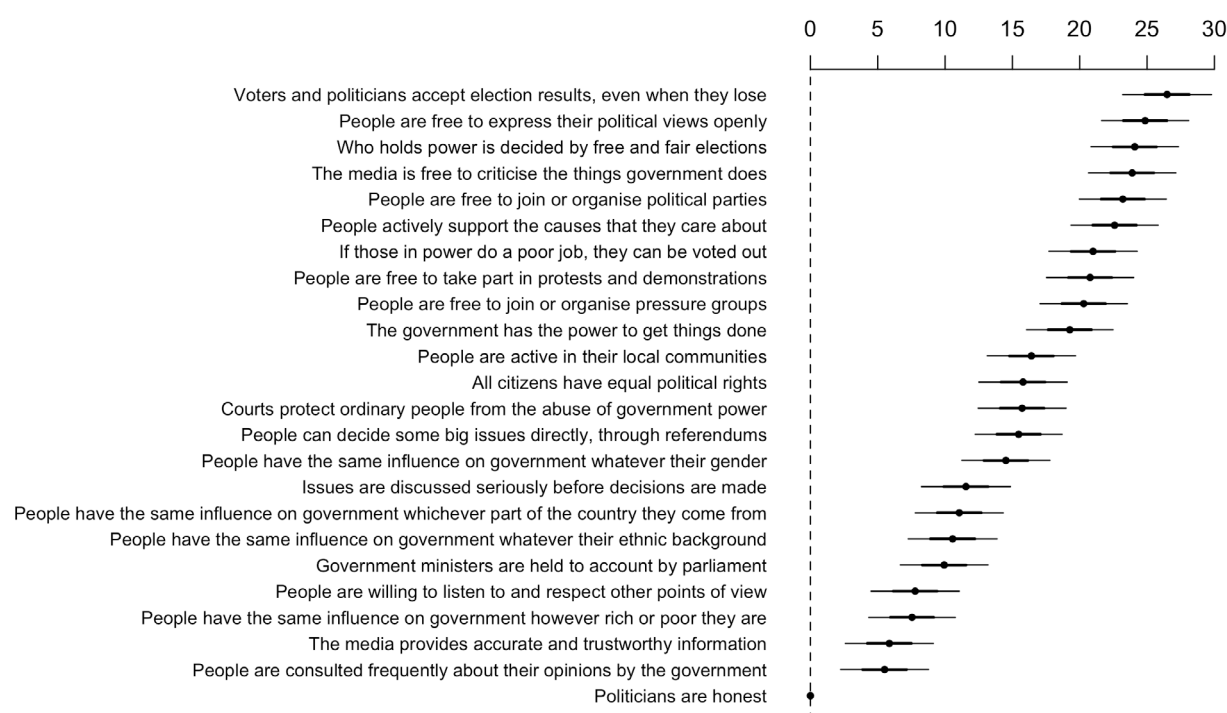
[Politicians] are learning to push the boundaries of good behaviour as far as they can, because there is no comeback.



These patterns from the citizens' assembly are corroborated by a further question fielded in survey 1, which asked respondents what elements of democracy the UK was doing better or worse at. As in the citizens' assembly, the elements that respondents thought were working relatively well were the basics of any democratic system: democratic election results are accepted and determine who holds power; there is freedom of expression for people and for the media; people can take part in political parties and other political activities (see Figure 1.4). By contrast, the items that scored lowest were about politicians' honesty, the trustworthiness of information in the media, and the responsiveness of the system to people's opinions, regardless of how rich or poor they are. These items map precisely on to those highlighted by the members of the citizens' assembly.

### Figure 1.4. Where UK democracy is doing better or worse

Question: People sometimes say the following things are both important to have in a democracy. Which, if either, of these two would you say the UK does better at the moment?



*Note: Each respondent saw two randomly selected options from the list shown. The chart shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these, with the least favoured option set at 0. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, if faced with a choice between 'Voters and politicians accept election results, even when they lose' (26) and 'Politicians are honest' (0), the number choosing the former would be 26 percentage points higher than the number choosing the latter.*

Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

## Perceptions of politicians

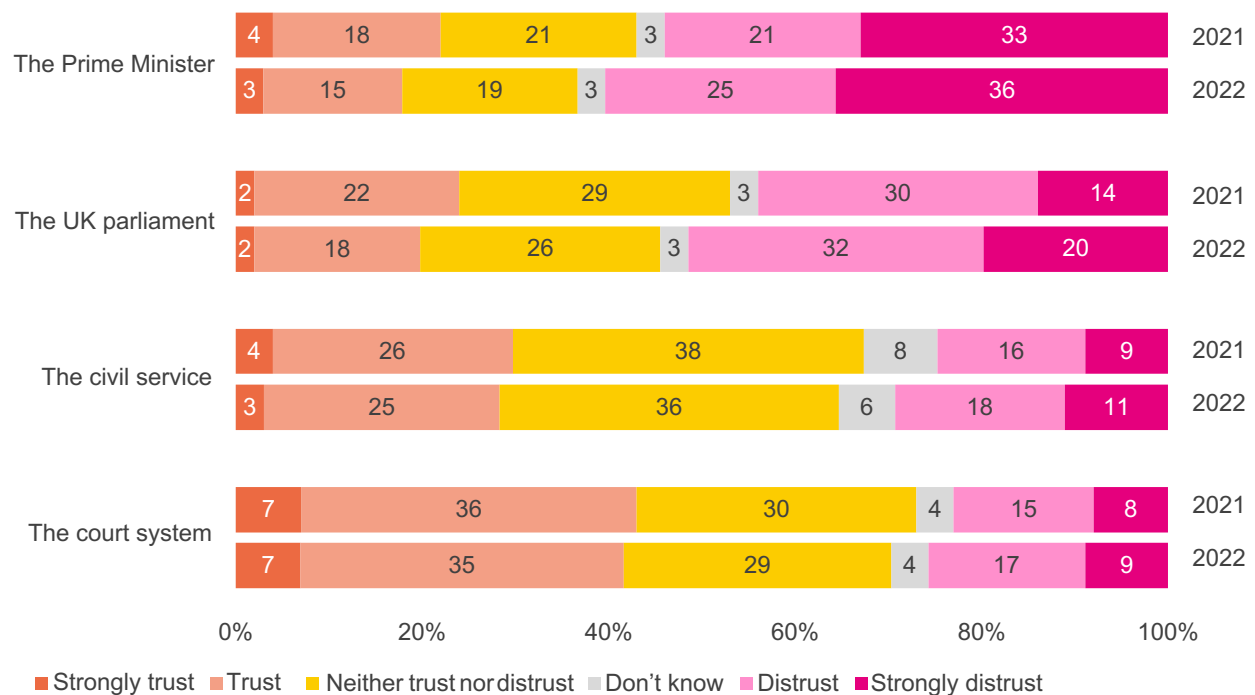
The preceding section looked at perceptions of how the democratic system as a whole is working. The following chapters will examine perceptions of various parts of the system. But there are particularly striking – and strongly felt – attitudes to politicians, and it is useful to highlight these here.

Both surveys asked about trust in politicians and other political actors. As Figure 1.5 shows, trust in the UK Prime Minister – who was Boris Johnson at the time of both surveys – was very low, and it fell over the year between the surveys. Trust was also low – though not as low – in the UK parliament. It was somewhat higher in the UK civil service and markedly higher in the court system.



### Figure 1.5. Trust in political actors in the UK

Question: To what extent do you trust or distrust each of the following to act in the best interests of people in the UK?

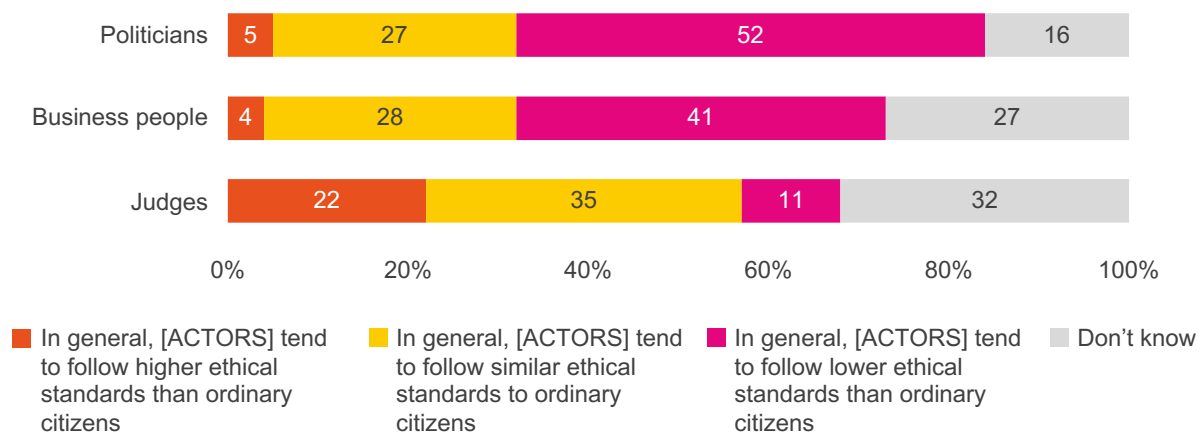


Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021, and survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

The second survey also revealed, specifically, that most people have a very low opinion of politicians' ethical standards (see Figure 1.6) – with the majority judging them to be lower than those for ordinary citizens. The ethics of businesspeople were also judged harshly, though slightly less so, while those of judges were not.

### Figure 1.6. Perceptions of ethical standards

Question: Which comes closest to your view?



Note: For each respondent, '[ACTORS]' was replaced by either 'politicians', 'business people', or 'judges'.

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.





This concern about politicians' ethical standards is clearly reflected in the statements from citizens' assembly members quoted above. Analysis of the sampled assembly transcripts again allows individual assembly members' thinking to be explored further. We identified 388 expressions of negative views about politicians, compared with just 21 expressions of positive views: a ratio of more than 18:1. Many assembly members saw politicians as belonging to an out-of-touch, privileged, and self-serving elite. Comments included:

I've got nothing but mistrust and disbelief for politicians and the so-called elite, which is a loose term, but let's just say it. It's the privileged and the wealthy.

I'd like to know how MPs get paid by companies to be on their boards when they're meant to be representing the people not their own profits.

I do believe that power leads to corruption. And while we have got MPs feathering their own nests, not just representing the public they're appointed to represent, then the system's never going to work.

Well our current government basically has been sourced from Eton, and they're all millionaires. Or 22 members of the cabinet are millionaires, and have been to Eton and Harrow, and all those schools. They don't represent the people. A lot of them don't know the price of a loaf of bread.

Poor moral standards, and a lack of accountability for such failings were also frequently mentioned:

If you see our so-called leaders behaving in a shoddy way, then that almost enables everyone else to do the same. They should lead by example of good behaviour. I mean, telling lies is one of the big no-nos but it seems to become more acceptable in politics now.

They get away with it – there's no reprimand. Like in other professions, if you do something wrong or like don't adhere to some standards, there is always consequences. But I feel like there is no consequences [for politicians].

A further recurring theme was that politicians break their promises:

It just seems absurd to me – they can promise us all this stuff, we vote for them, and nothing happens, or they don't do it.

If I hire a plumber to fix my toilet, he'll give me a quote, I'll say yes, he fixes it, I pay him. It's all good. When I vote for a politician, they say they're going to do this, this, this, this. I vote for them because I like what they say and then they get in and it's like, well what happened to that? And I know they have a difficult job to enforce all these new laws and stuff, new things, government stuff. But come on now, you know, don't – if that was a plumber I'd be asking for my money back. You didn't fix my toilet, it's still overflowing, you know, kind of scenario.

## Patterns across the population

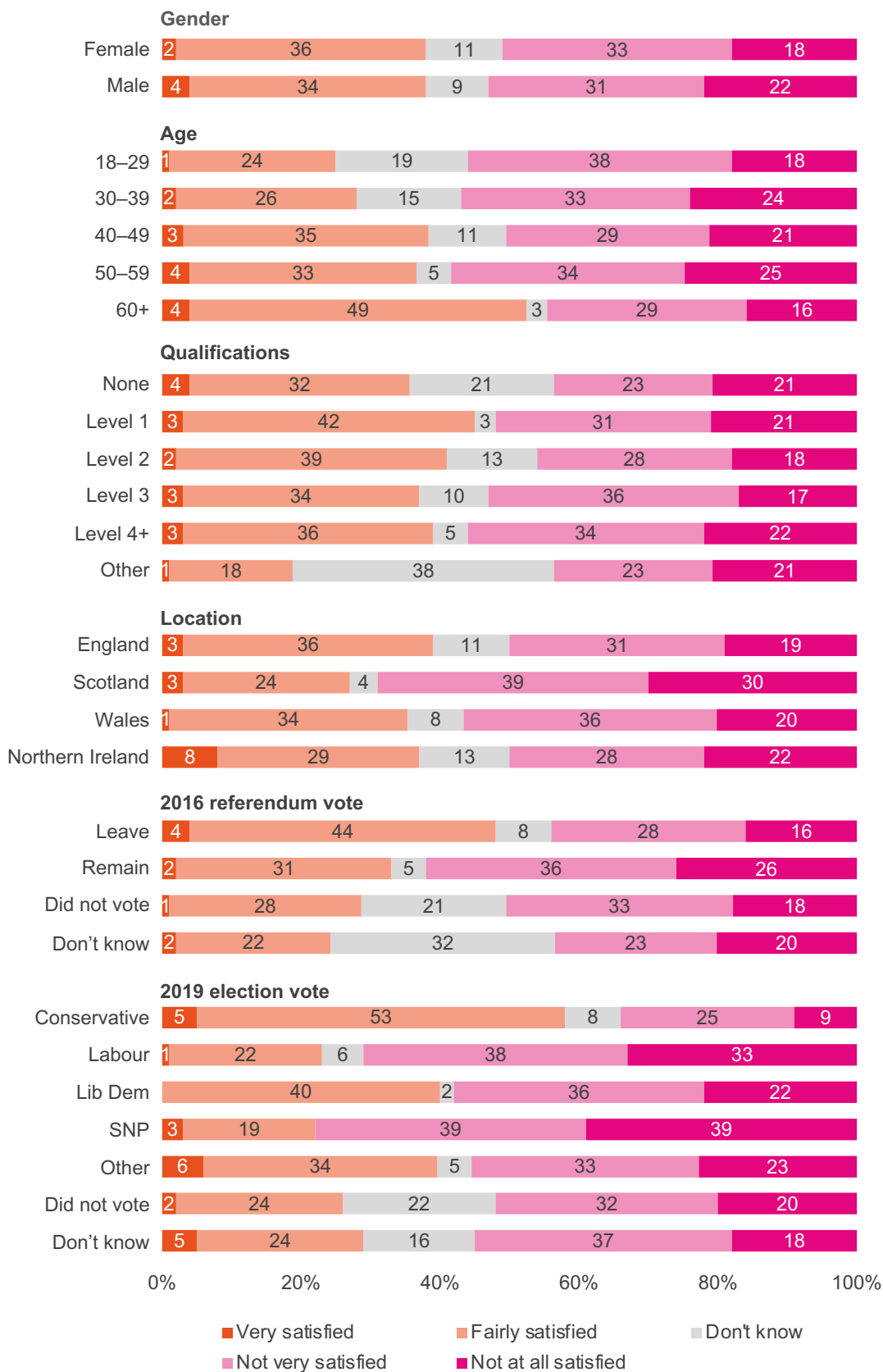
The preceding sections have shown that most people are disillusioned with the state of democracy in the UK and hold particularly negative views of politicians. But are such attitudes equally shared across the population? Figure 1.7 illustrates the patterns by showing variation in satisfaction with how democracy is working in the UK across a range of groups, using the 2022 survey data. There was no substantial difference between female and male respondents. Those in the oldest age group (60 years and over) were markedly more likely to express satisfaction than were others. Respondents in all younger groups were less likely to express satisfaction and more likely to express dissatisfaction, and those in the youngest two groups were also more likely to say that they didn't know. Differences across levels of qualifications were slight (except 'other' qualifications, which are mostly non-UK). Dissatisfaction was notably high in Scotland – unsurprisingly, given that a substantial part of the Scottish population would like to leave the UK entirely. Satisfaction was higher among those who voted Leave in 2016 and, especially, among those who voted Conservative in 2019, presumably reflecting the fact that the system had delivered the results that these voters wanted.

But these differences were often at the level of nuance. In no group did the proportion responding 'very satisfied' extend beyond 8%, and only among Conservatives and over 60s does overall satisfaction reach a majority. Taken together, the results indicate that concerns about the health of the UK's democratic system are broadly felt across different socio-demographic groups and across different parts of the country. These concerns are not the preserve of any one segment of the population.



## Figure 1.7. Variation in satisfaction with democracy in the UK

Question: On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the United Kingdom?



Note: Qualification levels are defined according to the UK government's classification. Level 1 corresponds to lower GCSE grades, level 2 to higher GCSE grades, level 3 to A level, and level 4+ to a certificate of higher education or above. 'Other' qualifications are generally from outside the UK.

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.



## What drives these perceptions?

The preceding analysis suggests that concerns about democracy in the UK are not much associated with where a person lives, how old they are, or their formal educational qualifications. Another way of thinking about underlying drivers for people's perceptions is to ask what people have in mind when they think about politics and the political system. As our previous reports have pointed out, most people do not ordinarily think about political institutions or abstract questions such as the features of a healthy democracy. So what is in their minds when they are asked to consider such questions?

Analysis of the citizens' assembly transcripts helps to examine this issue. As might be expected, members often looked at the democratic system through the lens of recent events, or of prominent political figures. The events that were mentioned most were Brexit (cited 104 times in the transcripts that we analysed) and the Covid-19 pandemic (102 times). Brexit came up in many contexts. Most references related to the referendum, with some members welcoming it as an opportunity for all voters to have a say on equal terms, while others criticised aspects of the process. Points were also made about the roles of parliament and the courts following the referendum, and the way in which the debate had left lasting divisions in society. Covid was similarly mentioned in a variety of contexts. Members recognised the scale of the interventions in people's lives that politicians had decided on during the pandemic period. Some mentioned that this highlighted a need for checks and balances, so that liberties could not be taken away too easily. Others emphasised that speed of action had been vital, and that strongly consultative processes would have backfired. Breaches in lockdown rules – particularly by Dominic Cummings and Matt Hancock – were also a recurring theme. The Partygate affair began to emerge shortly before the assembly's final weekend, and was frequently mentioned on those last two days.

Some earlier events were also repeatedly highlighted, though far less often than either Brexit or Covid. Those from recent years included the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the 2011 voting system referendum, the 2009 expenses scandal, and the military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. References to the Second World War and Nazism were not uncommon, and some members brought up the subject of Magna Carta on several occasions.

Turning to the people who were mentioned, the most oft-cited person was, unsurprisingly, the Prime Minister of the day, Boris Johnson (mentioned 56 times in the sampled analysed transcripts). Further illustrating the salience of Covid and of concerns around 'one rule for them, another for everyone else', the second most frequently mentioned person was Matt Hancock (41 references). David Cameron came third, mentioned 35 times, as the person who led the 2010–15 coalition government, initiated the Brexit process, and resigned as soon as the referendum result was announced – which some assembly members regarded as a dereliction of duty. Several aspects of his financial affairs were also sharply criticised. Others receiving significant numbers of mentions included (in descending order) Rupert Murdoch (23 mentions), Queen Elizabeth and Tony Blair (cited 17 times each), Marcus Rashford (14), Vladimir Putin (11), and Theresa May (10). Priti Patel was the most mentioned Cabinet minister of the day, with eight references. Reflecting the state of public consciousness in late 2021, Keir Starmer had barely registered with members, being mentioned only twice.

As the references to Vladimir Putin indicate, assembly members sometimes referred to international examples. Outside the UK, the United States was by far the most frequently mentioned country, coming up 39 times in the analysed transcripts. It was sometimes cited positively: for its system of checks and balances, for high public knowledge of the Constitution, and for the strict separation between the state and religion. But references were much more commonly negative: there were concerns that unduly strong checks and balances can lead to gridlock, that a written constitution can hand excessive power to the courts, that money carries too much power, that basic voting rights are under threat, that the norm of following the rules has been weakened, and that political debate has become very polarised. Russia and China were the next most frequently mentioned countries, on nine and six instances respectively, while individual assembly members brought up examples from a range of other places. The EU received significant attention too, being mentioned 27 times.

This analysis provides evidence of the frames through which assembly members viewed the various aspects of the democratic system that they discussed. Their dominant political memories were of the processes around Brexit and Covid-19 – the latter including various scandals, culminating in the Partygate affair that broke shortly before the assembly concluded. How far current perceptions of





democracy have been *caused* by experiences of Brexit and Covid is not possible to determine – that would require equivalent evidence also from before these developments took place. But understanding these frames is useful for interpreting the views expressed, both here and in later chapters.

## Conclusion

The evidence in this chapter demonstrates that public satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the UK is low – and, we would contend, worryingly so. At least at the time of the research in 2021 and 2022, most members of the public were disappointed and disillusioned with the state of politics, and thought that significant change was needed. In particular, people felt very distant from politicians, seeing them as members of an out-of-touch and self-serving elite, not as true representatives of the public at large. They were also dismayed by what they saw as a pervasive lack of honesty or integrity among those in public life – a theme that we return to in detail in Chapter 3. These views were shared across all parts of society.

As the analysis of the assembly transcripts shows, these perceptions were often grounded in experiences of Brexit and the Covid-19 period, and in perceptions of politicians such as Boris Johnson and Matt Hancock. It is possible that, over the past year, attitudes have shifted: the relative stabilisation of politics under Rishi Sunak may have led to improved attitudes; on the other hand, the data presented here were gathered before Liz Truss's brief premiership appeared to damage public confidence further. We return to these matters in the concluding chapter.



# Chapter 2. Views on How Democracy Should Work

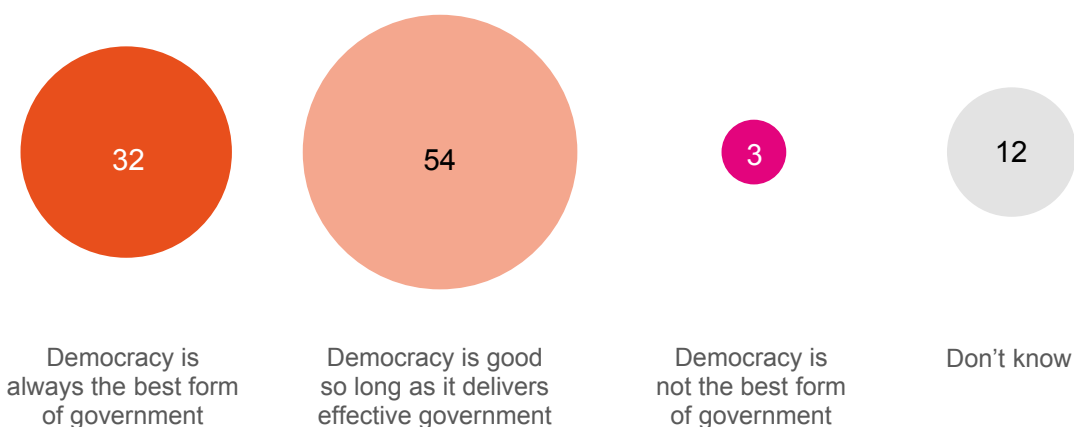
A further useful step is to consider how people think about democracy as a whole. The first section of this chapter examines whether people in the UK support democracy and key features that democracy implies – such as that leaders are subject to the rule of law and constrained by parliament. The second section considers what people's priorities for the democratic system are: what do they see as being the key components of democracy or the key principles that the democratic system should uphold? The third section ties this thinking back to the UK in particular, by investigating what changes people think would make democracy in this country better or worse.

## Do people value democracy?

Survey 1 asked respondents whether they thought democracy was the best form of government. As Figure 2.1 shows, the responses were overwhelmingly positive: only 3% said that it was not. At the same time, most respondents' support was contingent: they thought democracy was good so long as it delivered effective government. Only around a third said that 'democracy is always the best form of government'.

**Figure 2.1. Support for democracy**

Question: Which of the following comes closest to your view?



Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

Further survey questions explored two possible alternatives to democracy: 'strongman' leadership and technocracy.

There has been widespread concern in recent years that publics around the world are moving away from supporting liberal democracy in favour of 'strongman' leaders (in practice they do tend to be men) who claim a direct mandate from the people and seek to slough off the constraints imposed by legislatures, courts, and other institutions (Mounck 2018; Naím 2022; Rachman 2022). International examples include Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Narendra Modi in India, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Donald Trump in the US, and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. In the UK, the Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement* found in 2018 that more than twice as many people agreed with the statement 'Britain needs a strong leader willing to break the rules' as disagreed (Hansard Society 2019: 51).

The Hansard question was repeated in our second survey. As Figure 2.2 shows, the responses were markedly different from those given four years earlier: while the Hansard survey found in 2018 that 54% of respondents

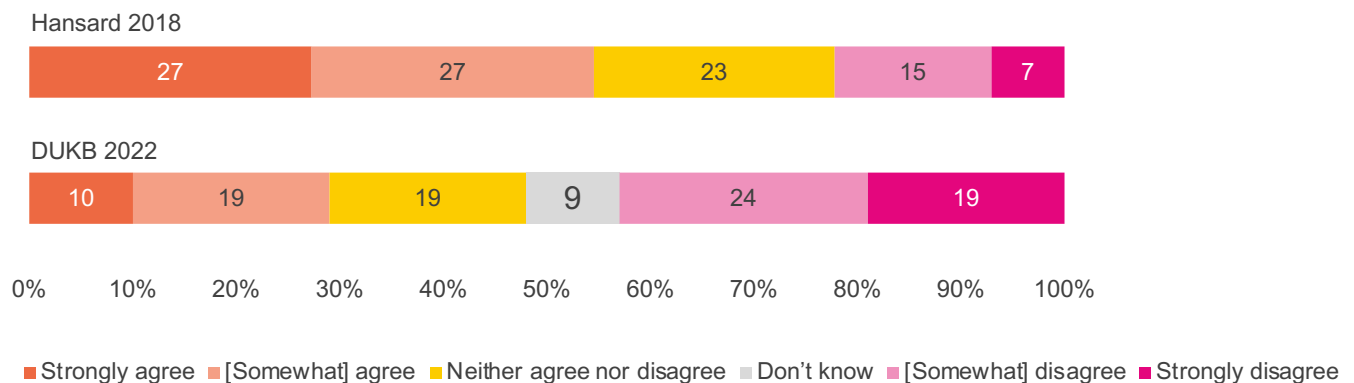


agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, our survey in 2022 found agreement at only 29%. That clearly raises important questions about why there is such a difference.

One possible explanation is that opinion shifted dramatically over time. The Hansard survey was conducted in late 2018, amidst Theresa May's battles with parliament over her Brexit deal. At that moment, many people may just have wanted someone to push a settlement through. By contrast, our 2022 survey was conducted at the height of concerns that the Prime Minister of the day had not followed the rules and had subsequently misled parliament, potentially lodging thoughts about the shortcomings of strongman leadership. But there are other possible explanations relating to how the surveys were conducted. Perhaps most plausibly, the Hansard survey asked the question towards the end of a list of mostly negatively worded statements that respondents were asked to express a view on, such as 'Britain is in decline' and 'Britain's system of government is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful'. Ours was a standalone question that immediately followed one asking 'To what extent do you agree or disagree that the people, and not politicians, should take our most important policy decisions?' These contexts may have put respondents in very different frames of mind.

## Figure 2.2. Views on a 'strongman' leader

Question: To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with this statement: Britain/The UK needs a strong leader willing to break the rules.



*Note: The statement in the Hansard question started 'Britain needs...'. The statement in our question (because of our UK-wide rather than GB-wide sample) started 'The UK needs...'. Hansard response options included 'somewhat' where indicated; ours (to maintain consistency across the survey) did not.*

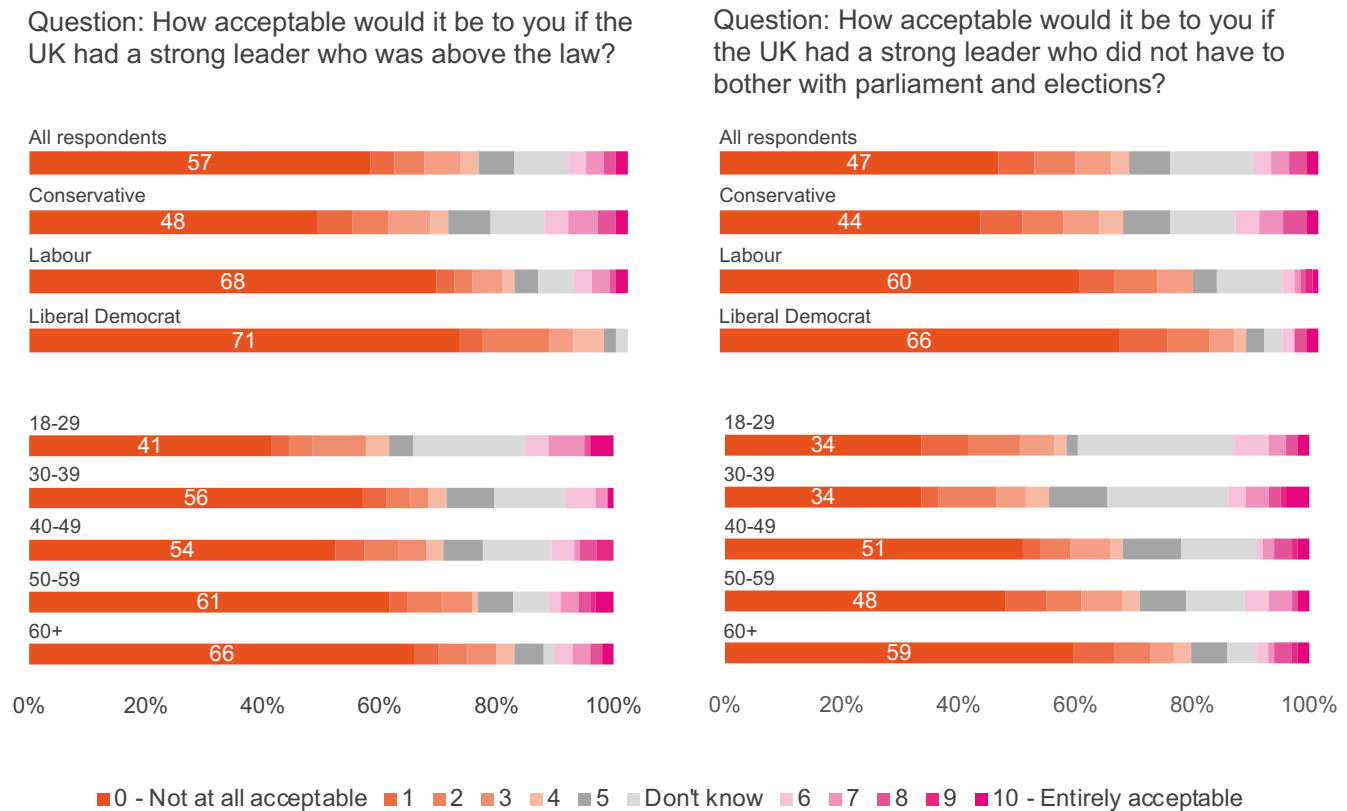
*Hansard 2018: 30 November – 12 December 2018, 1198 respondents, Great Britain. Hansard Society, Audit of Political Engagement 16: The 2019 Report, p. 51.*

*DUKB 2022: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

Whatever the explanation for the difference, it appears that majority support in the UK for strongman leadership is certainly not consistent. Many people may be tempted in some circumstances by the idea of a strong leader (whatever they take that to mean), but this seems to be the settled view of only a minority. Whether our survey marked an unusual low-point in support for strongman leadership or whether it showed a pattern closer to the norm will be identifiable only through further research.

As set out in our third report (Renwick et al. 2023: 5) and replicated in Figure 2.3, the 2022 survey sought to probe these attitudes further by including several additional versions of, in essence, the same question as just discussed. These yielded substantially similar responses to those above: asked how acceptable it would be to have a strong leader who was above the law or did not have to bother with parliament and elections, large majorities chose an option towards the 'not acceptable' end of the scale. Some analysts have highlighted evidence that young people in particular may be turning away from democracy (e.g., Mounck 2018: 105–10, 120–23). But the findings here cast some doubt on that. Younger respondents were indeed less likely than others to report viewing strongman leadership as unacceptable; but that was largely because they were much more likely to say 'don't know' – a pattern that repeats across all questions in the surveys.



**Figure 2.3. Further views on a ‘strongman’ leader**

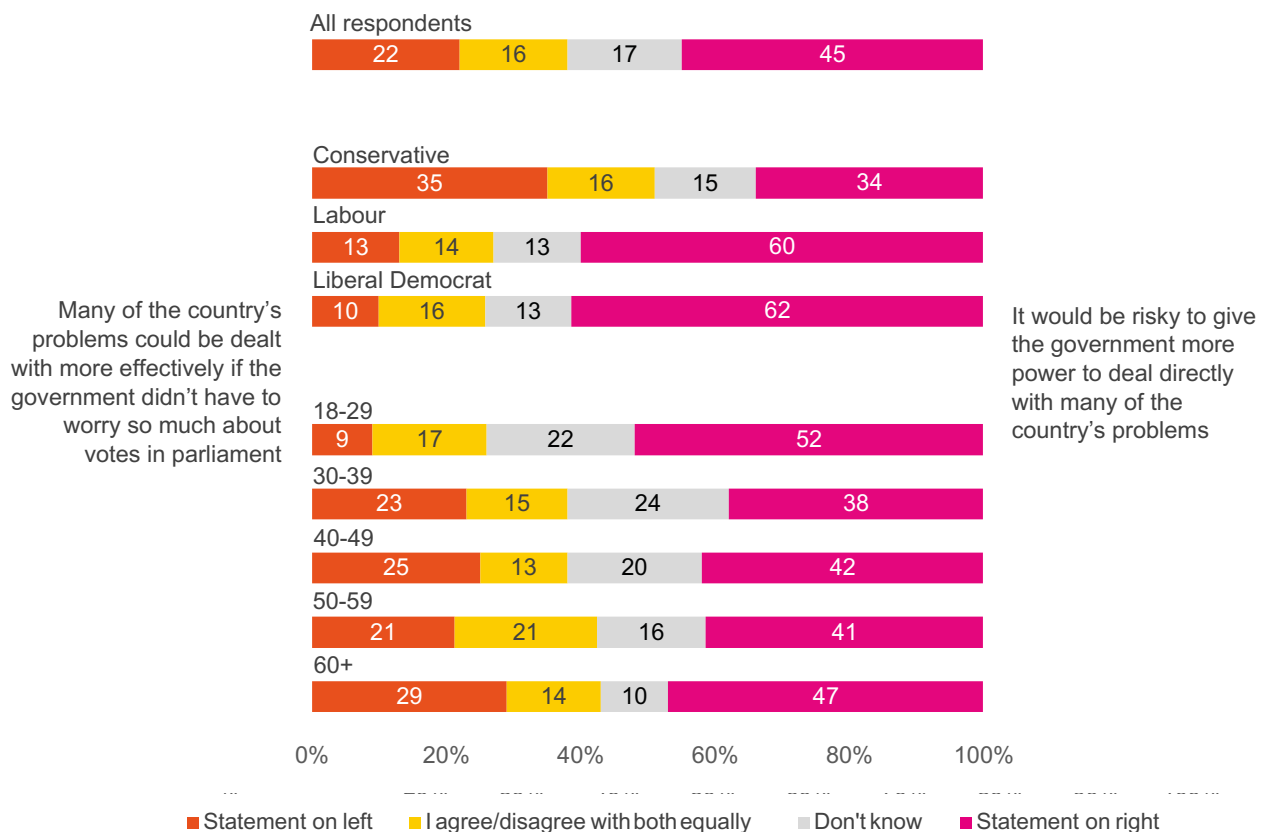
*Note: Each respondent saw either the question on the left or the question on the right, or the question shown in Figure 2.4.*

*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

Finally, another version of the question asked respondents to indicate not how far they agreed with, or found acceptable, one stated proposition, but rather which of two statements was closer to their view. As will be apparent from this report, we tended to favour questions that were structured in this way, as it asks respondents to weigh the pros and cons of alternatives. In line with the previous questions, the results, shown in Figure 2.4, suggested that many more people would see empowering government over parliament as too risky than would welcome it. Yet that pattern was this time much *stronger* among young people than in older age groups – the opposite of the pattern seen above. The explanation for this likely lies in different wording: the questions above referred to ‘a leader’ in the abstract, whereas the question here referred to ‘the government’; that likely put respondents in mind of the government in power at the time, which young people overwhelmingly disliked (YouGov 2022: 1). Yet the evidence further bolsters scepticism towards claims that young people are turning towards strong leadership and away from democracy.

## Figure 2.4. Views on empowering government

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

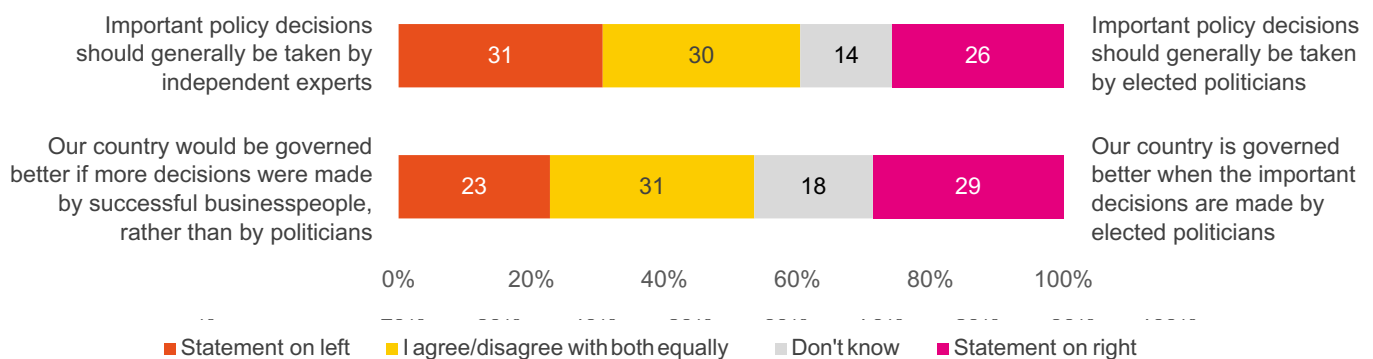


Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

The second alternative to democracy that we asked about was technocracy: the idea that government is best done by people with technical expertise rather than by politicians. Survey 2 included two questions on this, both shown in Figure 2.5. The first mentioned 'experts' in general terms; the second specified a group with a particular form of expertise – namely, businesspeople. The responses suggest greater support for experts in general than for businesspeople, fitting the patterns regarding trust seen in Chapter 1. Readiness to accept technocratic decision-making appears somewhat higher than support for strongman leadership, though caution is needed here, as the questions are not directly comparable. Large numbers of respondents chose either the 'I agree/disagree with both' option or the 'Don't know' option, however, suggesting that many did not have a clear or strong view.

## Figure 2.5. Views on empowering experts or businesspeople

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.



Looking across the evidence presented in this section, we can say that the overwhelming majority of people support the principle of democracy, and that support for 'strongman' leadership may be lower than some other evidence gathered several years ago suggested. On the other hand, much of that support for democracy is contingent on performance, and substantial minorities do find the idea of an unconstrained leader attractive. There is also some support for technocracy, though it would be valuable to investigate further what people actually meant when answering these questions as they did.

## How do people conceive of democracy?

Beyond the broad dispositions towards democracy examined in the previous section, the next question to ask concerns how people conceive of democracy. What do they see as the core elements of a healthy democracy? How do they think democracy ought to function? Much is written about alternative models of democracy: liberal versus populist, for example, or representative versus direct versus deliberative. What sorts of model are people in the UK attracted to?

Some hints on this have already come from the analysis in Chapter 1 of the statements drawn up by members of the citizens' assembly. Each of those statements had two parts. Chapter 1 quoted the first part of each, relating to how members felt about 'democracy in the UK today'. The second part addressed what a 'good' democracy would look like. The main theme that emerged from these second elements was the view that a good democracy would be representative of the public and responsive to their wishes. Statements reflecting this theme highlighted a variety of aspects:

In a 'good' UK democracy those we elect to represent us would prioritise representing the people that voted for them and the issues that are important to their constituency.

In a 'good' UK democracy citizens and politicians would be open minded, and minority opinions listened to and acknowledged. There would be a stronger relationship between elected representatives and their constituents – with both being responsible for this!

In a 'good' UK democracy there would be fair, equal and proportionate representation in government, so that it represents the public as a whole. We should all experience the same version of democracy and be able to see ourselves within it.

In a 'good' UK democracy there would be better connection and engagement between people and their elected representatives, and governments would be brave enough to listen to the recommendations of a Citizens' Assembly.

In a 'good' UK democracy the people, and their welfare, would be at the forefront of all policy, laws and decision making.

In a 'good' UK democracy there would be new political parties which are changing with the times, a spending cap on campaign funding, and an opportunity to explore proportional representation to enable the better inclusion of everyone's views in parliament.

In a 'good' UK democracy, where the system is working as it should, we the public would have better mechanisms to allow our voices to count. We would also be well informed and better able to identify what issues to push forward and confident in the belief that, by acting, we could get change to happen.

In a 'good' UK democracy we would have a representative system where elected members display respect for the core elements of our democracy and the people's right to choose.

The second theme identified in Chapter 1 – that politicians should act with honesty and integrity – also came through strongly:

In a 'good' UK democracy, we would want evidence of honesty and integrity in politics, backed up by investigative journalism and a balanced media that is able to challenge and scrutinise government and ensure the public are well informed.

In a 'good' UK democracy the people in power would have integrity.

In a 'good' UK democracy the system would be open, honest and transparent and there would be a culture of respect. Politicians would lead by example and be accountable for their actions.

In a 'good' UK democracy we would see integrity and accountability demonstrated at all levels of



political office, with clear and trusted procedures and sanctions that require politicians to uphold the highest levels of conduct and don't just rely on people in power choosing to '*do the right thing*'.

Some statements directly raised both of these themes:

In a 'good' UK democracy there would be more inclusivity, honesty, and integrity. There would be a parliament that truly represents the people of the country, and did not simply act as a cheerleader for the government.

As is evident, many of the statements drew in additional points too. A sense of public service and the responsibilities of those in public life was strong:

In a 'good' UK democracy politicians, and politics overall, would be interested in the greater good and be public service-minded.

In a 'good' UK democracy the people in power would be held accountable for their actions and there would be clear sanctions in place if they breach, or break, their responsibilities to the electorate.

In a 'good' UK democracy politics, parties and the government would be about public service, not self-service.

Several also focused on ensuring that members of the public can participate effectively:

In a 'good' UK democracy we would learn from best practice in democracies around the world and ensure we have better educated voters. This will help us to better safeguard basic rights, protect the weakest in society, limit the power of the elites, distribute work more fairly and reduce homelessness and poverty.

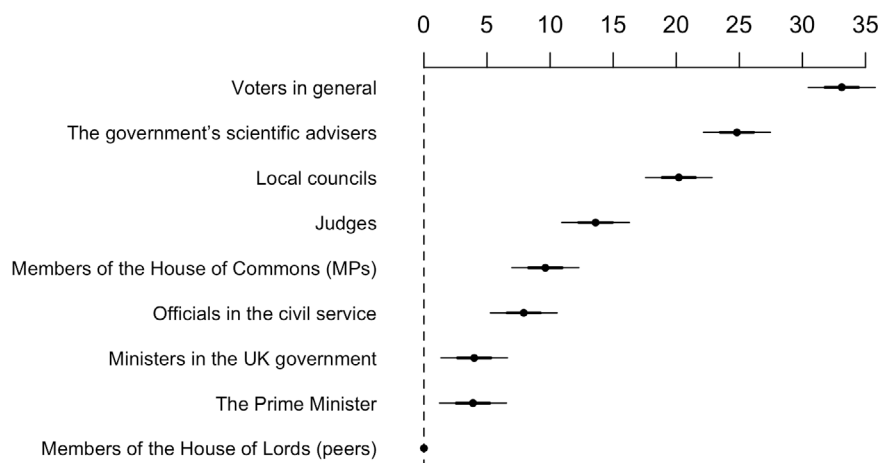
In a 'good' UK democracy however it is important that everyone should educate themselves about their vote and our democratic system, appreciate having a vote and a voice, and value that everyone is able to participate and has an equal right to be heard.

In a 'good' UK democracy people wouldn't feel inhibited to stand for election to represent their communities and the barriers that stop ordinary people being elected would be removed.

Similar concerns about democratic responsiveness and informed decision-making are also evident from a question in survey 1, asking whom respondents would want to make more powerful than they currently are. As shown in Figure 2.6, the most favoured options were 'voters in general' and 'the government's scientific advisers'. By contrast, all of the categories of national politicians came lower, reiterating previous evidence of limited confidence in these actors.

## Figure 2.6. Views on the distribution of power

Question: If you could make one of these more powerful than they currently are, which, if either, would you choose?



*Note:* Each respondent saw two randomly selected options from the list shown. The chart shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these, with the least favoured option set at 0. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, if faced with a choice between 'Voters in general' (33) and 'The Prime Minister' (4), the number choosing the former would be 29 percentage points (33 – 4) higher than the number choosing the latter.

Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.



The citizens' assembly provides two further sources of information regarding general conceptions of democracy. First, besides the statements set out above, the assembly's members also developed a set of principles that they thought should underpin a 'good' democracy in the UK. They began working on these at the first weekend, continued to reflect on them over subsequent weekends, and finalised and voted on them at the last weekend. The report of the assembly set these out in full, including an explanatory paragraph for each one based on notes made during the discussions (Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK 2022: 31–35). Box 2.1 provides a summary.

The principles that gained widest support among members in the final vote included honesty in politics (Principle 1), alongside traditional core building blocks of democracy such as free speech, the rule of law, accountability, free and inclusive elections, and protection of human rights (Principles 2–5 and 9). The focus already seen on responsiveness and representation was reflected in a widely shared desire to limit the influence of the powerful and ensure fair representation (Principles 7 and 8). A desire for an information-rich democracy was also evident, in support for knowledgeable ministers and an informed electorate (Principles 6, 10, and 11).

Most of these principles retained very high support among members throughout the assembly. There were a few towards the bottom of the list, however, that members initially found attractive, but came over time to question rather more. Members heard points from experts, for example regarding the need to respond to changing events or evidence, that led some to conclude that placing too much emphasis on party manifestos may be unwise. Having initially thought it clear that unelected bodies should not be involved in decision-making, many members later came to the view that such bodies could have important roles. Indeed, some members may have surprised themselves by realising that values they were initially drawn towards – that all decision-makers should be accountable to voters, and that politicians should be subject to constraints by unelected judges, regulators, and officials – might at times conflict. Nevertheless, substantial majorities still backed these principles (Principles 15 and 16) at the end of the process – though in the latter case with an added qualification about the role of the courts.



**Box 2.1. Principles of a 'good' democracy (Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK)**

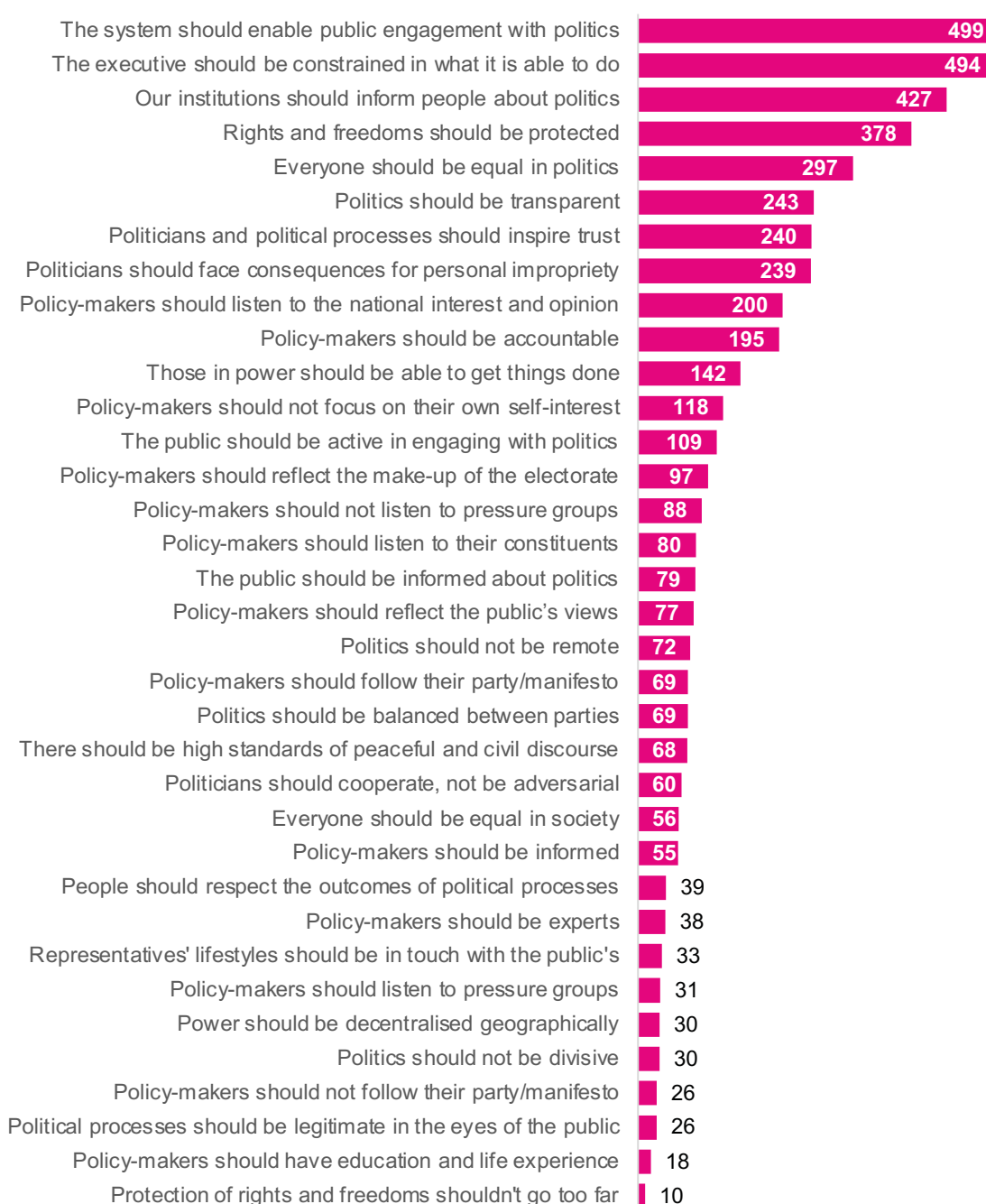
	% support among members
<b>1. Honesty in politics</b> ... so that the public can trust their elected representatives and have confidence and faith in the democratic system	98%
<b>2. Freedom of thought and speech</b> ... so that divergent views are welcomed and recognised in the public domain and there is an ability to question and protest to drive change	98%
<b>3. Rules of law that apply equally</b> ... so that there are clear lines between the church, state and judiciary, opportunities to abuse power are curtailed, and corrupt or dishonest practices are penalised	96%
<b>4. Systems of accountability and redress</b> ... so that politicians who are seen as doing a poor job can be challenged and, ultimately, replaced outside of the election cycle with representatives the public have confidence in	96%
<b>5. Free and inclusive elections</b> ... so that everyone can participate – regardless of profession, background, gender, race or religion – and have their vote count equally	96%
<b>6. Transparency in decision-making</b> ... so that, even if they don't agree, the public can see and understand how decisions that affect them are made	95%
<b>7. Limits on the influence of the already powerful</b> ... so that the monied lobbyists, the press and the 'habitually' powerful are not unduly able to influence government decisions	94%
<b>8. Fair representation</b> ... so that the people who are elected are actually representing the views of their electorate and decisions are driven by 'we the people'	94%
<b>9. A respect for the fundamental human rights of all people</b> ... so that governments cannot wilfully discriminate or create rules that are systematically prejudiced against sections of society	94%
<b>10. Ministers who are knowledgeable in their policy area</b> ... so that the public can have faith that their recommendations / decisions are evidence-based	93%
<b>11. An informed and educated voter base</b> ... so that voters' choices are based on clear, verifiable, honest, and accessible information	87%
<b>12. Respect for the results of a vote</b> ... so that, even if they lose, democratically made decisions are clear and enforceable	85%
<b>13. Power sharing</b> ... so that the interests of all are taken into account and decisions are made for the 'good of the people' as a whole	82%
<b>14. Diversity in our elected representatives</b> ... so that our parliaments and governments are representative of the electorate as a whole	81%
<b>15. A commitment from elected governments to deliver on their manifesto</b> ... so that the promises made to those that voted for them are delivered	80%
<b>16. No unelected bodies making political/policy decisions</b> ... so that decisions are made by representatives appointed by the people to enact their views (i.e. not officials or the House of Lords), but acknowledging there is a role for the courts to keep them in check	70%



Second, we can analyse the transcripts from the discussion sessions within the assembly to see which features of democracy members referred to most often. Figure 2.7 shows the results of such analysis, in which comments made by assembly members in the course of their deliberations have been categorised so as to capture the ideas they contained about how democracy should function (see the appendix for information on the coding process and the sample of transcripts that was included). The figure shows all categories including 10 or more comments.

Some caution is required in drawing inferences from analysis such as this about which were the most widely expressed ideas: the numbers in the figure depend in part on the range of comments that the analyst chooses to place together in a single category or split between several categories. Nevertheless, five clear patterns do emerge.

**Figure 2.7. Democratic values expressed by citizens' assembly members**



*Note: The bars show the number of comments by assembly members made during the assembly's formal discussions that were categorised as relating to each of the democratic values shown. See appendix for an explanation of how this analysis was carried out.*



First, assembly members were very concerned about the degree to which the public can take part and have influence in politics. They thought the system should enable public engagement with politics and help people become informed. They wanted power to be transparent and accountable, and not remote. Comments included:

Well I'm just watching what's going on in America at the moment, and I don't want our politics to descend into that by stopping people voting, etc., making it harder to vote. I think it should be made easier.

The governments should be accountable to the voters. [...] They don't give the public [a chance] to speak, and even when the public speak, they are not going to use whatever advice they give.

When they pass a new law it should be explained in simple words that everyone can then understand what they mean.

Young people ought to be educated with the information we're getting now [in the citizens' assembly] so in their life they can make decisions on politics which are more realistic because they know what they're thinking about.

Second, closely related to this first theme was another, relating to representation. Assembly members thought that everyone's voice should count equally, and that those in power should focus on the national interest, national public opinion, and the views of constituents. By contrast, members were very clear that policy-makers should not be guided by self-interest. There were many hostile comments about the power of particular interests, especially those of the wealthy, though some lobbying was seen as valuable:

Well the word for that is called lobbying isn't it. So when a company or a CEO sort of thing, lobbies the government, or lobbies someone in government, there's the private handshakes and like deals done over a dinner table sort of thing, or dinner parties, this is the way that power works, whereby someone with wealth and money sort of lobbies the government for a particular favours and deals sort of thing, and loans. [...] It's wrong the way that it works. And I'm pretty sure that real power comes from money. And has very little to do with democracy in theory.

I think it shows just how much swayed by money different political parties are, with Labour being swayed by the trade unions and Tories being swayed by business and successful entrepreneurs.

At the moment I can think about Rashford – he's making progress because he is going out and trying to get food for children that needs it, especially in the summer time and over the pandemic time, which he had to fight for it, you know. If people [...] are contributing and you can see where it's going, and the effect that it have, then that's a good thing.

Third, one of the most frequently mentioned ideas was that government should be constrained in what it can do. A total of 494 comments were placed in this category, most often relating to the need to prevent misbehaviour or abuses. The countervailing view – that those in power should be able to get things done – was also important for many members, but was mentioned far less frequently (142 times). Some members wrestled openly with this trade-off:

The government can't just do whatever they want whenever they want. They've got to go through parliament since everyone in parliament is voted in. So they have to go through everyone, so it's not just up to whoever's in charge.

I just worry that if you over-control it, decisions will never get made. You know, if you put too many restraints on, things will just be debated ad infinitum.

You know in terms of awarding contracts to your mates, and things like that, like there wasn't those checks that slow things down. And I think, that's the challenge isn't it, like do you want to check it so much they can't do anything, or do you want to check it so little that it can just crack on without being stopped?

Fourth, assembly members were very concerned about protecting rights and freedoms: 378 comments were categorised as relating to this value, while only 10 mentioned concerns that protections of rights and freedoms can sometimes be taken too far. In discussing these matters, members focused mainly on basic democratic rights, such as rights of speech and protest, the right to vote, and the right not to be imprisoned without trial – though there were exceptions to that:

When Magna Carta was sealed by King John in 1215, that in combination with the Bill of Rights which came along in 1688/89, actually lays down what our constitutional rights are. Obviously we have constitutional responsibilities, and the responsibility most fundamentally is that we don't harm anybody. And that all makes perfect sense to me.

The government never should have the ability to take away the right of people to vote. [...] Women's rights and everything and the right to vote should never, ever be taken away.

Basic human rights – you know, freedom of speech has always been protected, you know. We're a free country, we can say, even if people don't like it, you can still say it.

When they were trying to get migrants to prove their status before they could get medical treatment. Like those rights aren't fundamentally protected. They, they can be eroded and taken away. [...] They are still human beings so they still deserve medical treatment and the same rights as any other human being on this planet.

Finally, as already highlighted in this chapter and the preceding one, members were very concerned about dishonesty in politics, and they thought politicians should face consequences for personal impropriety.

I think if a politician has lied or broken the law, they should face stiffer penalties, because at the end of the day, they're in the public eye. [...] They're the ones that we put in. They're the ones looking after us.

Like the amount of times we catch our politicians out for just being grossly dishonest, and nothing ever seems to happen. Perhaps they lose their job or they're suggested to leave or something like that. But I don't feel like there's enough encouragement to do the right thing, or enough penalty to not do the right thing if you get what I mean.

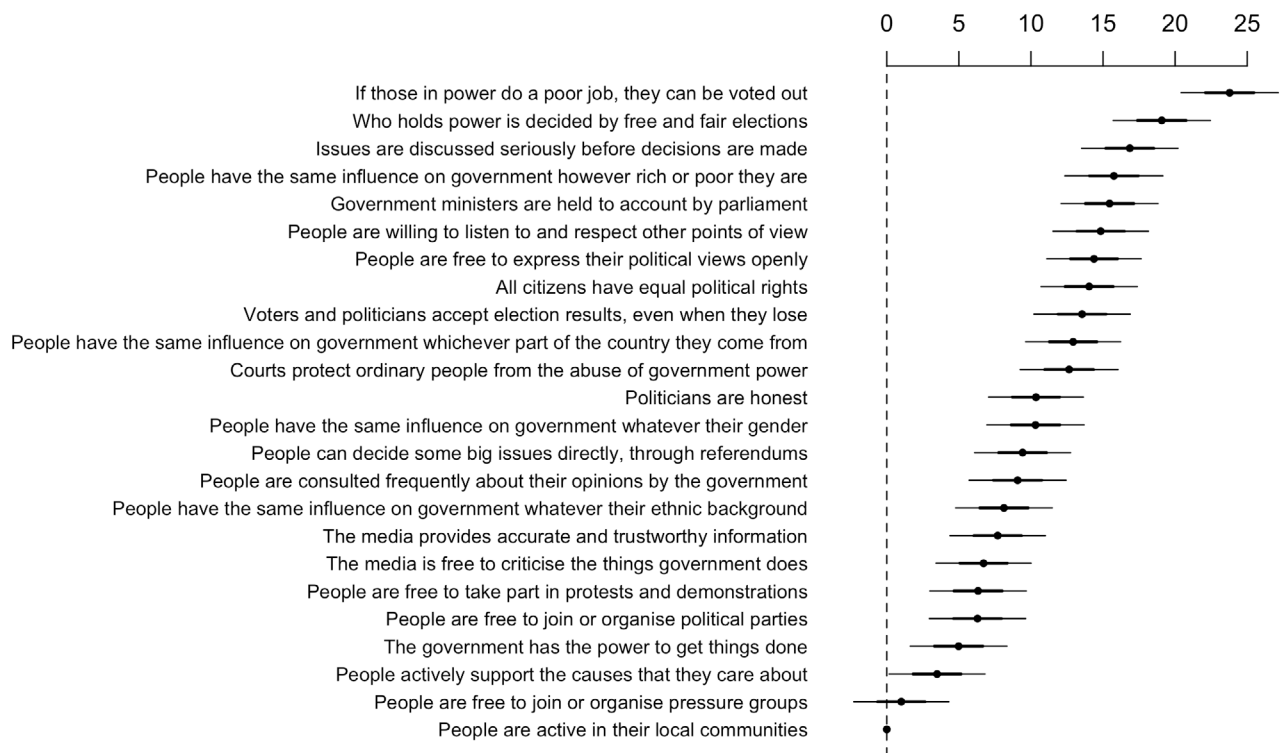
Many of these themes will be returned to in the following chapters.

Turning to survey evidence, information about public priorities for democracy comes from a question asking respondents to prioritise different components of democracy (Figure 2.8). In this case, the principle of accountability – that 'if those in power do a poor job, they can be voted out' – came top, followed by free and fair elections and serious discussion of issues before decisions are made. It is striking that the components that came lowest mostly related to public participation – that people are active in their local communities or in support of causes they care about, and that they are free to get involved in pressure groups, protests, and political parties. This reflects a diffidence about getting involved actively in politics beyond voting, which is examined further in Chapter 6. Also scoring low – perhaps surprisingly in light of rhetoric that was frequently used in the years preceding the surveys – was the government having 'the power to get things done'. It should be emphasised that a low placement in Figure 2.8 does not indicate that people thought that the given feature of democracy was necessarily *unimportant*: the question asked what is more or less important, not whether something is important or not. Indeed, there is a good case for saying that every item listed matters for healthy democracy. But the figure does provide an indication of public priorities when forced to choose.



## Figure 2.8. Components of democracy

Question: People sometimes say the following things are both important to have in a democracy. Which, if either, would you say is more important to have in a democracy?



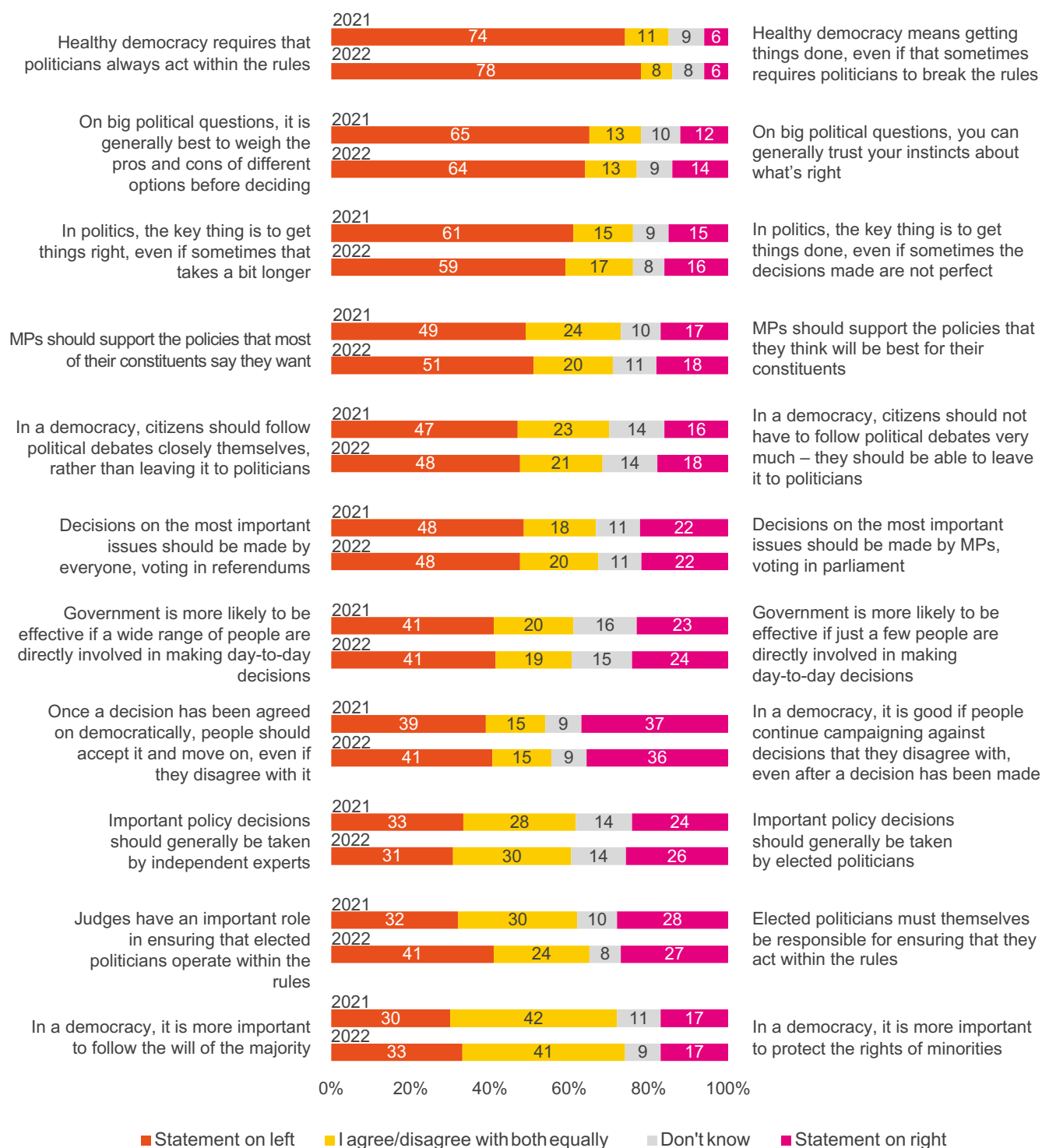
*Note: Each respondent saw two randomly selected options from the list shown. The chart shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these, with the least favoured option set at 0. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, if faced with a choice between 'If those in power do a poor job, they can be voted out' (24) and 'People can decide some big issues directly, through referendums' (9), the number choosing the former would be 15 percentage points (24 – 9) higher than the number choosing the latter.*

*Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.*

We also presented survey respondents with 11 choices that, collectively, were designed to capture different conceptions of how aspects of democracy should operate. Figure 2.9 shows the responses to each of these questions individually, in both the 2021 and 2022 surveys. It indicates that there was something approaching consensus among respondents on some issues – particularly the need for politicians always to 'act within the rules' rather than sometimes break them to get things done – while on other issues opinion was much more divided.

## Figure 2.9. Options for democracy

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

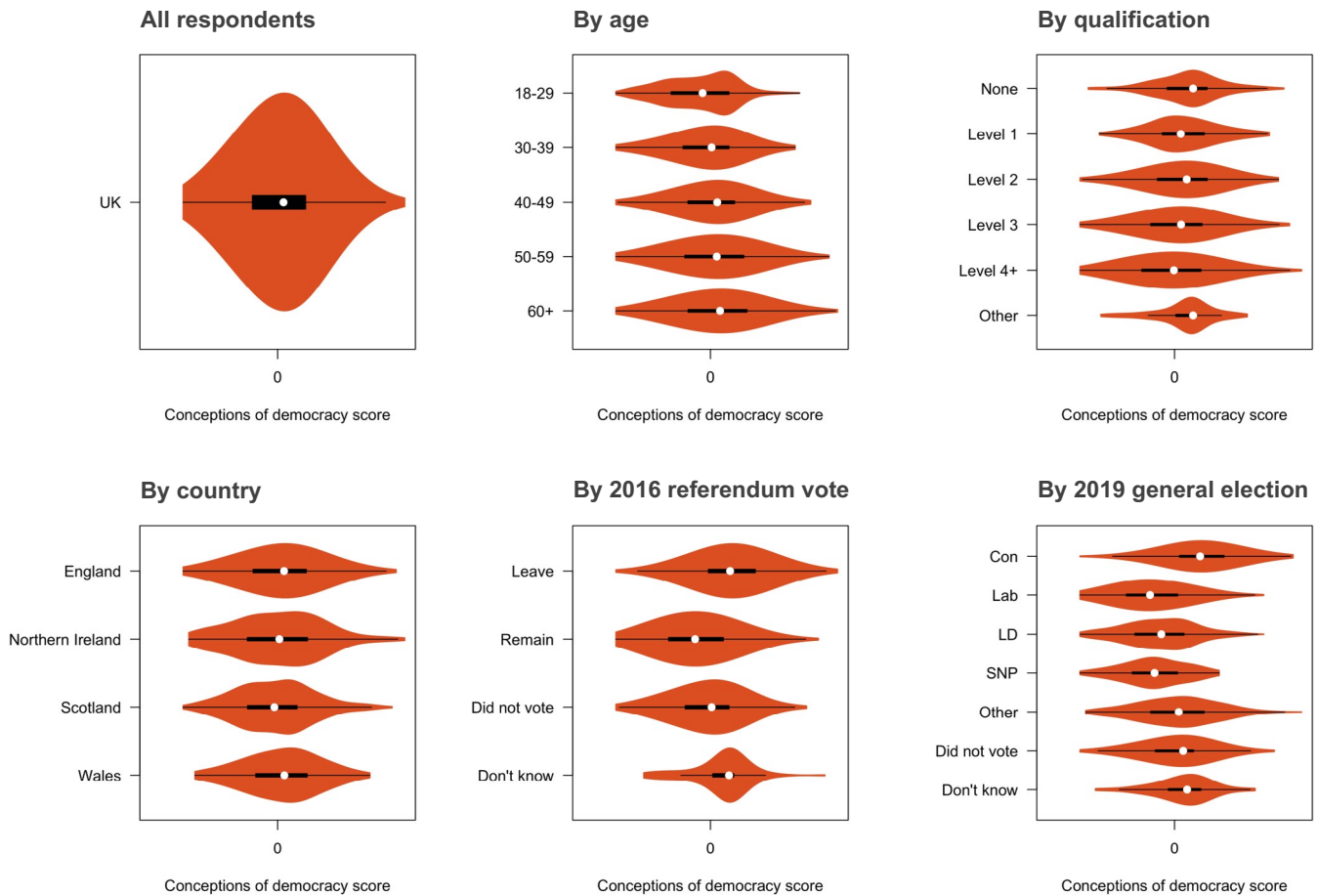


Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021, and survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

Statistical analysis makes it possible to identify patterns in these responses, both across the questions and among the respondents. Figure 2.10 shows the results of what in technical terms is called Graded Response Model analysis. Such analysis does three things. First, it identifies how responses across the questions tended to line up, such that people who gave a particular answer to one question tended also to give particular answers to other questions. Second, it shows how strong that alignment was. Third, it allows us to examine how perspectives varied across different parts of the population. This analysis is more complex than any other part of the report. But it yields considerable insights, and the following paragraphs take readers through it step by step.





**Figure 2.10. Conceptions of democracy**

*Note: Each panel shows the results of Graded Response Model analysis of the 11 trade-offs shown in Figure 2.9. The meaning of the horizontal dimension is explained fully in the text: further to the left indicates a more 'liberal' conception of democracy; further to the right indicates a more 'populist' conception; mixed views are found between these poles. The mean response is shown by '0'. The shaded area shows how many respondents' answers were located at any given point along the scale. The white dot shows the location of the median respondent. Half of all the respondents were within the range shown by the thick black line.*

*Qualification levels are defined according to the UK government's classification. Level 1 corresponds to lower GCSE grades, level 2 to higher GCSE grades, level 3 to A level, and level 4+ to a certificate of higher education or above. 'Other' qualifications are generally from outside the UK.*

*Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.*

Respondents' answers lined up in a way that suggests two alternative ways of thinking about democracy. If a respondent chose the statement that 'In politics, the key thing is to get things done, even if sometimes the decisions made are not perfect', they were also more likely than other respondents to chose the statements that 'Government is more likely to be effective if just a few people are directly involved in making day-to-day decisions', that 'On big political questions, you can generally trust your instincts about what's right', that 'Elected politicians must themselves be responsible for ensuring that they act within the rules', that 'Important policy decisions should generally be taken by elected politicians', and that 'In a democracy, it is more important to follow the will of the majority'. By contrast, if a respondent said that 'In politics, the key thing is to get things right, even if sometimes that takes a bit longer', they were more likely also to say that 'Government is more likely to be effective if a wide range of people are directly involved in making day-to-day decisions', that 'On big political questions, it is generally best to weigh the pros and cons of different options before deciding', that 'Healthy democracy requires that politicians always act within the rules', that 'Important policy decisions should generally be taken by independent experts', and that 'In a democracy, it is more important to protect the rights of minorities'.



The first of these sets of responses tends to fit with how the Johnson-led government that was in power at the time of the surveys sought to govern. Johnson's rhetoric frequently emphasised 'getting things done', and he did not appear to welcome constraints from parliament, the courts, experts, or other actors. He claimed a direct popular mandate for his chosen course. By contrast, the second set of responses tends to fit the view of Johnson's critics. They emphasised the importance of due process, and of checks and balances. The first view is closer to what is often called a 'populist' vision of democracy, while the second is closer to a 'liberal' vision.

In each of the six panels of Figure 2.10, a respondent whose answers entirely fitted the first of these views would appear at the right-hand end of the spectrum, while a respondent with the opposite set of views would appear at the left-hand end. Respondents giving more mixed answers, some coming from the first set and others from the second, appear between these poles. The thickness of the shaded areas show how many respondents appeared at any given point along the continuum.

What is evident from the first panel of Figure 2.10, showing the responses of the whole sample, is that most people voiced mixed views. Indeed, very few expressed attitudes that corresponded fully to either of the pure visions of democracy. In a highly polarised society, we could expect to see two 'peaks' in this chart, with large numbers of people voicing one or other vision and few offering mixed views in the middle. Here, by contrast, we see a single peak located towards the centre point of the scale. This suggests that society as a whole does not have polarised views of democracy.

The remaining panels of Figure 2.10 show the same responses broken down by different factors: age, qualifications, country of residence within the UK, and vote in the 2016 referendum and 2019 general election. In terms of age, qualifications, and country of residence, there is very little differentiation. Younger respondents in the sample voiced marginally more 'liberal' conceptions of democracy than did older respondents, as did respondents with more formal qualifications. But these differences were slight. Nor were there meaningful differences between respondents in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

On the other hand, clearer differences do emerge in relation to voting patterns. Leave voters in 2016 and Conservative voters in 2019 tended to voice more 'populist' conceptions of democracy, while Remain voters, as well as Labour, Liberal Democrat, and SNP voters, tended to voice more 'liberal' conceptions. These differences could reflect contrasting underlying ideas about democracy, or they could simply derive from circumstances. Regarding those circumstances, supporters of the government of the day (in this case, Conservative and, mostly, Leave voters) might naturally want those in power to be able to get things done without undue interference from outside, while its opponents might prefer greater checks and balances. The specific experiences of the Brexit process might have heightened such views. It will be possible to discover the degree to which such circumstantial factors or deeper value differences explain the patterns only through further research conducted in different circumstances, notably when a government of another colour is in power.

Are these differences 'large' in an absolute sense? Is there 'polarisation' between Conservative and other voters in their conceptions of democracy? Such questions are best answered by comparing the patterns found here with other factors linked to voting behaviour. The British party system has long been arranged around an economic left-right divide, with Labour on the left and the Conservatives on the right. More recently a second divide, between culturally liberal and conservative attitudes, is often said to have risen in prominence as well (for discussion, see Surridge 2021). The surveys included two standard sets of questions designed to measure, respectively, respondents' left-right economic attitudes and their liberal-conservative cultural attitudes. Subjecting these to the same form of analysis as above, we can see whether the division between the parties in terms of conceptions of democracy is stronger or weaker than the division on economic or cultural matters. In fact, the patterns are very similar across all three: all show broadly the same levels of overlap and difference between 2019 Labour and Conservative supporters, and across parties more generally.

This might lead us to think that the party divide in conceptions of democracy is quite marked: it is as strong as the two major value differences that are thought to structure the whole party system. On the other hand, these measures of left-right and liberal-conservative attitudes have never in fact been found to fit voting patterns very strongly, leading to a more cautious conclusion. Some balance of these two views may be appropriate: at least in 2019, there were real differences between voters for different parties in their conceptions of democracy, but these should not be exaggerated. It also bears repeating





that, while the economic and cultural divides have been analysed for decades and repeatedly been found to play a role in voting patterns, we have evidence on conceptions of democracy only from one rather unusual election. There is no guarantee these same differences will persist over time.

## How could UK democracy be improved?

Much of the preceding evidence carries implications for how people think democracy in the UK could be improved. They would like it to be more representative of and responsive to public opinion. They would like political discourse to be honest, serious, and based on information. They would like those in public life to act with integrity and to pursue the public good.

The recommendations of the citizens' assembly set out proposals for improvement on a wide range of issues. Many survey questions also asked about a range of possible changes. The following chapters examine these points in detail.

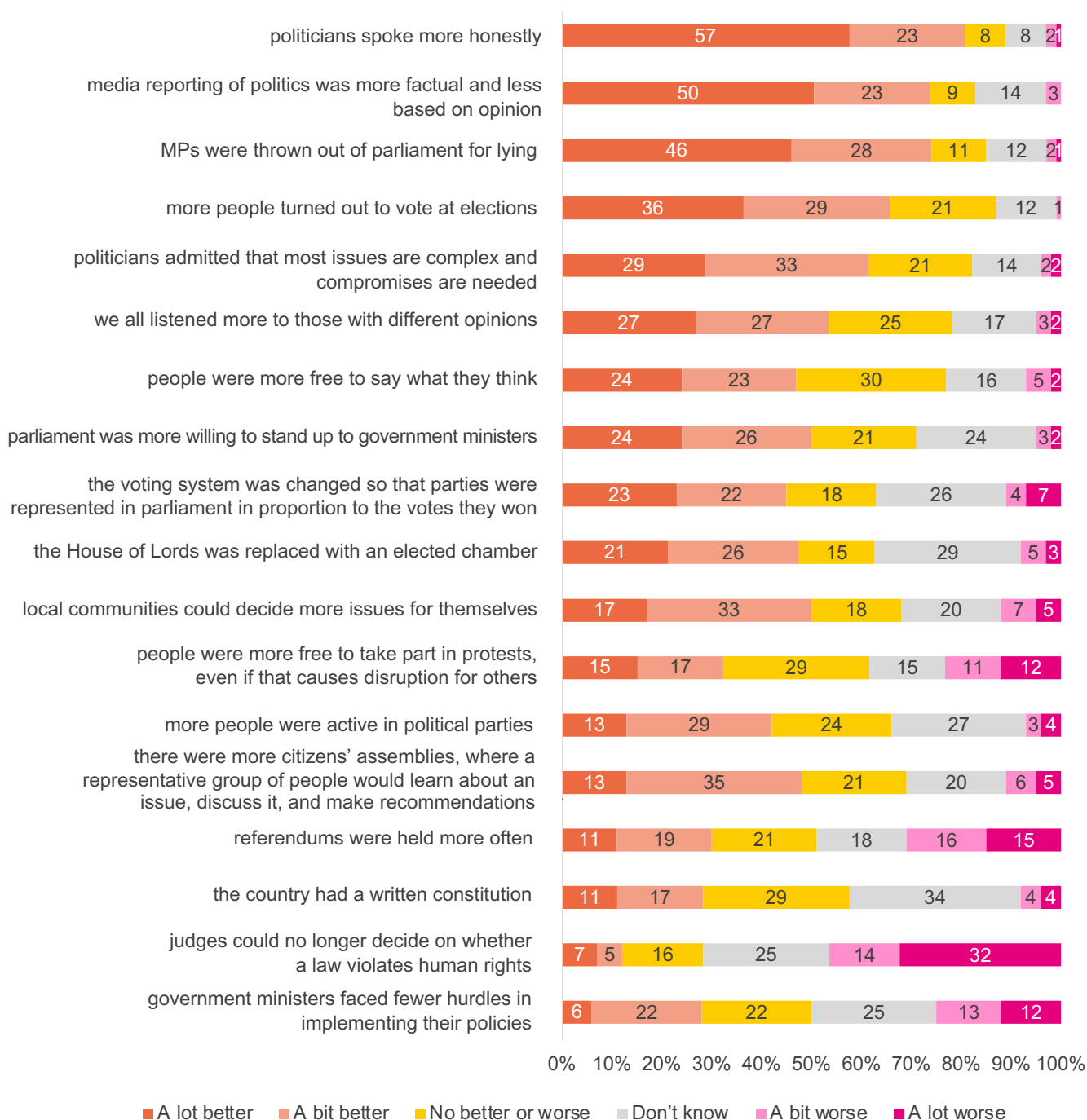
Before getting there, Figure 2.11 presents the findings from the final question in survey 2, which provides an overview of public sentiment towards a range of change options. This again highlights a strong public desire for more honesty in politics: the change that the most respondents thought would make democracy in the UK work better (fully 80% of them taking that view) was that 'politicians spoke more honestly'.

Looking at the results more generally, respondents were, for the most part, more positive about changes to political behaviour than they were about changes to political institutions. That is, they focused on how politicians speak, how the media report, and how voters engage, but they were less sure about changes to the power of parliament and government, the means of choosing parliamentarians, or the roles of courts and referendums. This reflects the fact, highlighted in Chapter 1, that most people see politics primarily through actions and events, not through structures. Some may know about and have views on what politicians say and do, while having less detailed knowledge of how institutions are organised. Others may understand both of these things well, but see institutions principally as (imperfect) means of inducing desired behaviours, not as ends in themselves. Either way, the responses again indicate very strongly the degree of public support for doing politics differently.



## Figure 2.11. Options for democratic reform

Question: How much better or worse would democracy in the UK work if ...?



Note: Each respondent was asked the question twice, with two items randomly selected from the list.

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.



## Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of people in the UK value democracy. For many, however, that support is conditional on democracy delivering effective government. At the time of our research in 2021 and 2022, support for 'strongman' leadership was much lower than some studies in the preceding years had found; whether that pattern will persist or was a reflection of the particular circumstances of the time will be knowable only through further research in the coming years.

This chapter has presented evidence from a variety of different ways of examining the kind of democracy that people want. The overarching theme that appears to run across all of them is that people want a democracy that delivers for everyone, not just for a privileged few. They therefore want those who hold positions of power to be genuinely representative of the public and responsive to their wishes, and they want politicians to act with honesty and integrity, and to be motivated by public service. In addition, they want core democratic rights to be upheld. They think ministers should be constrained by checks and balances, while still able to make and implement decisions. Issues should be discussed seriously. It should be easier for people to become informed and get involved, and the media, alongside politicians, have an important part to play in that.

There is some tendency for ideas about democracy to line up into more 'liberal' or more 'populist' perspectives – but such patterns should not be exaggerated. The public in the UK are not polarised in their conceptions of democracy, and there are few meaningful differences in ideas about democracy across different age groups, levels of educational attainment, or the parts of the UK. Nevertheless, some divergence in conceptions of democracy can be observed between Leave and Remain voters in the 2016 referendum, and between Conservative voters and voters for other parties in the 2019 general election. In both cases the former group was somewhat more inclined towards 'populist' ideas of democracy, favouring speedy and decisive action by elected leaders, while the latter tended towards more 'liberal' ideas, emphasising the value of taking decisions carefully, including many voices, and upholding checks and balances.

The next four chapters examine preferences about specific aspects of the democratic system in depth. Given the strength of concern just seen about standards of ethical behaviour in politics, we begin by examining attitudes towards standards in public life.



# Chapter 3. Standards in Public Life

As the preceding chapters have shown, members of the public in the UK are particularly concerned about standards of behaviour among those in public life. They think politicians have low ethical standards – that politicians are dishonest and self-serving. They want politicians who are honest, have integrity, act within the rules, and pursue the public good. It is striking that the statements about a good democracy developed by members of the citizens' assembly and quoted in Chapter 2 touched upon every one of the seven so-called 'Nolan principles' that were developed in the 1990s to guide action in public life (see Box 3.1). Beyond the concrete evidence set out above, our own experience in running the citizens' assembly and engaging with the members was that no other subject raised passions to the same extent as this one.

## Box 3.1. The seven principles of public life

### Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

### Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

### Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

### Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

### Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

### Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

### Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour and treat others with respect. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Source: Committee on Standards in Public Life, 'The Seven Principles of Public Life', 31 March 1995, as updated November 2021.

This chapter begins by examining public expectations regarding standards in public life in further detail. It then focuses specifically on honesty – a value that came up again and again in the research as a strong priority. Finally, the chapter explores public views on the mechanisms through which standards in public life should be upheld.

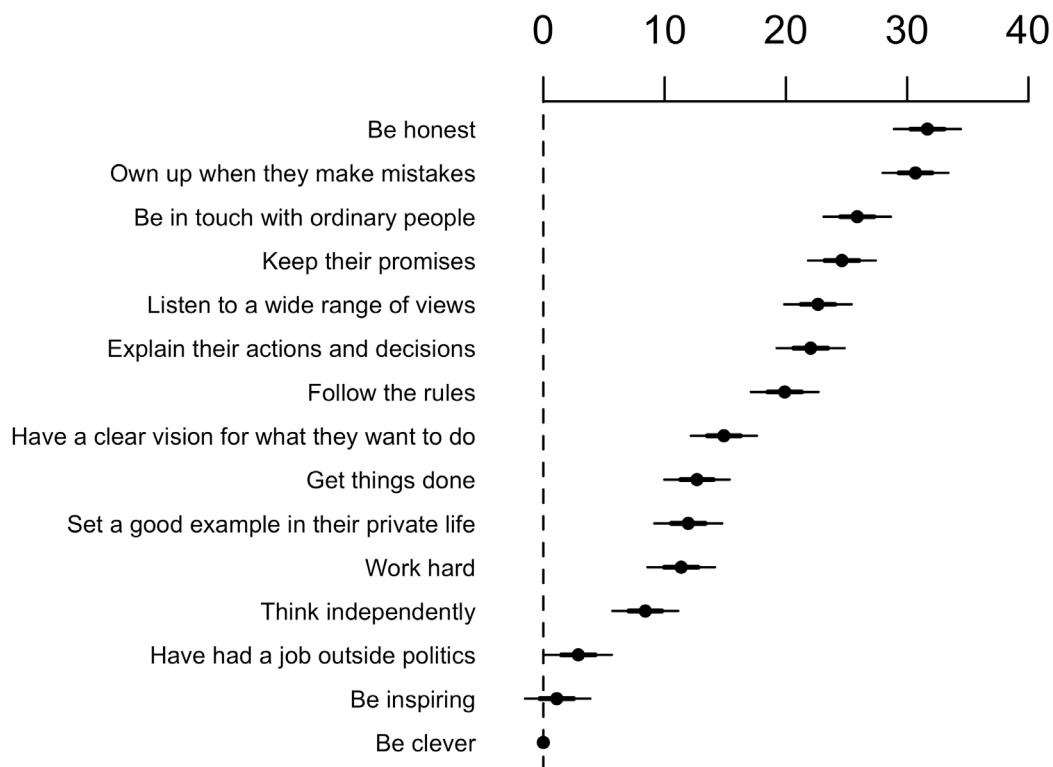
## Public expectations on standards

Our surveys asked respondents about the characteristics that they thought politicians should embody. The list of characteristics that we offered was wide-ranging, including moral standards, but also items such as 'getting things done', 'having had a job outside politics', and 'being inspiring'. Figure 3.1, reproduced from our first report, shows the findings from survey 1. As is evident, 'being honest' came out top, closely followed by 'owning up when they make mistakes'. The focus on representation and responsiveness that the previous chapter highlighted was also evident again here, with 'being in touch with ordinary people' coming third. Mirroring the question about components of democracy discussed in Chapter 2, these values came well ahead of 'getting things done'. Survey 2 repeated this question and reached very similar findings, but with the order of the first two items reversed.



### Figure 3.1. Preferences for politicians' characteristics

Question: Is it more important for a politician to [A] or to [B]?



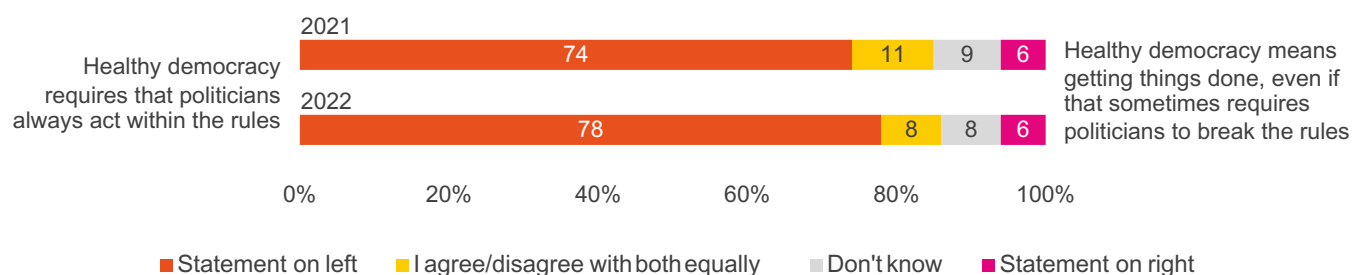
*Note: Each respondent saw two randomly selected options from the list shown. The chart shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these, with the least favoured option set at 0. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, if faced with a choice between 'Be honest' (31) and 'Get things done' (14), the number choosing the former would be 17 percentage points (31 – 14) higher than the number choosing the latter.*

*Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.*

Both surveys asked respondents whether they thought politicians should 'always act within the rules' or whether, in their view, 'healthy democracy means getting things done, even if that sometimes requires politicians to break the rules'. As shown in Figure 3.2, there was overwhelming support for the former view. Perhaps in light of events during the intervening year, that majority strengthened still further between the two surveys.

### Figure 3.2. Views on whether politicians should always act 'within the rules'

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



*Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021, and survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

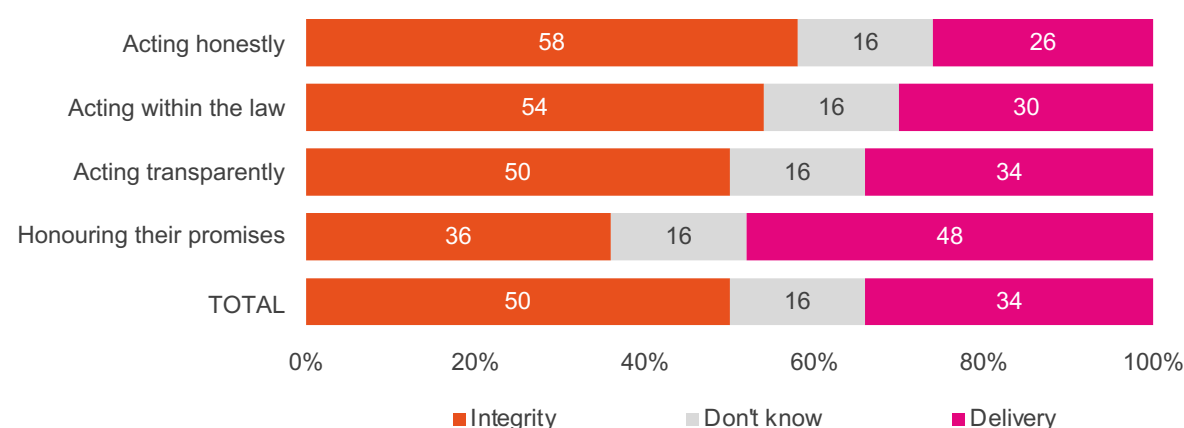


Building on this finding, the surveys also asked respondents to imagine a future Prime Minister having to choose between acting with integrity or delivering on outcomes. Respondents were randomly assigned different versions of the question, containing different forms of integrity and delivery. Our first report set out the findings from survey 1. Here we report those from survey 2, where the wording was slightly altered to take account of concerns that the initial phrasing may have generated inadvertent biases.

As Figure 3.3 shows (and as was also the case in survey 1), respondents placed three of the four forms of integrity – acting honestly, acting within the law, and acting transparently – ahead of delivery. Only with the fourth form of integrity – honouring promises – did more respondents favour the delivery option. Of the four forms of integrity, ‘acting honestly’ ranked highest. For ease of interpretation, this figure presents the results for the four forms of integrity while aggregating across the various forms of delivery.

### Figure 3.3. Integrity versus delivery, by forms of integrity

Question: Please imagine that a future Prime Minister has to choose between [INTEGRITY] and [DELIVERY]. Which should they choose?



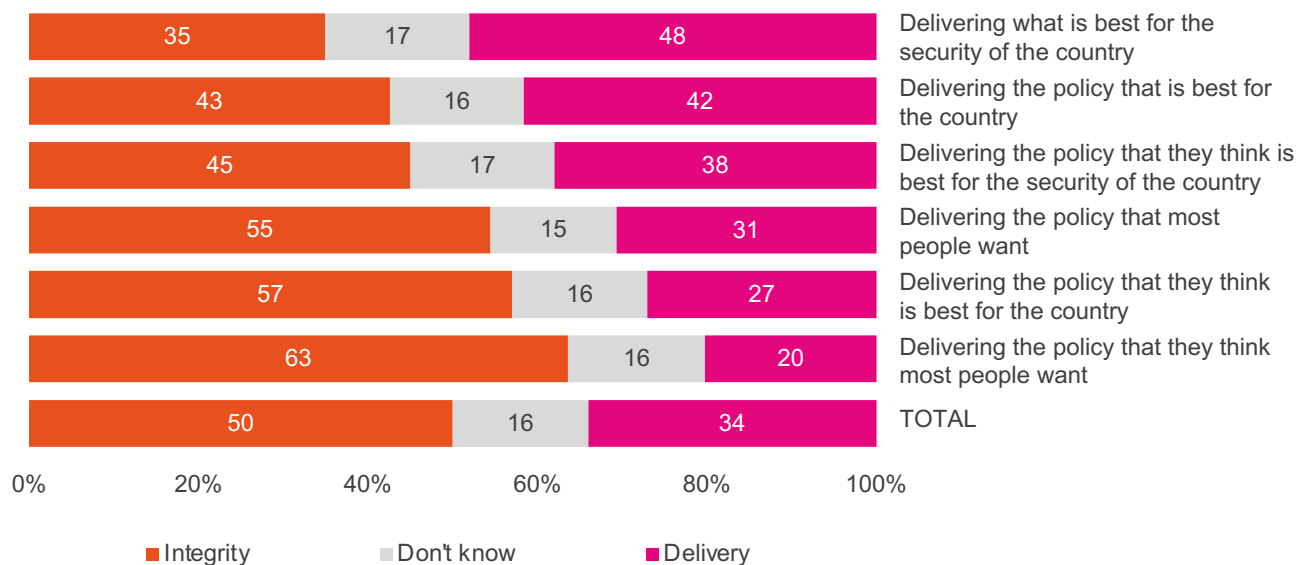
*Note: For each respondent, [INTEGRITY] was replaced with one of four alternatives and [DELIVERY] with one of six alternatives. The chart separates out the forms of INTEGRITY, shown on the left, while aggregating across the forms of DELIVERY.*

*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

Figure 3.4 presents responses to the same question, but this time separating out the forms of delivery while aggregating across the forms of integrity. The forms of delivery differed from each other in two ways: the kind of objective being pursued (what most people want, what is best for the country, and what is best for the security of the country); and whether these objectives were framed in terms of what the imagined future Prime Minister *thinks* is best or just what is best. Regarding the first dimension, respondents were most attracted to delivering for ‘the security of the country’ and least attracted to delivering ‘what most people want’. The lower priority given to responsiveness to public wishes may appear to be in tension with some of the findings in Chapter 2. It should be recalled, however, that Chapters 1 and 2 both also revealed concerns about the degree to which current politics enables people to come to informed judgements on what is best. It appears likely that this explains the greater support for the seemingly objective idea of doing what is best for the country, particularly for its security. Turning to the second dimension, respondents were much more sceptical when the future Prime Minister’s perceptions were mentioned – particularly in relation to what is ‘best for the country’. Some of the preference for integrity over delivery therefore clearly comes from scepticism that a Prime Minister might know what is best. Yet, even allowing for this, only the option of delivering what is best ‘for the security of the country’ was chosen by more respondents than were the integrity options.

### Figure 3.4. Integrity versus delivery, by forms of delivery

Question: Please imagine that a future Prime Minister has to choose between [INTEGRITY] and [DELIVERY]. Which should they choose?



*Note: For each respondent, [INTEGRITY] was replaced with one of four alternatives and [DELIVERY] with one of six alternatives. The chart separates out the forms of DELIVERY, shown on the right, while aggregating across the forms of INTEGRITY.*

*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

We have had many conversations since our first report was published about how these findings should be interpreted. There have been two main challenges to the simple interpretation that most people really do care more about politicians' honesty and other standards of behaviour than about their ability to deliver on policy.

First, many of those we have spoken with have suspected respondents reported what they thought they ought to prioritise, rather than what their true preferences would be when faced with an actual choice. Politicians, for example, have noted that, when in the polling booth, most voters think primarily about who will deliver the best outcomes. There is clearly something in such observations. For example, the long-running Ipsos Issues Index generally finds that matters to do with the economy, public services, or immigration rank highest among respondents' priorities, though 'lack of faith in politics/politicians/government' has risen in recent years (Ipsos 2023). Our own evidence on how far people care about political processes is presented in Chapter 7.

Second, some politicians have also suggested to us that, if they really were honest with the electorate, they would be voted out. One cited the 2017 Conservative election manifesto, seeing it as an attempt to be honest about the cost of social care reform that backfired electorally. And, currently, there is much discussion of politicians' alleged failure to be honest with the public about the costs involved in achieving net zero carbon emissions. Again, there is much in this point: whatever the merits of the particular examples, it is clear that honesty is not always a direct route to popularity.

But neither of these points detracts from the fact that people clearly do care about ethical standards. The passions raised by 'Partygate' and other recent episodes have been real. If people say that they value honesty, that means that honesty does matter to them, even if they may sometimes find, to their considerable frustration, that their perceptions of honesty have to be trumped in the polling booth by other considerations.

# Honesty

The evidence highlighted so far has repeatedly identified honesty as a key value for many people. It was backed by 98% of citizens' assembly members as a core democratic principle, and was also mentioned in many of the statements about democracy that members wrote. In the surveys, it ranked first among a diverse array of politician characteristics and first among an equally wide set of possible changes to how democracy works. Survey respondents gave it greater priority than policy delivery, or than the values of transparency, following the rules, or honouring promises.

But what do people mean by 'honesty'? Valuable illumination comes from the citizens' assembly. The most widely agreed democratic principle among assembly members was:

## Honesty in politics

... so that the public can trust their elected representatives and have confidence and faith in the democratic system

Principle 1; see Box 2.1

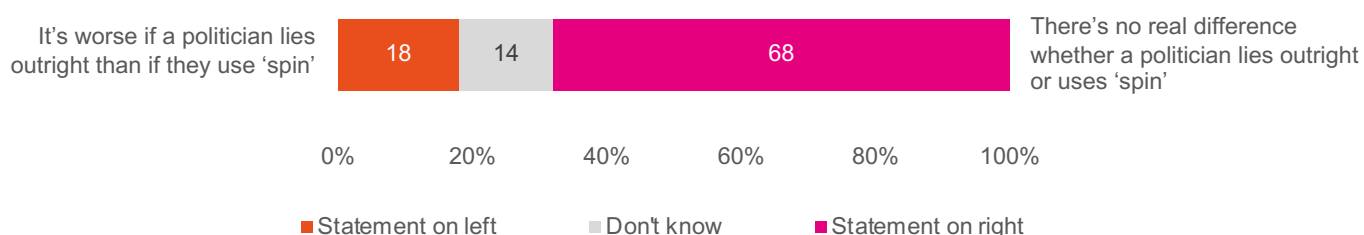
As was set out in the assembly's report, members prioritised honesty as most important because they believed it had a knock-on effect for all of the other principles. Beyond an almost-universal call for politicians to 'not lie', members in their discussions identified key features of what honesty in politics would look like that they felt were lacking at present. These included: apologising for mistakes; declaring conflicts of interest; admitting when you don't know the facts; not relying on optimistic spin; and dealing truthfully with the public even when the news is bad (e.g., about taxes going up).

This is significant because it highlights that people see honesty as about much more than not telling outright lies. Politicians who evade questions or offer partial spin are also seen by most people as dishonest.

These findings are corroborated by the answers to several questions in survey 2. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three questions that sought to elucidate different aspects of the issue. One of these explored whether people saw a difference between spinning and lying. As Figure 3.5 shows, most said the two were equivalent.

## Figure 3.5. Lying versus spinning

Question: Sometimes, politicians are accused of lying outright. At other times, they are said to 'spin' issues in a way that is misleading but not strictly false. Which of the following statements comes closer to your view?



Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

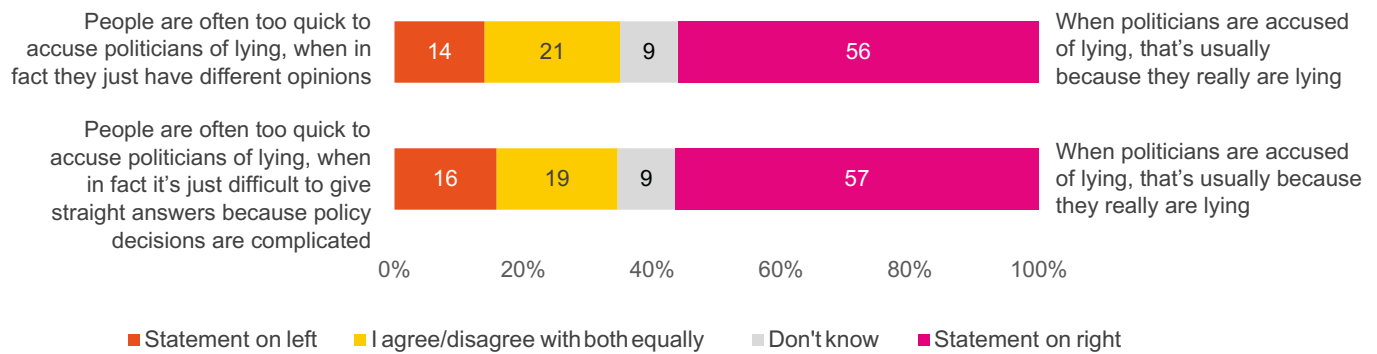
The two remaining questions explored whether people were willing to accept that accusations of lying are sometimes unwarranted: because straight answers may be difficult, or because such accusations sometimes just reflect differences of view. As Figure 3.6 shows, most respondents were unwilling to accept such explanations: in both cases, majorities insisted that, 'when politicians are accused of lying, that's usually because they really are lying'.





### Figure 3.6. Is 'lying' always lying?

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

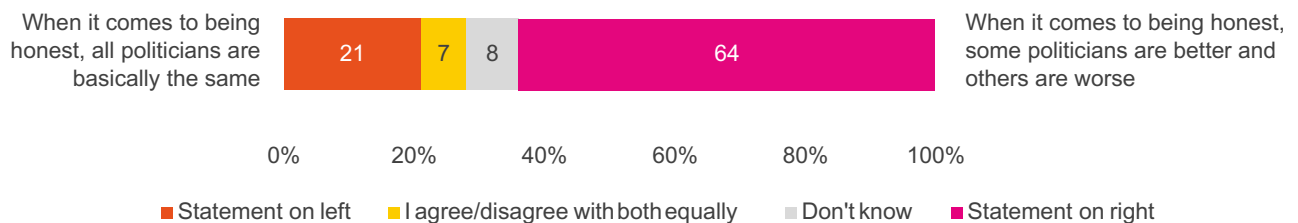


Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

All of these findings confirm the impression given by the citizens' assembly, that most people have a broad understanding of what honesty requires, and see politicians as falling short of it in many ways. At the same time, a less uniformly negative perception is indicated by one final question, shown in Figure 3.7, which found that most people acknowledged that some politicians are better when it comes to honesty than others. Most respondents, at least in response to this question, did not accept the cynical view that 'they're all the same'.

### Figure 3.7. Are all politicians equally dishonest?

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

## How standards should be upheld

So it is clear that most people are very concerned about politicians' ethical standards and want them to improve. But how do they think that end should be achieved? There are multiple possible models. Some forms of misconduct may be matters of law, ultimately decided in court by judges or juries. Others may relate to codes of conduct, policed by regulators, committees of MPs, or (in the case of ministers) the Prime Minister. When it comes to MPs, there are strong defenders of the current principle that the only people who should be able to make a decision about their removal are electors. All of these possibilities were explored in the research.

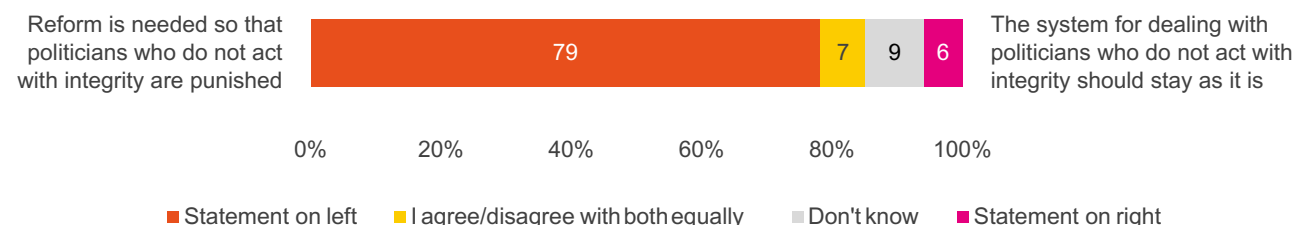
As indicated in Chapter 2, few people think much about the details of political institutions. In particular, few are aware of how standards are currently upheld or have developed thoughts on how the system ought to operate. Survey questions on the matter therefore give an indication of people's basic instincts, rather than any more considered view. Nevertheless, the findings from several such questions are striking.

Survey 2 first asked a very broad question about whether stronger enforcement of standards is needed. An overwhelming majority – answering, we should remember, in the summer of 2022, after Boris Johnson had been forced to announce his resignation as Prime Minister but before he had left office – said that

stronger enforcement was needed (see Figure 3.8). It should be acknowledged that the wording of the question could be read as implying that politicians who do not act with integrity currently go unpunished. It therefore may be felt to have nudged respondents towards this answer. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority choosing it tells a meaningful story. Supporters of change included 78% of 2016 Leave voters, 87% of Remain voters, 80% of 2019 Conservative voters, and 83% of Labour voters.

### Figure 3.8. Views on punishing politicians who act without integrity

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

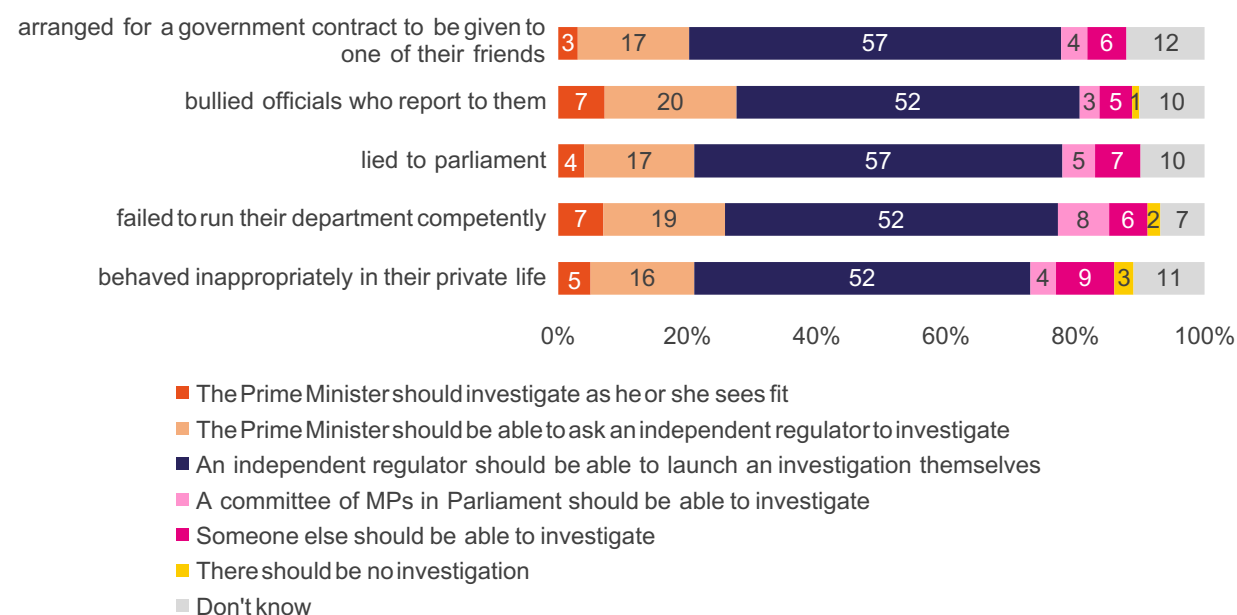


Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

The survey then asked two specific questions about how to reform the integrity system: one on investigations into alleged misconduct, the other on who should decide a minister's fate when failure had been demonstrated. In the first (see Figure 3.9), a clear majority said that an independent regulator should be able to launch an investigation themselves, whatever the nature of the alleged wrongdoing. Around twice as many took this view as held that such matters should be left to the Prime Minister or to parliament. It was the most favoured option even among Conservatives, who, understandably, were more likely at that time than other respondents to support prime ministerial authority.

### Figure 3.9. Investigating allegations of ministerial failure

Question: Please imagine there are allegations that a minister in government has [FAILURE]. Which, if any, of the following do you think should happen?



Note: In place of '[FAILURE]', each respondent saw one of the statements on the left of the chart.

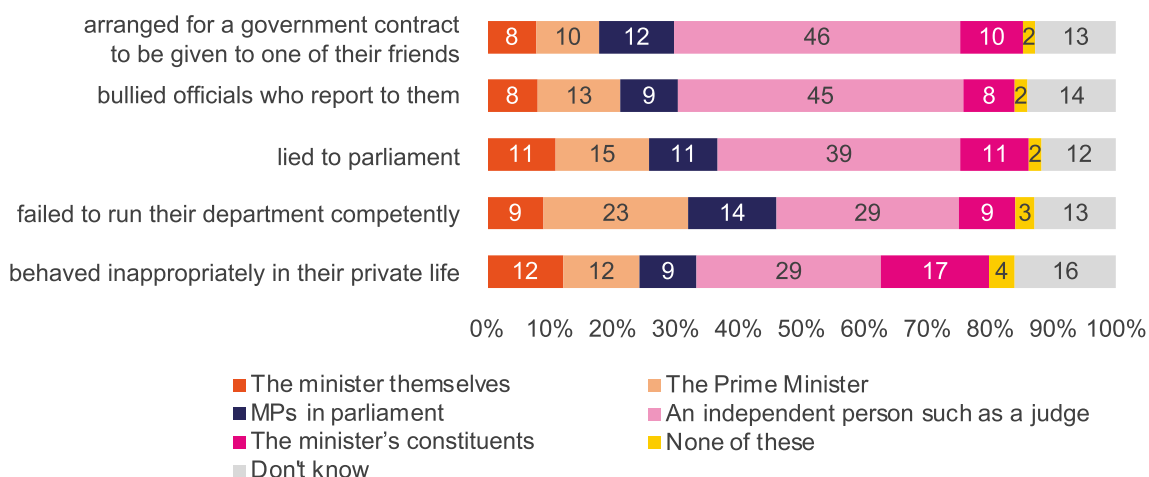
Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.



The nature of the wrongdoing had more impact on answers to a further question, which looked at who respondents thought should decide whether a minister who had been shown to have fallen short in some way ought to resign (Figure 3.10). But the greatest number in each case still wanted ‘an independent person such as a judge’ to decide. People tended to see poor running of a department as a political matter, to be resolved within government or parliament. But many saw fraudulent or bullying behaviour – and lying to parliament – as requiring independent enforcement from outside. Across all the scenarios, few respondents thought sanctions should be decided by voters. Whether that would have been different in the case of failure by an individual MP rather than a minister we do not know.

### Figure 3.10. Punishing ministerial failure

Question: Please imagine there is clear evidence that a minister in government has [FAILURE]. Which, if any, of the following do you think should decide whether they ought to resign?



Note: In place of '[FAILURE]', each respondent saw one of the statements on the left of the chart.

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

These findings suggest that most people want a stronger system for upholding standards than they perceived to exist at the time of the survey in 2022 (it is possible that the subsequent high-profile Privileges Committee investigation into Boris Johnson's parliamentary conduct may have shifted those perceptions somewhat). Most people thought that an independent regulator should have free rein to investigate allegations of misconduct – implying that they would not endorse the current arrangements for ministers, under which the Prime Minister's Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests can launch investigations only with the Prime Minister's agreement.

The survey results, as ever, show people's immediate instincts: the details of structures for investigating alleged ministerial failures are not matters that many respondents will have thought about much before. Additional insight into people's more considered views on upholding standards is available through the citizens' assembly. The relevant recommendations were set out in full in the assembly's report, along with analysis of the thinking that underpinned them. Box 3.2 provides a summary. As with the other specific matters that the assembly expressed views on (seen in later chapters), members agreed an overarching resolution that summed up their view on the matter, plus a series of specific recommendations. In the case of standards, members were almost unanimous in agreeing that more effective policing of ethical standards was needed. They agreed a set of expectations, and said that codes of conduct and mechanisms for enforcing them should be strengthened.

At the same time, the assembly wrestled with a tension between wanting strong enforcement mechanisms on the one hand and, on the other, wanting voters rather than unelected judges or officials to make the ultimate decisions. Thus, they wanted to 'be able to trust their elected representatives to behave honestly and selflessly' (Resolution 6); and they said that 'In matters concerning the conduct of MPs we need to be able to rely on the political process, supported by independent regulators, to result in action by parliament' (Recommendation 6.5). But they also wanted stronger rules and a clear role for regulators (Recommendation 6.2), and believed that MPs who break the rules 'should be fined or otherwise punished' (Recommendation 6.4).



## Box 3.2. Citizens' assembly recommendations: upholding standards

### Resolution 6

We believe that the public should be able to trust their elected representative to behave honestly and selflessly. While the political system is intended to have mechanisms in place to police this, we believe that they are not working well and that greater involvement of independent regulators is needed.

Supported by 95%

Recommendation 6.1: The public should be able to expect members of parliament to conduct themselves ethically in their work and that regulators will investigate conduct that appears dishonest or self-interested, or lacks integrity.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 6.2: The Code of Conduct for MPs, peers and government ministers needs to be strengthened to give clear guidance on what a breach will result in. Regulators need to recommend consistent sanctions to all parties and levels of office, and the public should be able to expect these to be imposed.

Supported by 98%

Recommendation 6.3: The public needs to be able to trust that the recommendations made after an investigation into ministerial conduct by an independent regulator appointed to do this will be respected and implemented by government. If this cannot be guaranteed through the political process then it may require regulators to be given greater powers.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 6.4: Lying or intentionally misleading parliament should be able to be identified as 'contempt of parliament'. As well as being made to give a public apology, MPs who break this rule should be fined or otherwise punished.

Supported by 98%

Recommendation 6.5: In matters concerning the conduct of MPs we need to be able to rely on the political process, supported by independent regulators, to result in action by parliament. Matters relating to ethical behaviour should only be a matter for the courts if there is evidence of illegal activity, like fraud or theft.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 6.6: In the workplace MPs should be subject to the same sanctions as other employees regarding the treatment of staff. Bullying or harassment should not be tolerated.

Supported by 93%

There is sometimes a concern that, over the course of their deliberations, members of a citizens' assembly may not only become more informed about the issues within their remit and more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of different options, but also that they become different from regular members of the public, such that their views can no longer be seen as representative. To check this, we put some of the assembly's recommendations to respondents in survey 2.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of standards, this exercise included Recommendation 6.4 plus a version of Resolution 6 that was couched as a recommendation rather than a statement of belief ('Existing ways of ensuring that elected representatives behave honestly and selflessly are not working well. Greater involvement of independent regulators is needed.'). In total, 83% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with

<sup>1</sup> Given that many survey respondents were likely to be unfamiliar with some of the concepts in the assembly's recommendations, the wording of the recommendations that they saw was in some cases slightly simplified, and for some we added a short explanatory note. Full details of the wording can be seen in the survey 2 questionnaire, available on the project's website. Survey respondents saw varying amounts of information about where the recommendations came from: in particular, some respondents were told that the recommendations came from a citizens' assembly while others were not. As discussed in Chapter 6, this information had only small effects on the responses.



Recommendation 6.4, against just 4% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. On the reworded Resolution 6, 68% agreed or strongly agreed, while 4% disagreed or strongly disagreed (and a large proportion – 28% – said that they didn't know or that they neither agreed nor disagreed). Thus, while the assembly members became more informed about current realities and different policy options, the evidence does not suggest that they became unrepresentative of underlying public attitudes.

## Conclusion

People in the UK care deeply about the standards of behaviour displayed by those in public life. They want politicians to be honest, to act with integrity, and to pursue the public interest, and they feel that many politicians fall far short of these standards at present. They think that systems for enforcing high standards should be tough on demonstrated wrongdoing. Most people think enforcement mechanisms are inadequate at present. In particular, at the time the research was conducted in 2021 and 2022, confidence in the system was being undermined by a perception that leading politicians – especially the Prime Minister at the time, Boris Johnson – had lied regularly but faced no consequences. Most people did not know about existing enforcement mechanisms; so far as they could see, action was either not being taken, or moving far too slowly.

At the same time, many people, particularly after deliberation, recognise that there are some quandaries in how to design a system of enhanced enforcement: on the one hand, they think that the role of independent regulators should be bolstered; on the other hand, they do not want to empower unelected officials at the expense of voters. They see no danger to the second of those values from enhancing the powers of regulators to investigate allegations of wrongdoing and thereby provide transparency. Whether they think that regulators, judges, or other independent actors should also have powers to levy sanctions depends in part on the nature of the wrongdoing that has been identified. On matters such as bullying or corruption, they think politicians should be subject to the same rules as everyone else. When it comes to poor ministerial performance, they are more inclined to think that elected politicians should decide the appropriate sanctions. But they are clear that, where the latter approach is taken, politicians do need to take their enforcement role seriously. Otherwise, as citizens' assembly members warned, public confidence may require that more decisions be removed from politicians' hands.

Across all of this evidence, survey respondents and citizens' assembly members clearly rejected the view, expressed by some politicians, that, in a democracy, the ballot box should provide the sole mechanism by which the elected are held to account. Indeed, in our conversations with assembly members, some expressed rage at the idea that they should have to use their precious vote – available only once every four or five years – to deliver a verdict on a politician whose misbehaviour was evident. They wanted mechanisms to exist for such cases to be dealt with swiftly, so they could concentrate at the ballot box on the core policy choices.



# Chapter 4. Government and Parliament

The government and parliament lie at the heart of the representative system, in the UK as in other modern democracies. This chapter therefore explores public attitudes to these institutions. The first section looks at views on the appropriate distribution of power between government and parliament. Do people believe that leaders need substantial freedom to craft and implement coherent policy agendas, or that parliament needs a greater role to ensure that proposals are subject to detailed scrutiny and all voices have a chance to influence outcomes? The next three sections then focus on the House of Commons: on the role of MPs, the composition of the chamber, and the voting system through which MPs are elected. The subsequent section turns to the House of Lords, examining views on its role and composition. The final section looks briefly at arrangements within the executive branch: particularly, the role of the civil service.

It is important to emphasise again that most people do not have detailed knowledge of current institutional arrangements. When they respond to questions about those arrangements, they are not responding to the longstanding debates about possible democratic reforms that may be familiar to many of the people who read this report. Rather, their responses reflect their basic instincts as to how the country should be governed. Members of the citizens' assembly clearly had much greater knowledge by the time they drew their conclusions, but, even there, we should not exaggerate the depth of understanding gained within the limited time that was available.

Even if the responses primarily reflect broad instincts, a clear overarching message emerges. This reiterates the themes observed in the preceding chapters: of scepticism towards concentrated power and a desire to see open and inclusive discussion in parliament, reflecting public wishes and interests, at the heart of the nation's political affairs.

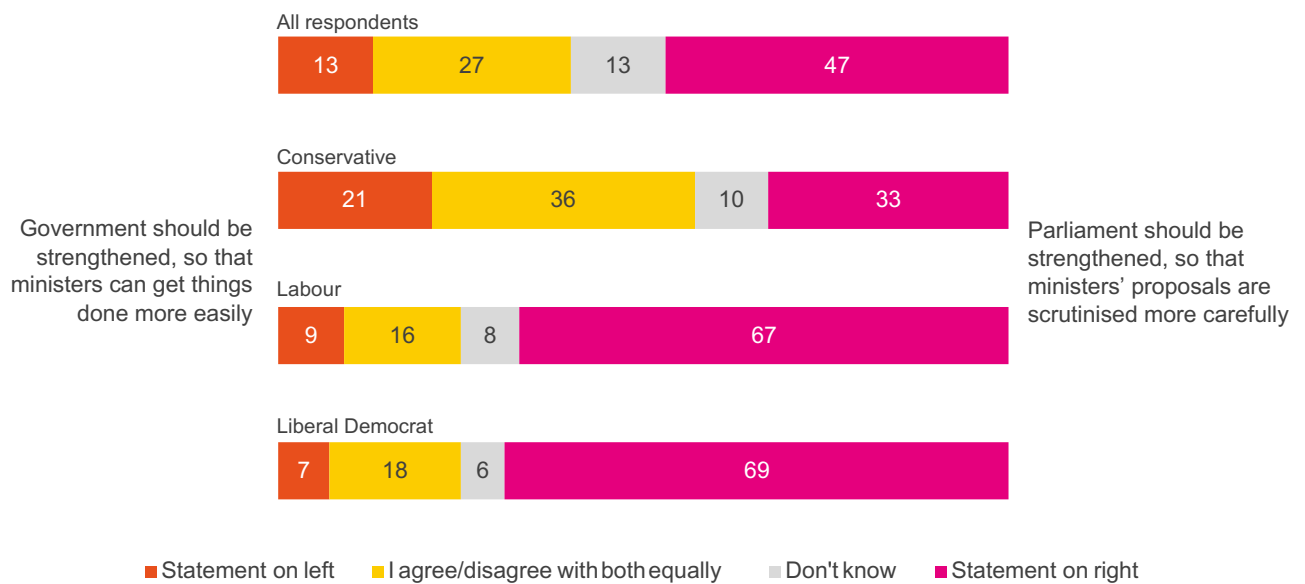
## Relations between government and parliament

The 2022 survey asked a general question about whether government or parliament (or both, or neither) should be strengthened. As shown by the top bar in Figure 4.1, the largest number of respondents thought that parliament should be strengthened to allow for greater scrutiny, while relatively few thought that government should be strengthened to get things done more easily. That preference was overwhelming among opposition party supporters (the lower bars in Figure 4.1). But even among those who voted for the Conservative Party in 2019, 33% thought parliament should be strengthened, against 21% who thought government should be strengthened, while 36% said that they agreed or disagreed with both statements equally.



## Figure 4.1. The strength of government and parliament

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

The relationship between government and parliament was the first concrete issue examined by the citizens' assembly. In their overarching resolution on the topic, most assembly members, like most survey respondents, saw a need to strengthen parliament. Indeed, the majority for this view after deliberation was much higher than that revealed in the survey (Resolution 1 in Box 4.1). We cannot be sure, but one possible interpretation of these patterns is that survey respondents, not having a clear view on the question, often reverted to whether they supported the government or not, while assembly members, after deliberation, could look at the merits of different democratic arrangements more objectively. Notwithstanding their near unanimity on the desirability of strengthening parliament, assembly members were also cautious: in their Recommendation 1.2, they said that 'the government should not be unduly blocked or delayed in implementing' policies that were 'clearly laid out' in the governing party's manifesto. They were thus weighing two sometimes conflicting values: that the voices of all voters should be heard; but also that ministers should be able to implement the programme upon which they were elected.



## Box 4.1. Citizens' assembly recommendations: government and parliament

### Resolution 1

We believe that parliament needs to be able to play a stronger role in scrutinising the actions of government. Collectively, it represents the voice of the electorate as a whole, whereas not everyone voted for the government.

Supported by 92%

Recommendation 1.1: When significant new policies are announced by the government there should be an opportunity for full parliamentary scrutiny before decisions are made.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 1.2: While there needs to be scope for the opposition to question policies proposed by a democratically elected government, and for MPs to scrutinise details, when a policy was clearly laid out in their manifesto the government should not be unduly blocked or delayed in implementing it.

Supported by 92%

Recommendation 1.3: In the interest of transparency, but subject to the need to maintain security, there should be a public record of the expert advice given to the government to inform their policy decisions so that members of the public can understand the basis of the decision, even if they don't agree with it.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 1.4: Government should not be able to make significant legal changes – whether through primary or secondary legislation – without proper scrutiny. A cross-party parliamentary committee – not the government – should decide which laws are judged 'significant'.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 1.5: In cases of emergency when there is a need to introduce new laws quickly without allowing for full scrutiny and debate, these should be clearly identified as temporary laws, with a scheduled review date as early as possible, at which point parliament should have the opportunity to debate the law, and to amend it or repeal it.

Supported by 98%

Recommendation 1.6: When voting on new laws that were not key manifesto pledges, MPs should have permission to vote in a way that represents the views of their constituents without penalty, particularly on issues that directly affect their constituency even if that is against the position of their party.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 1.7: MPs must be able to ensure that issues that are important to the public and/or have significant public support are raised in parliament, debated publicly and decided, even if they are not part of the government's programme or are something that the government actively disagrees with.

Supported by 95%

Recommendation 1.8: The right of all elected MPs to propose a bill should be protected. A cross-party committee should decide which bills are debated in parliament. Where there is substantial support for a bill, time should be available to scrutinise it and decide on it properly.

Supported by 88%

Recommendation 1.9: More fixed time needs to be reserved in the parliamentary schedule to ensure that matters such as private members' bills and public petitions can be debated and decided, without being 'talked out'. But this should be balanced against the right of government to have the time to deliver on what they were elected to do.

Supported by 92%

Recommendation 1.10: The government should propose when parliament goes to recess, but MPs should be able to debate and amend the proposal before a vote in parliament. Government can however recall Parliament in the case of exceptional circumstance / emergency.

Supported by 91%

Recommendation 1.11: A petition signed by half of the elected MPs should be able to demand that parliament is recalled from recess to debate important decisions.

Supported by 94%

Recommendation 1.12: The Prime Minister should only be able to call an early general election if it is supported by a vote in the House of Commons.

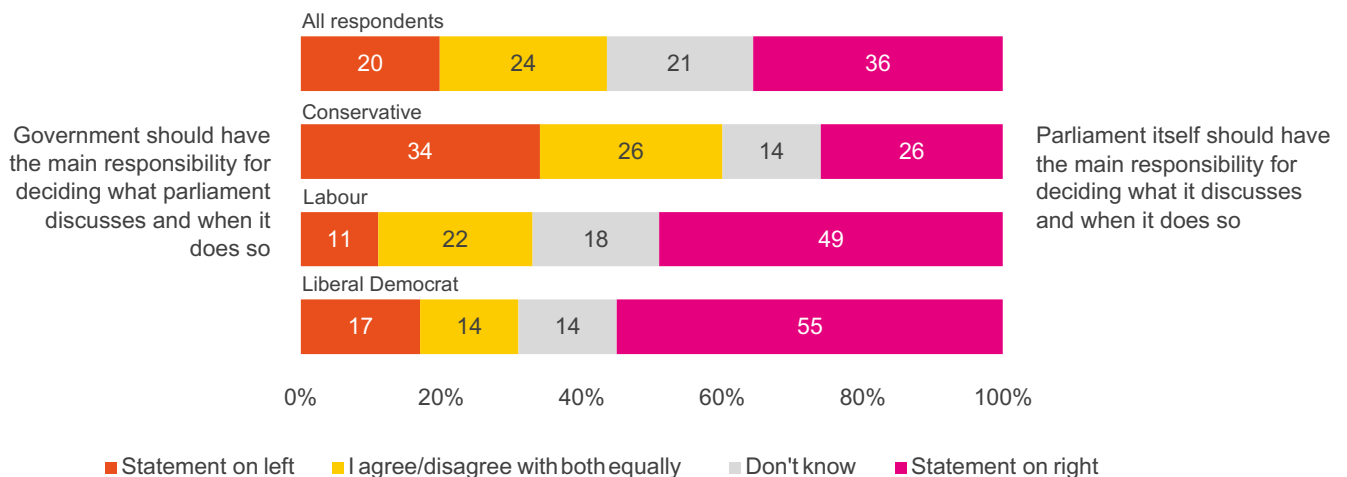
Supported by 78%



Survey questions and the deliberations of the citizens' assembly also probed into more specific aspects of the relationship between government and parliament. One topic that both explored was attitudes towards the allocation of parliamentary time. Survey 2 asked about responsibilities for deciding what is discussed – and when it is discussed – in parliament (Figure 4.2). Many respondents were unsure, but the overall pattern was similar to that seen in Figure 4.1 – albeit less dramatic. There was substantially more support for parliament deciding these matters than for government doing so. Since the government at present largely controls what gets debated in the House of Commons, this suggests that many would instinctively support a move away from the status quo.

### Figure 4.2. Control over the parliamentary agenda – general

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

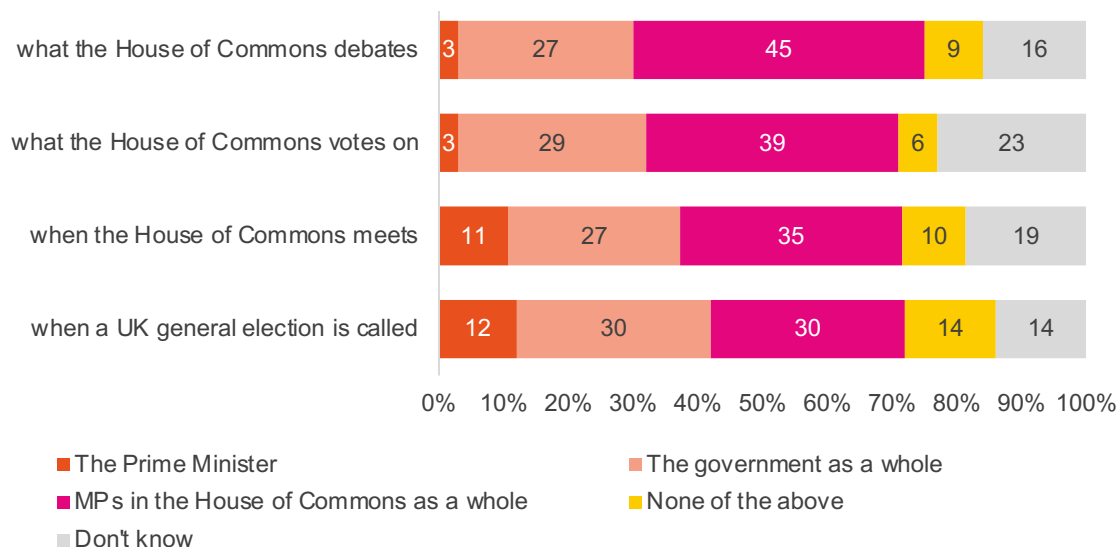


Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

The 2021 survey asked about several more specific aspects of parliamentary agenda control (Figure 4.3). Respondents were most likely to support empowering MPs to decide what the House of Commons debates. But they were somewhat more likely to think that ministers should make what is perhaps the most fundamental decision about parliamentary time: namely, when parliament is dissolved and a new election called. This seems likely to reflect awareness among some respondents that this power has traditionally lain – and again today lies – in the hands of the Prime Minister.

### Figure 4.3. Control over the parliamentary agenda – specific dimensions

Question: Which of the following do you think should decide...?



Note: Each respondent saw one version of the question, corresponding to one of the bars.

Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

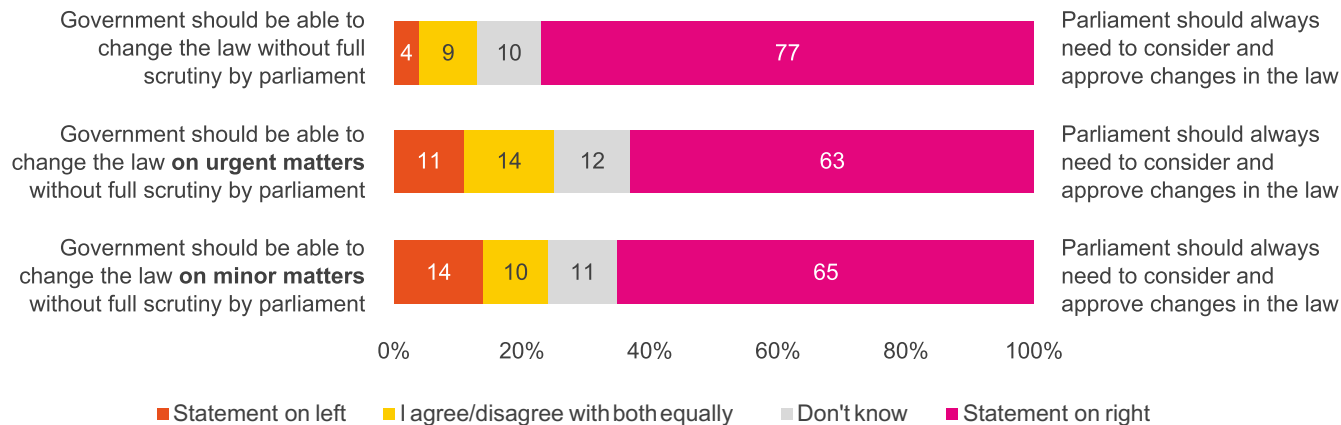


The citizens' assembly agreed several recommendations regarding parliamentary time (see Box 4.1, above). This was among the specific topics addressed by expert speakers at the assembly, who expressed a range of views. Members concluded that more time should be devoted to non-government business, such as private members' bills and petitions (Recommendation 1.9). They thought that MPs should be able to amend the government's proposals for parliamentary recess dates (Recommendation 1.10) and be able to force the recall of parliament during recess (Recommendation 1.11). Finally, most thought that an early general election should be possible only following a Commons vote (Recommendation 1.12) – one of relatively few cases where the post-deliberation conclusions of assembly members contradicted the views of the greatest number of survey respondents.

Beyond options for the control of parliamentary time, the surveys and citizens' assembly also explored views on the relationship between government and parliament in policy-making. Survey respondents overwhelmingly thought that parliament's approval should be needed before changing any law. The 2022 survey put three variants of this question to different respondents: the first asked about law-making in general, the second about law-making 'on urgent matters', and the third about law-making 'on minor matters'. Though respondents were somewhat more likely to favour government action on urgent or minor matters than on changes in general, the large majority in each case thought that parliamentary scrutiny and approval should be required. (Figure 4.4). Conservative voters were more willing to allow law-making by government than were Labour voters: for example, 23% of 2019 Conservative voters thought that government should be able to change the law on urgent matters without full parliamentary scrutiny, compared to only 3% of Labour voters. Nevertheless, the majorities saying that parliament should always need to approve changes were in both cases again clear: 53% of Conservative voters chose this option, as did 78% of Labour voters. Clearly, few people know in detail how laws are made; but the findings suggest that many would be concerned if they understood how widely delegated legislation is used at present.

#### Figure 4.4. The roles of government and parliament in changing the law

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



*Note: Each respondent was given one of these pairs of statements.*

*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

Citizens' assembly members again heard from experts expressing competing stances on this point. Having considered this evidence, they reached conclusions that were very similar to the views of survey respondents. Of the members participating in the final vote, 96% wanted 'full parliamentary scrutiny' of significant new policies before any decisions were made (Recommendation 1.1 – see Box 4.1, above), and 93% likewise said there should be no significant legal changes without full scrutiny (Recommendation 1.4). They added, more specifically, that, if urgency did require law-making without such scrutiny, such laws should be temporary only (Recommendation 1.5). And they wanted greater scope for backbench MPs, acting on behalf of the public, to exercise agency beyond the control of party whips – in voting (Recommendation 1.6), in raising matters for discussion (Recommendation 1.7), and in proposing bills that had a chance of passing (Recommendation 1.8).



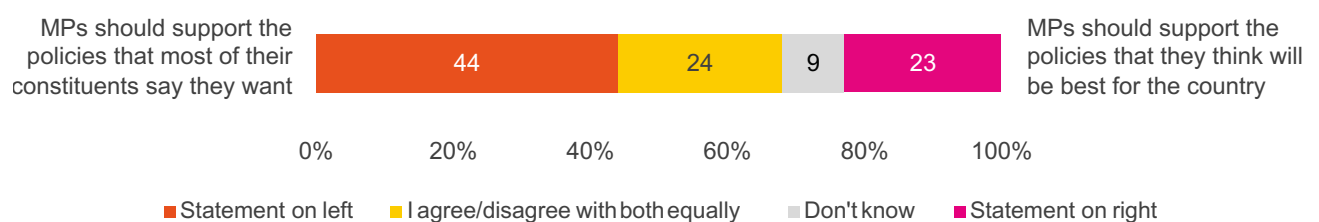
As in the case of the assembly's recommendations on standards set out in Chapter 3, we added a further check on whether the views of assembly members might have deviated from those of the wider public over the course of their deliberations by putting six of the twelve recommendations shown in Box 4.1 to the respondents in survey 2. In all cases, over half the respondents said that they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the recommendations. Most widely supported were Recommendations 1.1 (full parliamentary scrutiny for new policies) and 1.7 (that MPs should be able to ensure important matters are debated): these were backed, respectively, by 72% and 76% of all respondents. Recommendation 1.6 (that MPs should be free to vote with their constituents against the party line) and Recommendations 1.10 and 1.11 (calling for greater parliamentary control over recess dates and recall) received roughly two-thirds support. In all these cases, only 4–6% of respondents said they 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. The lowest support was for Recommendation 1.12, on requiring a Commons vote before an early dissolution of parliament – which was also the recommendation relating to parliament and government with the least backing among assembly members. Even here, however, 52% of respondents backed the recommendation, while only 15% opposed it. In all cases, substantial numbers of respondents – between 21% and 33% – said that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation or that they didn't know. All of this suggests that the assembly members' views remained strongly in line with wider public opinion at the conclusion of the six weekends of deliberations. Those views became richer, more detailed, and more confidently held over the course of the assembly, but did not markedly change.

## The role of MPs

The survey findings and citizens' assembly conclusions shed considerable fresh light on what role people think MPs should perform. There is a centuries-old discussion – often pegged to Edmund Burke's address to the electors of Bristol in 1774 (Burke 1777 [1774]) – over whether MPs should be delegates who follow their constituents' wishes or trustees who exercise their own judgement as to what will best serve the public interest. The 2022 survey asked respondents to choose between these different visions of representation, and almost twice as many chose the delegate model as the trustee model (Figure 4.5). This amplifies the finding shown above in Figure 3.4, that people are much warier of politicians doing what 'they think is best' rather than simply what 'is best'. Both questions relate back to the low public trust in politicians shown in Chapter 1.

### Figure 4.5. The role of MPs: delegates or trustees

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



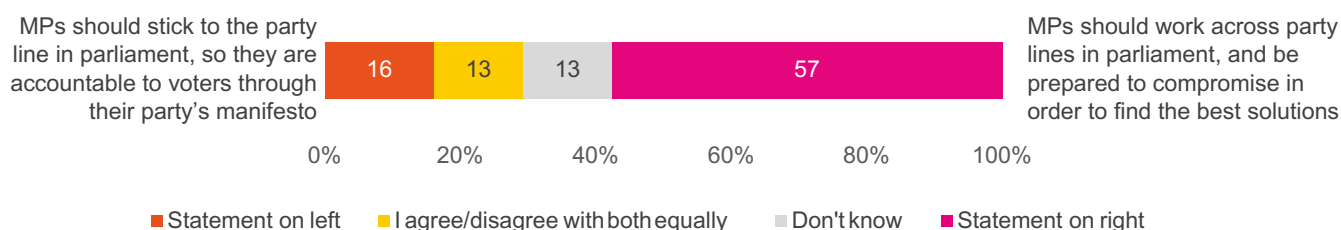
Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

Further illumination comes from two additional questions. First, the 2022 survey asked about whether MPs should follow the party whip or work across party lines. Knowing from other findings (discussed in Chapter 6) that many people have a very negative view of political parties, we sought to word the first option in a manner that might overcome that negativity, linking whipping to accountability to voters. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 4.6, cross-party working was favoured by a margin of more than 3:1.



## Figure 4.6. Party voting versus working cross-party

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

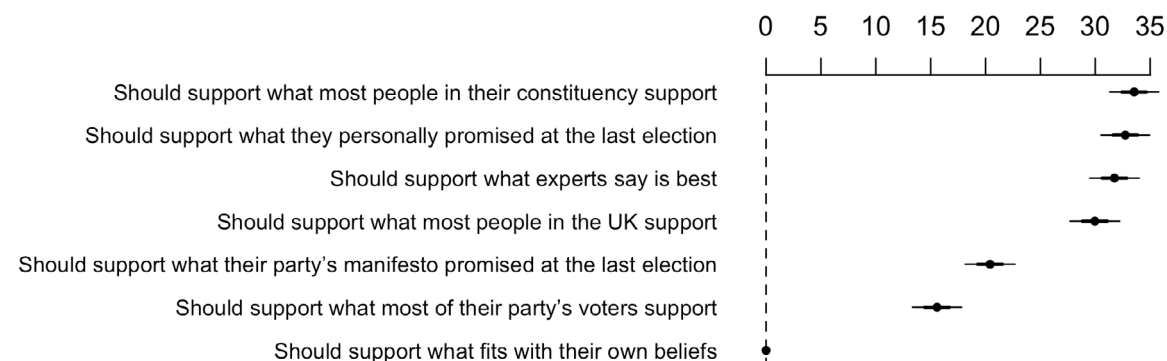


Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

Second, a question in the 2021 survey asked respondents to prioritise a range of different factors that MPs might take into account when deciding how to vote. Doing what fitted with their own beliefs came last, by a large margin. Doing what their own party's voters supported or what their party's manifesto contained also fared poorly. Respondents instead gave roughly equal backing to four remaining options: that MPs should do what most people in their constituencies supported, do what they personally promised at the last election, follow expert recommendations, or follow the views of the UK public (Figure 4.7). The last three of these items suggest a clear preference for acting according to the general public interest rather than any more sectional interests. The prioritisation of personal promises over party promises is perhaps more surprising, but fits with other evidence in this report of negative views towards political parties.

## Figure 4.7. Views on how MPs should reach decisions

Question: Please imagine that an MP has to choose between [A] or what [B]. Which do you think they should choose?



Note: In place of '[A]' and '[B]', each respondent saw two of the options shown. The chart shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these, with the least favoured option set at 0. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, if faced with a choice between 'Should support what experts say is best' (32) and 'Should support what fits with their own beliefs' (0), the number choosing the former would be 32 percentage points higher than the number choosing the latter.

Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.



These various findings suggest that most people are attracted to the idea that policy-makers should work together to find the best solutions. This fits the evidence from the citizens' assembly statements set out in Chapters 1 and 2: people want politicians to work constructively in the public interest. One of the assembly's agreed principles was:

**Power sharing ...**

**so that the interests of all are taken into account and decisions are made for the 'good of the people' as a whole.**

(Principle 13; see Box 2.1)

It also fits with the assembly's Recommendation 1.6: members did not want MPs to be bound by the party whip on matters that had not been 'key manifesto pledges'. Yet, while most people want MPs to perform such a deliberative role, they do not trust them to do so in pursuit of the public interest rather than their own interests. As seen in Chapter 1, trust in politicians is very low; most people feel the political world is unrepresentative of them and unresponsive to their wishes.

Many MPs see the trustee model of representation as sacrosanct, and work hard to embody its demands in their work. But successful trusteeship requires trust, which is lacking. Without it, most members of the public cleave strongly to a delegate model of representation.

## The composition of parliament

Beyond the delegate and trustee models, the concept of representation has multiple further dimensions, including descriptive representation – the degree to which representatives are like those they represent – and how representatives are chosen. This section examines the first of these, while the next section turns to the second.

One of the principles agreed by the citizens' assembly – and backed by 81% of members – was:

**Diversity in our elected representatives ...**

**so that our parliaments and governments are representative of the electorate as a whole.**

(Principle 14; see Box 2.1)

Many members perceived a lack of diversity in parliament and were concerned that the demographics and backgrounds of current MPs are not representative of the wider public. They focused on the need to remove barriers to ensure equal opportunities for all to enter parliament, regardless of background, profession, gender, or ethnicity. They felt that informing and educating voters could encourage more people to consider standing and that other barriers, such as financial costs, needed to be removed. The assembly followed up this principle with a specific recommendation:

**Recommendation 2.7: The people elected to represent the public in parliament need to be more diverse and more closely represent the make-up of the UK population so that people can recognise themselves and their interests within the representative system.**

Supported by 83%

Survey 2 asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with this recommendation. More than half of respondents (54%) said that they agreed or strongly agreed, while 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 31% said that they neither agreed nor disagreed or that they didn't know. This was one of the lower levels of support that we recorded for an assembly recommendation among survey respondents; but the proposal was still backed by a margin of over three to one.

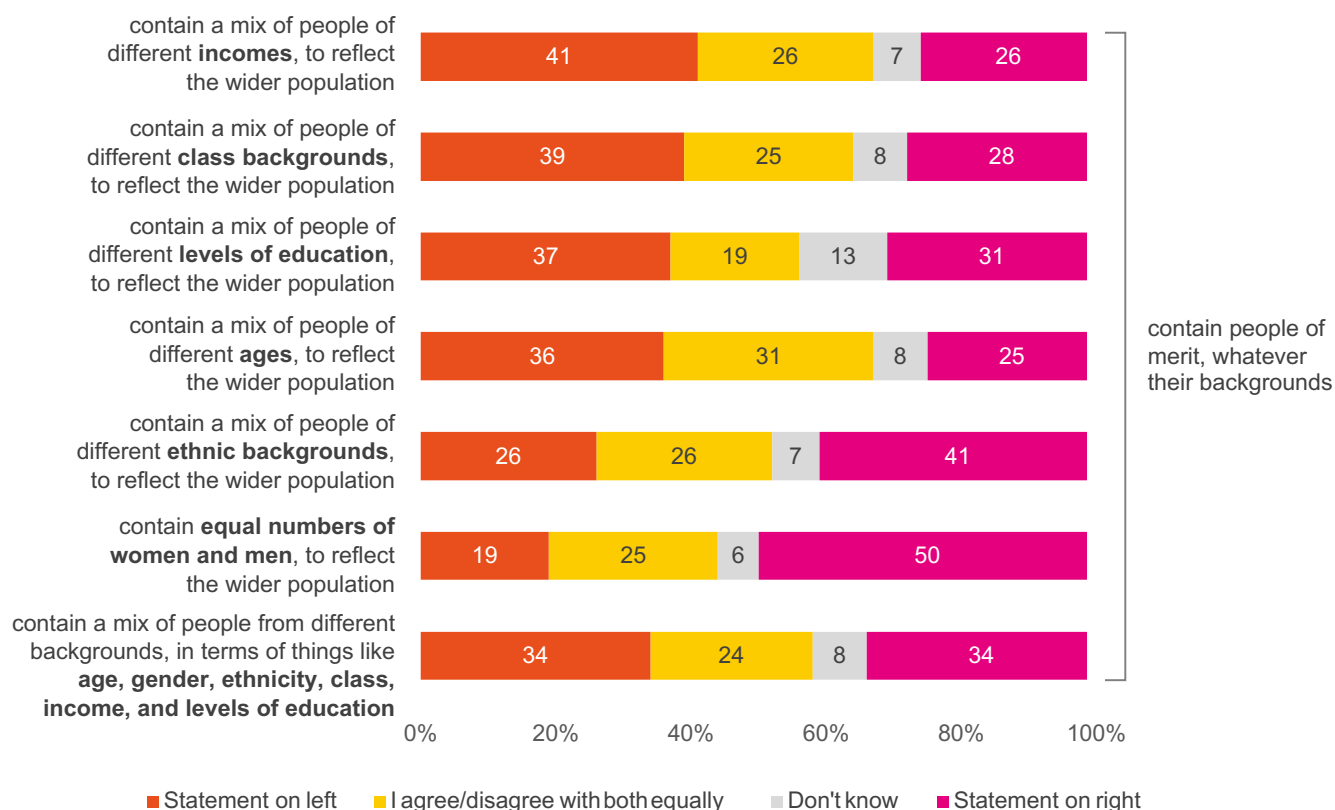
Survey 2 also included a question that examined perspectives on descriptive representation further (Figure 4.8). This indicates that people tend to be supportive of seeking descriptive representation (rather than pure selection on 'merit') in relation to incomes, class, education, and age, but less so in relation to ethnic background. The difference might reflect racial prejudice, or simply that people are more likely to prioritise descriptive representation where they feel underrepresented themselves, and that fewer come from minority ethnic backgrounds. The support figure was also notably lower with respect to gender, but this needs to be



interpreted with caution: this item necessitated a different kind of wording, so the option on the left was framed more narrowly than for the other versions of the question. When respondents were asked about descriptive representation in general (see the bottom row of the chart), the support for this was equal to that for selection solely on 'merit'.

### Figure 4.8. Ideas about descriptive representation

Question: Is it more important for parliament to [BACKGROUND], or to contain people of merit, whatever their backgrounds?



Note: For each respondent, [BACKGROUND] was replaced by one of the phrases to the left of the chart.

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

## Electing MPs

Given time constraints, we did not include the system through which MPs are elected among the topics for discussion at the citizens' assembly. Significant numbers of members were interested in the issue, however, and this was reflected directly in two of the principles that members agreed:

### Free and inclusive elections ...

so that everyone can participate – regardless of profession, background, gender, race or religion – and have their vote count equally

(Principle 5)

### Fair representation ...

so that the people who are elected are actually representing the views of their electorate and decisions are driven by 'we the people'.

(Principle 8; see Box 2.1)



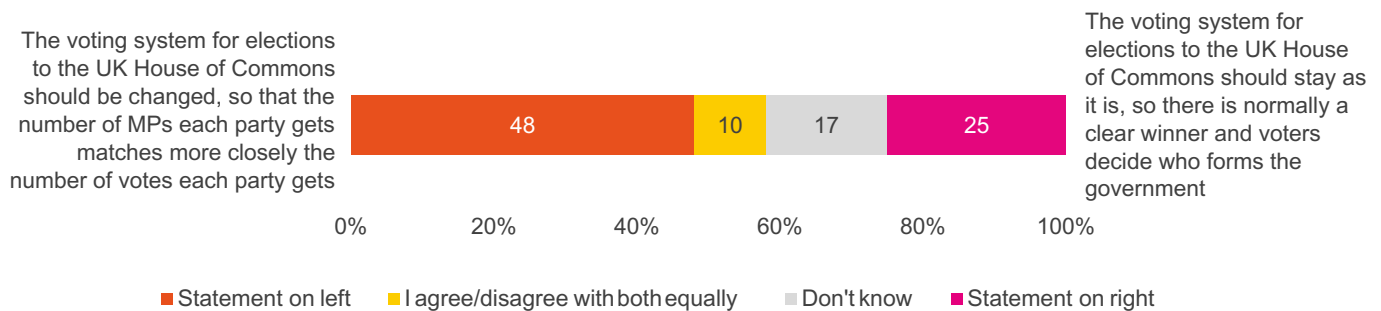


Several of the statements about a 'good' democracy agreed by groups of members likewise reflected thinking about voting systems. One, for example, called for 'an opportunity to explore proportional representation to enable the better inclusion of everyone's views in parliament'; another called for 'fair, equal and proportionate representation in government, so that it represents the public as a whole'. At the end of the assembly, members were asked whether there were any aspects of democracy they would have liked to discuss more. The electoral system or electoral reform was the most mentioned topic, highlighted by 10 members.

Given this and other evidence of public interest in the subject, two related questions were included in survey 2. One posed a simple choice between the status quo and a proportional voting system, in each case deploying one of the key arguments used in favour of such a system. Almost twice as many people supported reform 'so that the number of MPs ... matches more closely the number of votes' as supported the status quo 'so there is normally a clear winner and voters decide who forms the government' (Figure 4.9). Support for reform was overwhelming among 2019 Labour voters (66%, against 12% who backed the status quo) and among Liberal Democrat voters (69% to 10%). The greatest number of Conservative voters preferred the status quo, but by a much smaller margin: 34% backed reform, while 46% opposed it.

### Figure 4.9. Electoral systems: proportional representation versus first past the post

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



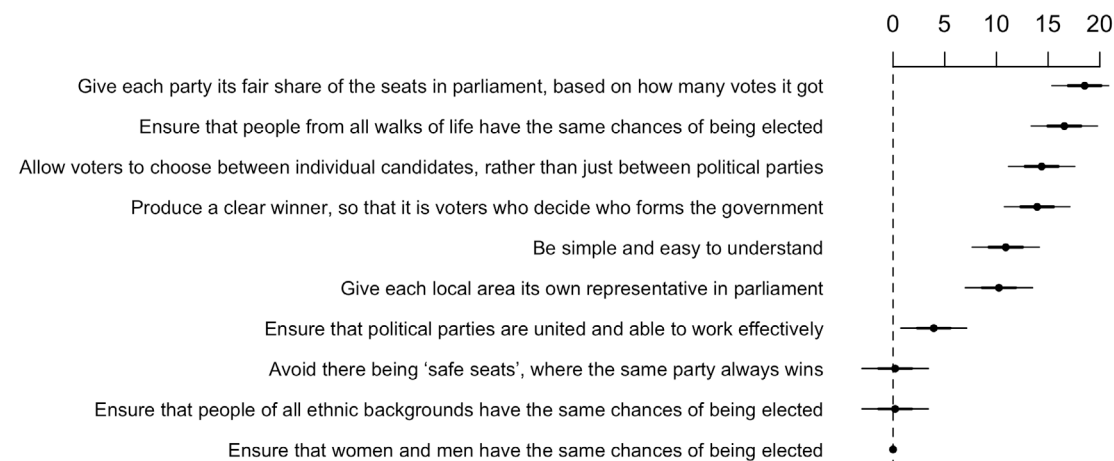
Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

The second question dug into the principles that respondents thought the voting system should advance. Survey 1 had asked what respondents thought were the most important features of a democracy, and the highest-ranked feature was that 'if those in power do a poor job, they can be voted out'. This emphasis on accountability might suggest that the case for adopting a proportional voting system could be hard to make. The question in survey 2 asked specifically what it is 'more important for the voting system used in general elections to do'. This time, as shown in Figure 4.10, the principle that the voting system should 'produce a clear winner, so that it is voters who decide who forms the government' came only fourth, with the top principle being 'Give each party its fair share of the seats in parliament, based on how many votes it got'. But the differences were small: the 'clear winner' option scores 14 on the scale in the chart, while the 'fair share' option scores 19, a difference of 5. This indicates that, faced with a choice between the two, about 5% more people would choose the latter than the former.

Overall, these responses would fit with a preference for a proportional system – but not a particularly strong one.

### Figure 4.10. Views on what the voting system should do

Question: Which of the following is it more important for the voting system used in general elections to do?



*Note: Each respondent saw two randomly selected options from the list shown. The chart shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these, with the least favoured option set at 0. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, if faced with a choice between 'Give each party its fair share of the seats in parliament, based on how many votes it got' (19) and 'Ensure that women and men have the same chances of being elected' (0), the number choosing the former would be 19 percentage points higher than the number choosing the latter.*

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

## The role and composition of the House of Lords

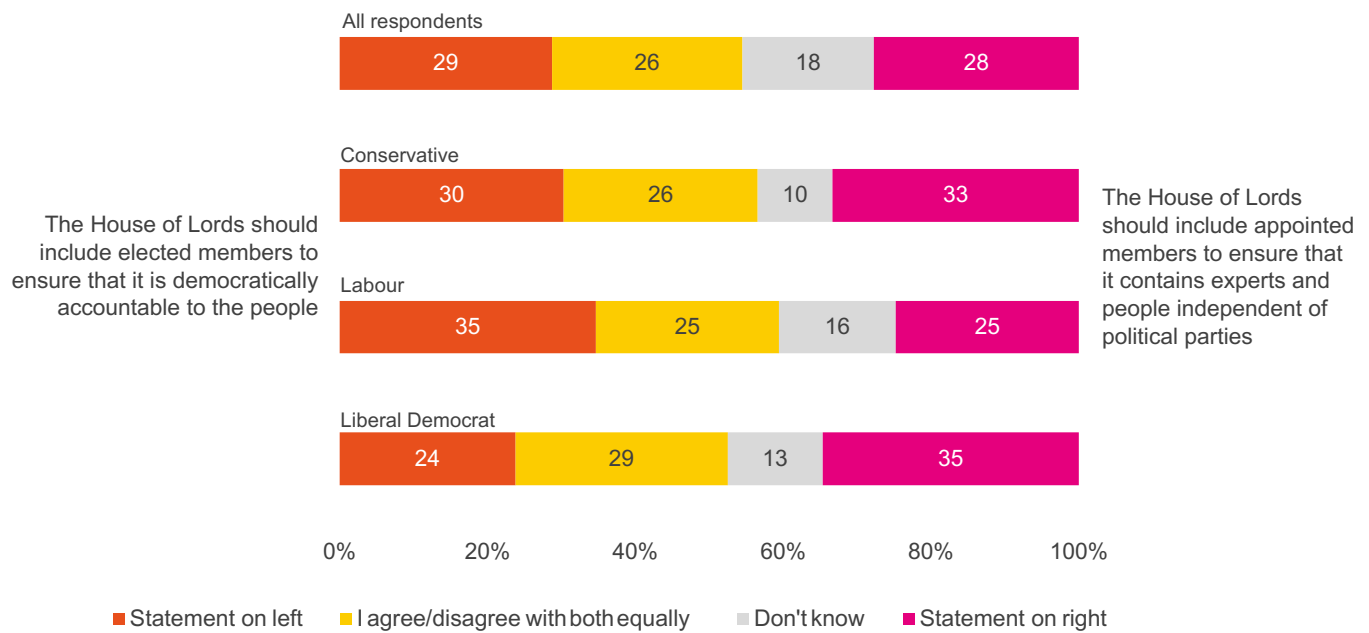
Reform of the House of Lords has been on the political agenda from time to time for well over a century. A commission chaired for Labour by the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown suggested in 2022 that the chamber should be abolished in its current form and replaced with an elected assembly of the nations and regions (Commission on the UK's Future 2022: 134–43). Others advocate more gradual reforms – regulating appointments more tightly while retaining the strengths of the existing system – at least as a first step. The citizens' assembly did not discuss Lords reform. But survey 2 asked about both the composition and the role of the second chamber.

On the basic principles of composition, shown in Figure 4.11, respondents were almost evenly split into three groups: those favouring inclusion of elected members; those favouring inclusion of appointed members; and those saying 'I agree/disagree with both equally', which could imply support for a chamber of mixed composition. There were some differences between supporters of different parties, but these were – perhaps surprisingly – small.



### Figure 4.11. Composition of the House of Lords

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

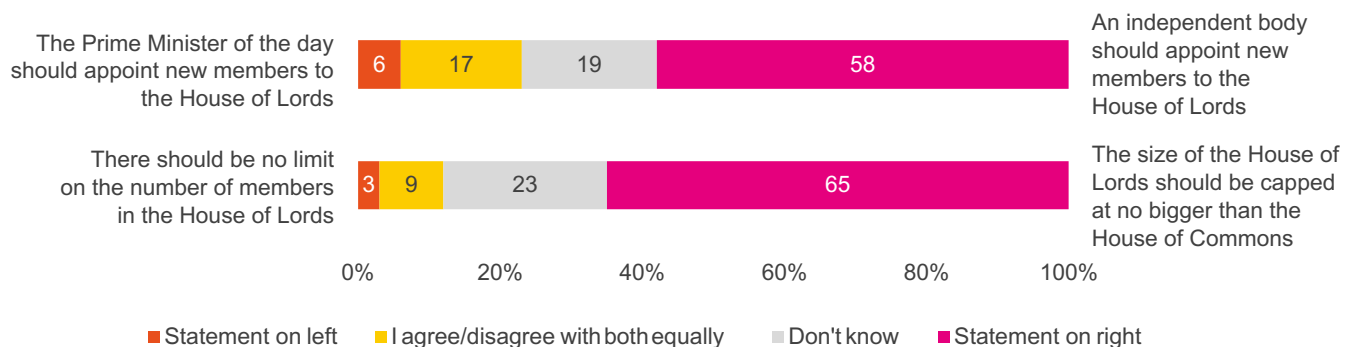


Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

As Figure 4.12 indicates, however, overwhelming majorities did support certain reforms: that appointments should be made by an independent body rather than the Prime Minister, and that there should be a cap on the size of the chamber. There were some differences between voters for different parties, but these were never large. Even among 2019 Conservative voters, 55% supported an independent body to make appointments, while just 10% thought that the Prime Minister should have this role. Conservatives (at 77%) supported a cap on the size of the chamber more strongly than did any other group.

### Figure 4.12. Appointments to the House of Lords

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



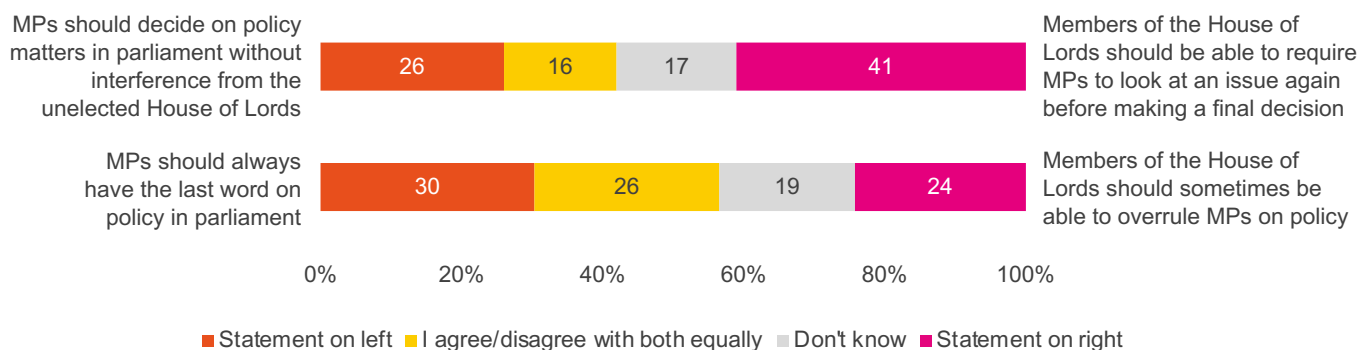
Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

On the role of the House of Lords, survey 2 asked different respondents slightly different questions in order to explore how far views depended on whether the second chamber was presented as having the power to overrule the House of Commons or merely ask it to look at a decision again (Figure 4.13). In the version where the Lords could just require MPs to look again, substantially more respondents backed this role than

opposed it – even though the question referred to the Lords rather negatively as ‘unelected’. Faced with the notion of the Lords overruling the Commons, by contrast, the split was more even, with the greater number opposing. We also varied question wording, finding that respondents were more likely to favour a role for the Lords if the question mentioned that peers ‘are often experts’, and less likely to do so if it noted that MPs ‘are accountable to voters’.

### Figure 4.13. Role of the House of Lords

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



Note: Each respondent was given one of these pairs of statements.

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

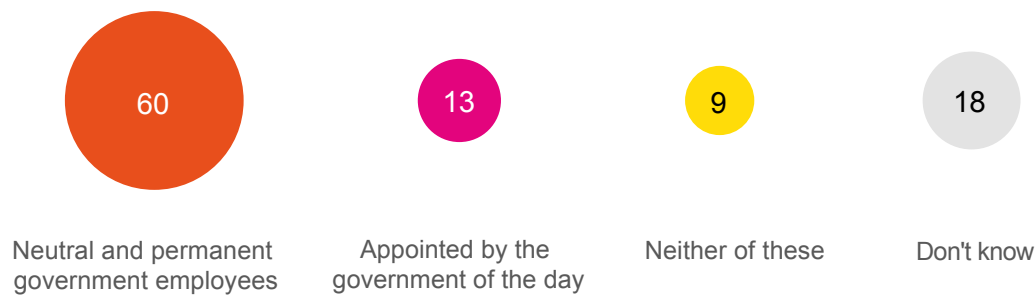
## Within the executive branch: the role of officials

This report has already looked at one aspect of the role of impartial officials: Chapter 3 examined attitudes towards the role of regulators in upholding standards in public life, with particular reference to cases of alleged failure by ministers. This showed that both survey respondents and members of the citizens' assembly saw the function of regulators as important, both in investigating allegations of wrongdoing and in enforcement.

The project did not examine the wider role of civil servants in detail. But one question in survey 1 did inquire about attitudes towards the core principle structuring the civil service: whether civil servants should be politically neutral (as is the case in the UK today), or whether they should be appointed by the politicians in power at any given time to align with their agenda (as is true to varying degrees in some other countries, most prominently the United States). As shown in Figure 4.14, a substantial majority of respondents backed the principle of the impartial civil service. This fits with the recurring theme seen throughout this project in responses to questions about institutional arrangements: a suspicion of concentrated power and a desire to see policy-making shaped by an inclusive range of voices, including those of experts. As elsewhere, this presumably also related to most people's underlying distrust of politicians.

### Figure 4.14. Attitudes to the civil service

Question: Do you think that unelected senior officials who advise government ministers should be people who are neutral and permanent government employees, or do you think they should be people who are appointed by the government of the day?



Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

## Conclusion

The evidence set out in this chapter reinforces the conclusions reached in previous ones. Most members of the public in the UK are sceptical towards the concentration of power in the hands of a few ministers, and prefer to see strong checks and balances – provided by parliament, and also by the impartial civil service. They certainly do not want such arrangements to be taken too far: there is also a desire for governments to be able to implement their manifesto commitments without undue constraint. But the desire for checks and balances appears to have two bases. The first is negative: the low trust in politicians that we saw in Chapter 1. If you do not trust those in power to act with integrity, you are likely to want them to be subject to limits. The other driver is more positive: a recognition that the UK contains many people with diverse views, and a belief that policy-makers should take account of such views when making policy. These themes are examined further in Chapter 8.

More specifically, there is public support for giving parliament greater control over its agenda and timetable, and for empowering backbenchers to push issues up the agenda and introduce legislation. There is also a strong belief that the government should not be able to make laws without the full scrutiny of parliament. Most people want MPs to be more responsive to public opinion than they are perceived to be at present. Many people are very open to the idea of electoral reform – though supporters of the status quo have arguments that also resonate with the public. There is near-universal concern about the current system for appointments to the House of Lords. Many people back at least an elected element in the second chamber, but there is substantial support for the inclusion of appointed experts as well. The principle of a neutral and permanent civil service is widely backed.

# Chapter 5. Law and the Courts

Some of the most divisive constitutional debates of recent years have focused on the proper role of law and the courts. Almost all politicians pay at least lip service to the rule of law, and for most it is a fundamental and unshakable principle; but some have appeared at times to regard it as dispensable when it has posed a barrier to their preferred course. Equally, while rights or liberties are highly esteemed on all sides, there are debates about which rights should be prioritised and how these rights are best protected: to what degree political processes can be relied on for that purpose, and to what degree extra controls from courts and a more 'legal constitution' are needed.

This chapter examines public attitudes on these issues. The first focuses on broad principles of the rule of law and human rights, while the second investigates the role of the courts. The evidence suggests that support for the rule of law and for the concept of human rights is very widespread. And support for a powerful role for the courts is stronger than the recent public discourse might have led us to expect. There are some disagreements over which rights or liberties deserve protection, but here too differences are not as stark as may sometimes be supposed.

## The rule of law and human rights

The evidence points to strong public support for the rule of law. One of the principles agreed by the citizens' assembly – and backed by 96% of members – was:

### Rules of law that apply equally

... so that there are clear lines between the church, state and judiciary, opportunities to abuse power are curtailed, and corrupt or dishonest practices are penalised.

(Principle 3; see Box 2.1)

That fits with the survey findings already set out in Chapter 2, which showed that respondents rejected the idea of a 'strongman' leader who is above the law (Figure 2.3).

Beyond the general issue of the rule of law, members of the citizens' assembly also wanted to highlight the particular importance of rights. Two further principles for a good democracy that they identified, agreed respectively by 98% and 93% of members, were:

### Freedom of thought and speech

... so that divergent views are welcomed and recognised in the public domain and there is an ability to question and protest to drive change.

(Principle 2)

### A respect for the fundamental human rights of all people

... so that governments cannot wilfully discriminate or create rules that are systematically prejudiced against sections of society.

(Principle 9; see Box 2.1)

The first of these principles highlights core democratic freedoms. As was indicated in Chapter 2, when assembly members talked about rights, it was often these fundamental freedoms that they had primarily in mind. We pick these matters up again – particularly in relation to protest – in Chapter 6. The second principle emphasises that, while there was some disagreement among assembly members about what should be considered a human right, there was general agreement that the rights of minorities needed to be protected too. Members acknowledged that almost all laws have greater impacts on some sections of society than on others, but argued that 'wilful discrimination' should not be something that governments could readily engage in.

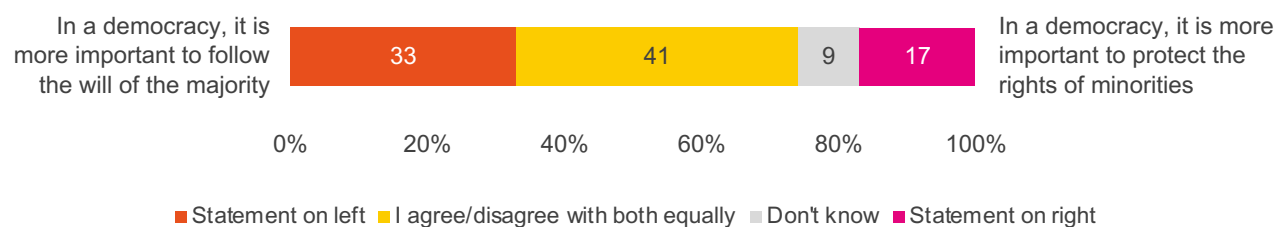


A prioritisation of rights is evident in the survey responses as well. For example, that ‘all citizens have equal political rights’ was among the highest ranked components of democracy shown in Figure 2.8. Still, there are two caveats to that. First, the list of components of democracy in Figure 2.8 includes several rights-related elements that received lower priority: that ‘people are free to organise or join pressure groups’, ‘people are free to take part in protests and demonstrations’, and ‘people are free to join or organise political parties’. As emphasised in Chapter 2, low prioritisation does not necessarily mean respondents thought these features of democracy undesirable, only that they ranked them as less important than others. Still, the differences are meaningful and striking.

Second, in another question, an option phrased specifically in terms of ‘the rights of minorities’ attracted rather lower support, as shown in Figure 5.1. Among those who were prepared to choose between following the will of the majority and protecting the rights of minorities, twice as many opted for the former as the latter. Fully half of all respondents avoided choosing at all, many of them presumably hoping that it is possible to achieve both.

### Figure 5.1. Majority will versus minority rights

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

Further evidence on attitudes to rights protection is bound up with evidence on attitudes to the role of the courts, which is explored in the next section.

## The role of the courts

We have already seen several pieces of evidence regarding public attitudes to the role of the courts.

Figure 1.5 showed that trust in ‘the court system’ is markedly higher than trust in politicians, and Figure 1.6 indicated much more favourable perceptions of judges’ ethical standards than of the standards of either politicians or businesspeople. In Figure 3.10, it was seen that many people think judges should have a role in deciding the consequences of ministerial wrongdoing.

As was noted in Chapter 2, members of the citizens’ assembly wrestled with competing instincts as to what role judges should play. In their initial discussions, they formulated a principle for good democracy according to which no unelected bodies should make policy decisions. There was a clear view that unelected bodies may be unrepresentative or biased towards the perspectives of the already powerful, and therefore lack the legitimacy to make such decisions. But support for this principle weakened as the assembly continued, as members considered the roles of expert advice, direct citizen participation, independent regulators, and judges. Their concerns over the behaviour and motivations of many politicians caused them to want to place constraints upon those politicians. Reflecting this shift in thinking, the text of the original principle was amended by members during the assembly’s fifth weekend in order to acknowledge specifically the role of the courts.

**No unelected bodies making political / policy decisions ...**

**so that decisions are made by representatives appointed by the people to enact their views (i.e. not officials or the House of Lords), but acknowledging there is a role for the courts to keep them in check.**

(Principle 16)



Even so, many members continued to find this final text problematic: 70% of members backed it in the final vote, but 30% did not. This compares to over 90% support for most of the other principles.

When they examined the role of the courts specifically, assembly members came to a strong overall view that courts should play a central role in upholding rights. At the same time, their doubts about empowering unelected actors prompted them to specify constraints on that role. Their overarching resolution and specific recommendations are set out in Box 5.1. The resolution, agreed by 92% of members who voted, stated that courts have an important role in protecting 'basic rights and core democratic principles'. Recommendations 7.1 and 7.2 specified that courts should be able to overturn laws that violated 'legally recognised human rights' or 'basic democratic rights', and Recommendation 7.4 again emphasised 'basic democratic freedoms such as the public's right to protest and freedom of speech'. But the recommendations also specified limits: the power to overturn laws should not extend beyond these recognised rights (Recommendation 7.1), and such powers 'should be used sparingly' to avoid being 'governed by the courts rather than the people we elect to represent us' (Recommendation 7.3). The final two recommendations related to ideas for limiting court powers that had been floated by ministers around the time of the assembly's deliberations, which most assembly members thought unjustified.

### Box 5.1. Citizens' assembly recommendations: the role of the courts

#### Resolution 7

We believe that there is an important role for the courts to play in limiting the laws that can be passed by government when they are seen to challenge basic rights and core democratic principles.

Supported by 92%

Recommendation 7.1: Courts should be able to overturn laws that are judged as violating legally recognised human rights. Otherwise they should not have the power to override the sovereignty of parliament.

Supported by 86%

Recommendation 7.2: The basic features of our democracy that protect the public's constitutional rights to participate and be represented should be hard for any government or parliament to change, and courts should be able to overturn, or require modifications to, laws that challenge these basic democratic rights.

Supported by 90%

Recommendation 7.3: If the courts were to be given wider scope to challenge unfair laws and ask parliament to think again (beyond legally protected human rights) that power should be used sparingly. If overused it could mean we lose important features of our democracy and be governed by the courts rather than the people we elect to represent us.

Supported by 83%

Recommendation 7.4: In particular, the courts should have more powers to challenge laws that restrict basic democratic freedoms such as the public's right to protest and freedom of speech, which are currently under threat.

Supported by 89%

Recommendation 7.5: The government should not be able to limit the ability of the courts to scrutinise secondary legislation.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 7.6: There should be no fast-track procedure available to government to override how courts interpret laws. Any such action should require parliament's explicit consent.

Supported by 86%

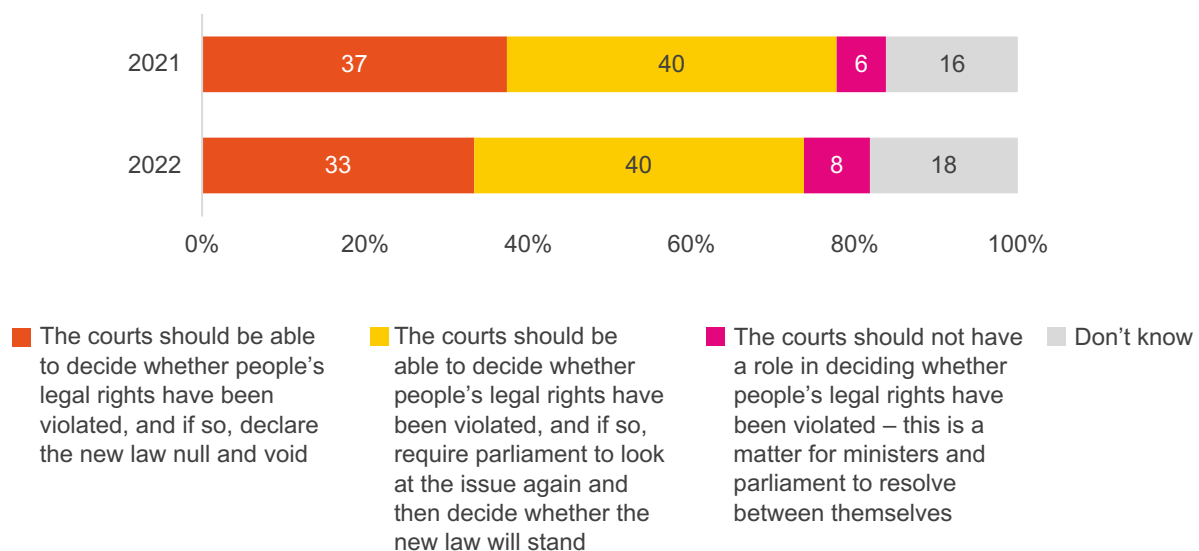


The surveys also included two detailed questions about the role of the courts, one of which focused on their role in rights protection. We varied several elements of the question between respondents, making it possible to see how stated attitudes were affected by which rights were at stake, what the legal source of those rights was, and which courts were potentially involved in decision-making. Figure 5.2 shows the overall results, while Figures 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 show how the responses were affected by the three dimensions of variation.

As indicated in Figure 5.2, only a small minority of respondents thought the courts should have no role in rights protection. A large majority thought that courts should be able to require parliament to think again (broadly the power of the UK courts at present under the Human Rights Act) or that they should have a stronger power to strike down laws deemed to violate legal rights. It should be remembered that most people do not have clear knowledge of what powers the courts currently have; the responses indicate people's instincts on the matter. For most people, that instinct seems to be that the current balance between the roles of parliament and the courts is about right.

### Figure 5.2. The courts and human rights

Question: Please imagine the government has proposed a new law and parliament has approved it. Some people believe that this law violates [RIGHT]. Should the courts be able to decide whether people's legal rights have been violated as claimed?



*Note: For each respondent, [RIGHT] was replaced by a specific claimed right (see Figure 5.3). The chart shows average responses across all of these. Only respondents who saw the same version of the question in both surveys are included. Respondents to survey 2 who saw the different question variants shown in Figures 5.4 and 5.5 are therefore excluded. This means that the numbers are slightly different from those published in previous reports.*

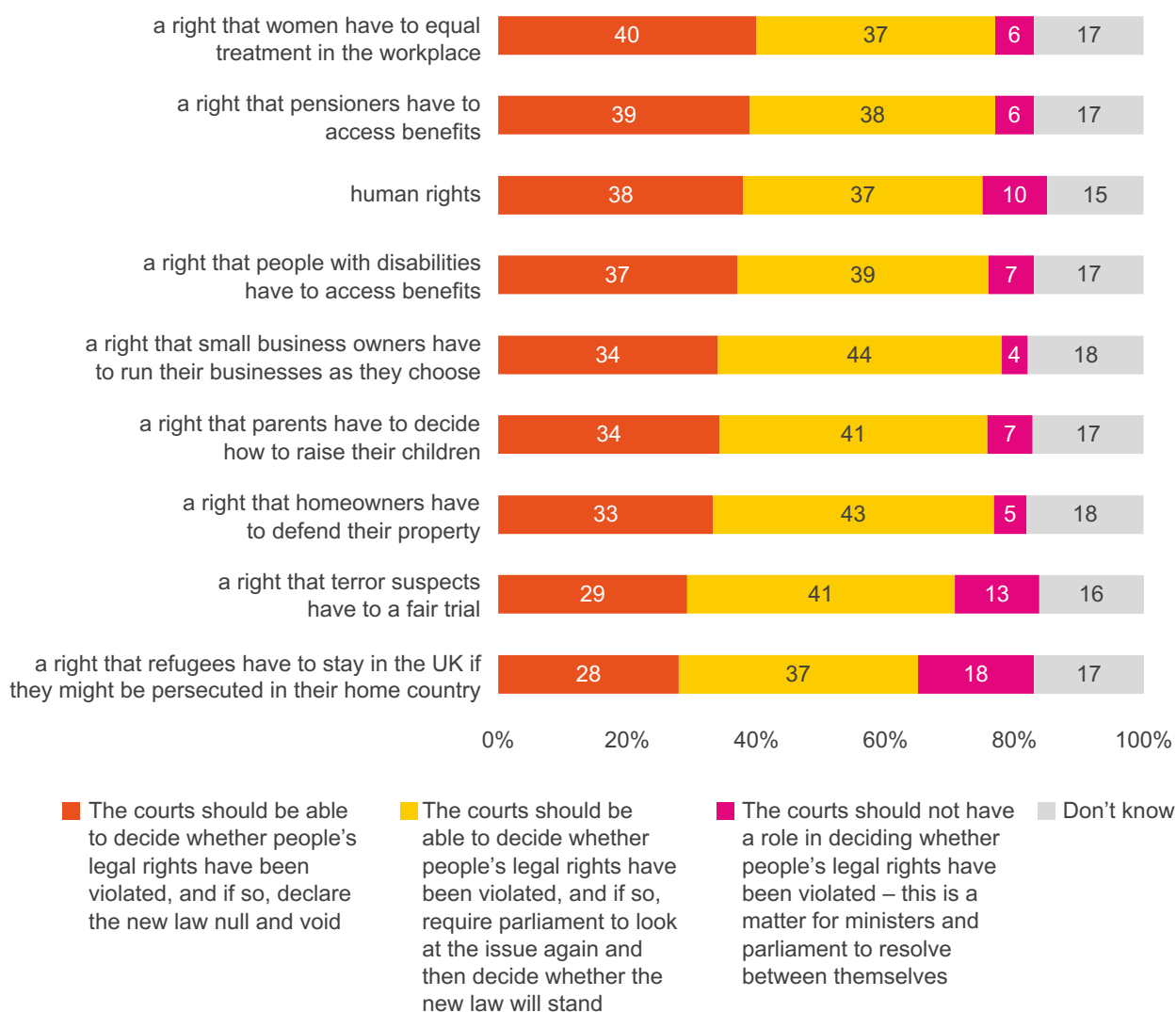
*Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021, and survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

Figure 5.3 shows that responses varied somewhat depending on what right was claimed to have been violated, with some people warier of allowing the courts a role when the claimed rights of refugees or terror suspects were mentioned. This likely reflects greater doubts about such rights – that they exist at all, or that they deserve priority, or that the courts will interpret them appropriately. This variation was, however, perhaps surprisingly small, and did not impact the basic pattern of preferences.



### Figure 5.3. The courts and human rights: variation by right

Question: Please imagine the government has proposed a new law and parliament has approved it. Some people believe that this law violates [RIGHT]. Should the courts be able to decide whether people's legal rights have been violated as claimed?



Note: For each respondent, [RIGHT] was replaced by one of the phrases to the left of the chart.

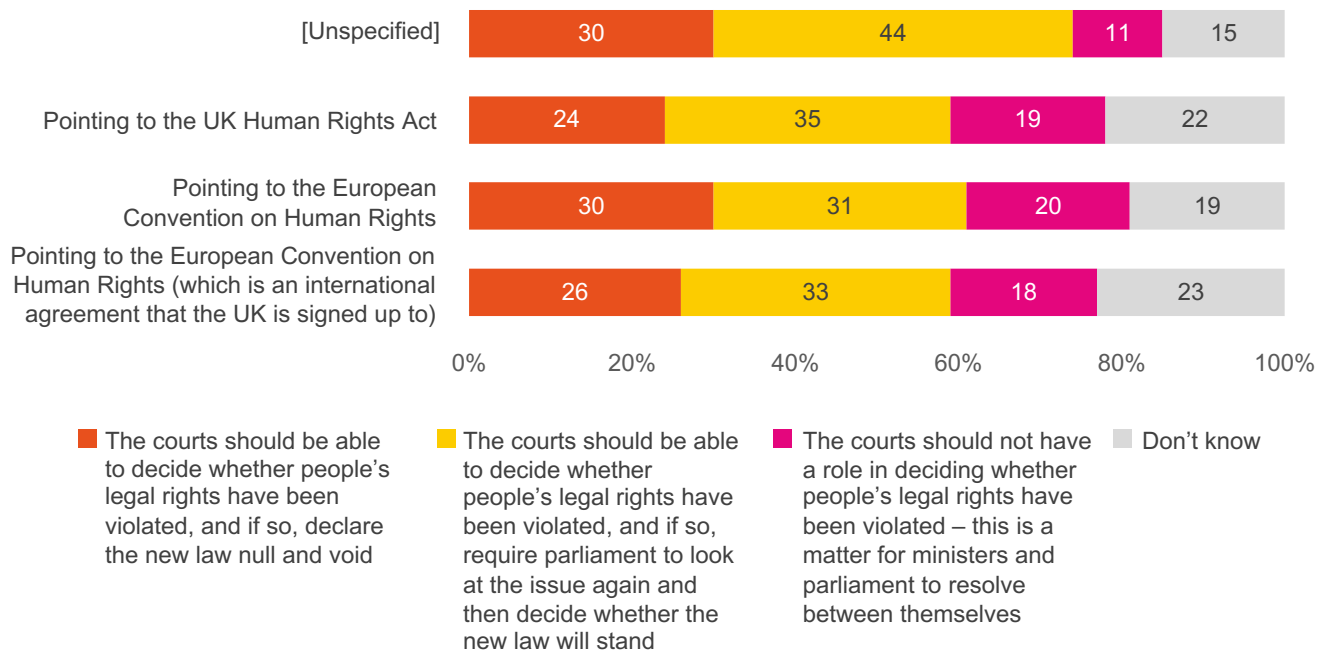
Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

Figure 5.4 shows the impact of what the question said about the legal origin of the claimed rights. We wanted to see whether specifying a particular legal origin – the UK Human Rights Act or the European Convention on Human Rights – made a difference. The tenor of public debate on the matter might suggest that support for a judicial role would be lower when the European Convention was mentioned. As the figure indicates, specifying a legal origin did reduce support for the courts having a role to a degree: the combined extent of the two categories on the left of the chart diminished. Whether the question specified the UK Human Rights Act or the European Convention on Human Rights made no significant difference, which may suggest that both have become associated in some people's minds with unpopular court rulings. Given that most respondents would know little of the European Convention and might think it related to the European Union, we included a version that explained what it is (bottom bar in Figure 5.4), but this did not significantly change the results. The differences between these versions of the question and the original version, where the legal origin was unspecified, are noteworthy. Nevertheless, the main conclusion remains the same: across all of the versions, substantial majorities thought the courts should retain an important role.



### Figure 5.4. The courts and human rights: variation by legal origin

Question: Please imagine the government has proposed a new law and parliament has approved it. [ORIGIN] Some people believe that this law violates [RIGHT]. Should the courts be able to decide whether people's legal rights have been violated as claimed?



*Note: Each respondent saw a specific proposed right in place of '[RIGHT]' (see Figure 5.3). The chart shows average responses across all of these. In place of '[ORIGIN]', respondents saw either no text – the 'unspecified' option above – or one of the phrases on the left of the chart.*

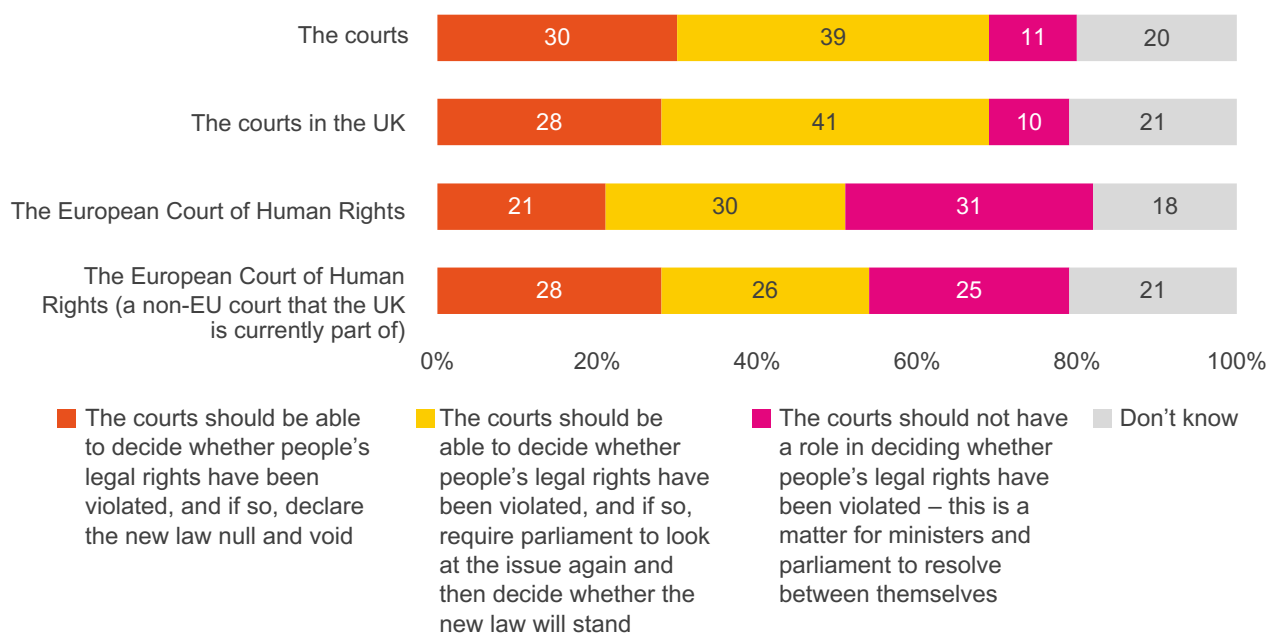
*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

Finally, we wanted to see whether specifying 'the courts in the UK' or 'the European Court of Human Rights' changed the responses. As above, it might be anticipated that mentioning the European Court would reduce support for court powers. As shown in Figure 5.5, this was the case – though this effect was reduced when the question explained (again, in the last bar on the chart) what this court is. Nevertheless, more than half the respondents thought that even the European Court of Human Rights should have a role, against fewer than a third who thought that it should not.



### Figure 5.5. The courts and human rights: variation by court

Question: Please imagine the government has proposed a new law and parliament has approved it. Some people believe that this law violates [RIGHT]. Should [THE COURTS] be able to decide whether people's legal rights have been violated as claimed?



*Note: Each respondent saw a specific proposed right in place of '[RIGHT]' (see Figure 5.3). The chart shows average responses across all of these. In place of '[THE COURTS]' in the question and the response options, respondents saw either no text – the 'unspecified' option above – or one of the phrases on the left of the chart.*

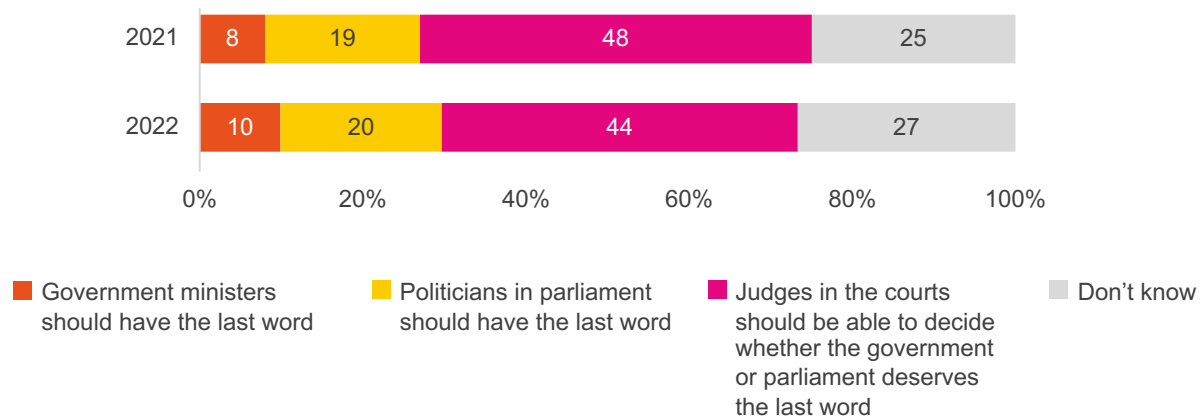
*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

Overall, these results indicate a higher level of support for court intervention in human rights matters than might have been expected in light of public discourse on the issue. Indeed, many of those we have spoken with since the original release of these results have been surprised. But the basic pattern of the results is robust across multiple wordings of the question, and the findings also fit closely with those from the citizens' assembly. Certainly, some caution should be exercised in interpreting the findings. In particular, it would be unwise to make too much of the distinction between the courts having their current powers or stronger strike-down powers: few people have thought about this difference, let alone thought through its implications. Nevertheless, most people do appear to have a sense that significant judicial protections are needed against laws that violate rights norms. Given the findings of Chapter 1, this should perhaps not in fact be too surprising: most people take a very dim view of politicians, but give much greater credit to judges. They do not trust politicians to uphold the rights of the public at large; they are more prepared to trust the courts.

The second detailed survey question relating to the role of the courts focused not on human rights, but on adjudication of disputes about the powers of government and parliament. As shown in Figure 5.6, most respondents said that the courts should decide in such cases. As explained in our third report, we were concerned after survey 1 that the question may have introduced unintended bias in favour of this response. Some respondents therefore saw different wording in survey 2; but the results remained essentially the same, adding to confidence that the finding is meaningful (see Renwick et al. 2023: 11–12 for details).

### Figure 5.6. Courts and determining the powers of government

Question: Please imagine there is a dispute over whether the government has the legal authority to decide a particular matter on its own or whether it needs parliament's approval. How should this dispute be settled?



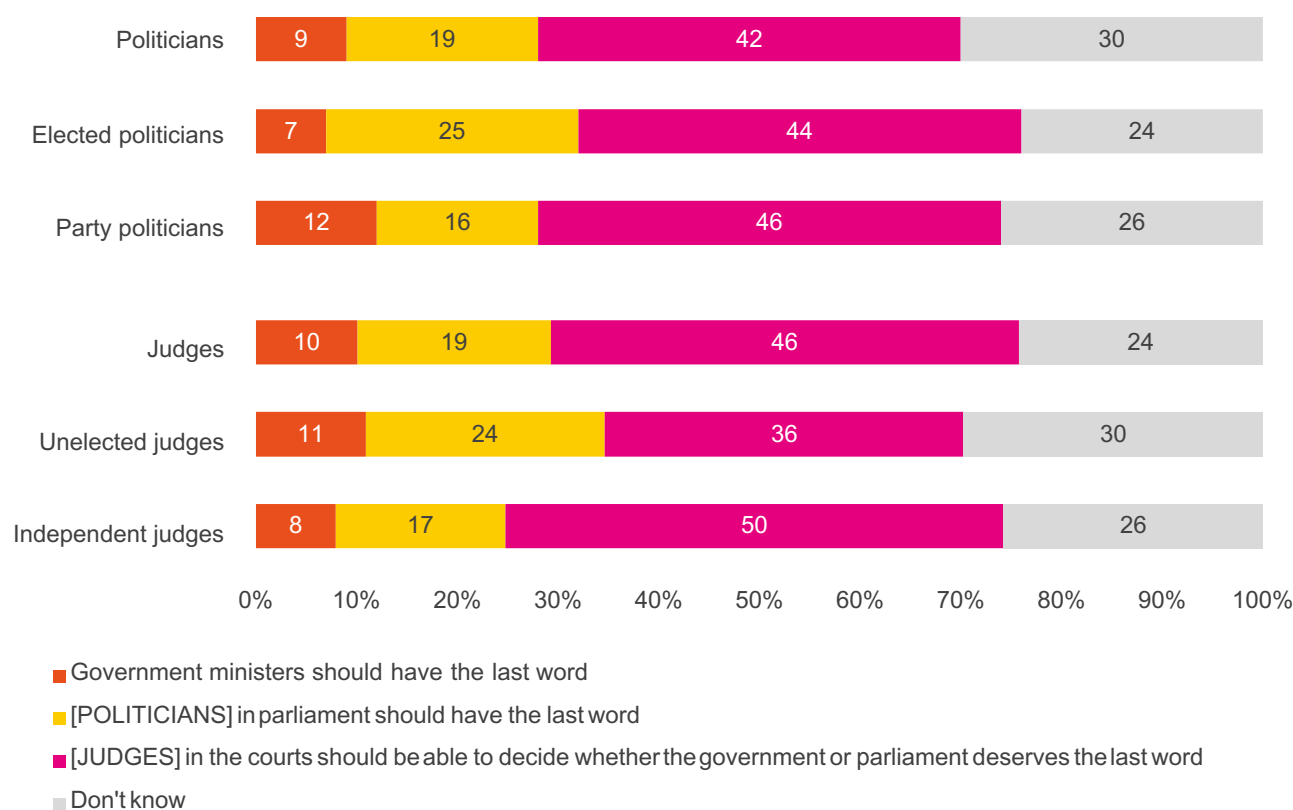
Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021, and survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

This question also explored the robustness of the responses to alternative question wordings. We varied whether politicians in parliament in the second response option were described simply as 'politicians' or as 'elected politicians' or 'party politicians'. Similarly, we varied whether judges in the third response option were described simply as 'judges' or as 'unelected judges' or 'independent judges'. We expected that mention of 'elected' or 'unelected' would increase support for politicians to decide, while mention of 'party' or 'independent' would increase support for judges. The scale of such differences would allow us to check the degree to which results might just be by-products of question wording, and the extent to which respondents did have clear preferences.

Figure 5.7 shows the impact of these two sets of variations. The effects were all in the expected directions: mentioning that politicians in parliament were elected increased the likelihood that respondents would choose this option, while mentioning their link to political parties reduced it; mentioning that judges were unelected reduced the popularity of their being involved; mentioning that they were independent increased it. But these shifts were all small, and did not affect the overall pattern of opinion: in every case, more people said that judges should decide than the combined total who said that ministers or parliamentarians should decide (though that was barely the case when judges were described as unelected). The fact that varying the question wording changed the results confirms that not all respondents would have had settled views before reading the question. But the fact that the effects were relatively small suggests that many people have at least fairly clear instincts in favour of holding politicians subject to legal checks and balances.

## Figure 5.7. Courts and determining the powers of government: impact of question wording

Question: Please imagine there is a dispute over whether the government has the legal authority to decide a particular matter on its own or whether it needs parliament's approval. How should this dispute be settled?



Note: Each respondent saw [POLITICIANS] replaced by either 'Politicians', 'Elected politicians', or 'Party politicians', and [JUDGES] replaced by 'Judges', 'Unelected judges,' or 'Independent judges'.

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

A final piece of evidence relates to the reactions of survey respondents to the recommendations of the citizens' assembly relating to the role of the courts. Survey 2 included questions about two of those recommendations (Recommendations 7.1 and 7.2, stating that courts should be able to overturn laws found to violate human or democratic rights). Absolute majorities stated agreement with both: 54% agreed or strongly agreed with Recommendation 7.1; 65% did so with Recommendation 7.2. Only 12% in the first case and 6% in the second either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Again, an instinct in favour of a strong role for the courts in checking politicians' freedom is evident.

## Conclusion

The main conclusion of this chapter is the same as that of the previous one: there is clear public wariness of concentrated executive power and support for checks and balances upon that power. In particular, most people think that those in power should be constrained by the rule of law and the need to protect human rights, and most people think that courts have an important role to play in protecting these principles. At the same time, there is caution about extending the role of the courts too far: they must not usurp the place of elected representatives in deciding matters of normal policy.

Also as in the preceding chapter, we can see a mix of factors underpinning these views. On the one hand, distrust of politicians leads many people to want limits to be imposed upon them. On the other hand, many also positively value the principle that everyone has rights that deserve protection, irrespective of what part of society they come from.



# Chapter 6. The Roles of the Public

We learned while running the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK how hard many people find it to talk about government, parliament, law, and the courts: for many, these are distant and rather alien abstractions of which they are only dimly aware. That is much less the case when considering the roles of the public. As was the case when looking at standards of ethical behaviour in public life, this was a topic that most people could relate to personally.

This chapter begins, in the first two sections, by highlighting the potential tension mentioned in the Introduction: on the one hand, most people think the democratic system is insufficiently responsive to public wishes and interests; on the other hand, few people participate very actively in politics or want to increase their participation. We suggest that it is wrong to think that such patterns necessarily reflect public inconsistency: there are important barriers to effective public participation that ought to be addressed. The subsequent sections therefore explore public attitudes towards ways of encouraging greater engagement, including improved education about politics, improved information, better media coverage, and renewed protections for freedoms of speech and protest. The final three sections of the chapter then look at particular channels for public involvement: petitions, referendums, and deliberative institutions such as citizens' assemblies.

The results show wide support for increasing opportunities for public participation and for easing such participation. At the same time, there is also wariness, particularly about referendums. This appears to reflect a concern that participatory processes, if badly designed, may hinder informed and thoughtful discussion. There was support for deliberative processes, but also a clear belief (notwithstanding public concerns about these actors) that the ultimate decision-makers should remain elected representatives, who are in turn accountable to voters.

## The importance of responsiveness

Chapter 1 showed that a key source of disillusionment with politics in the UK is a perception that the system is not responsive to public wishes. And Chapter 2 indicated that people view such public responsiveness as a key requirement for a well-functioning democracy. As some members of the citizens' assembly put it (in two of the statements set out in Chapter 2):

We feel **dissatisfied** with how democracy is working in the UK today because there is a lack of honesty and integrity in politics, combined with a lack of clear and unbiased information from both the government and the media. In a 'good' UK democracy, we would want evidence of honesty and integrity in politics, backed up by investigative journalism and a balanced media that is able to challenge and scrutinise government and ensure the public are well informed.

We feel **let down** about how democracy is working in the UK today because we feel disconnected, not listened to and not represented. In a 'good' UK democracy politics, parties and the government would be about public service, not self-service.

Another group of members (again in one of the statements quoted in Chapter 2) saw responsibility for overcoming the disconnect between politicians and voters as resting on both sides of that relationship:

We feel **frustrated** about how democracy is working in the UK today because there is a disconnect between people and the system. We do not feel listened to and there is no clear way to have influence. We need to feel that change can happen and that different voices are taken into account. In a 'good' UK democracy citizens and politicians would be open minded, and minority opinions listened to and acknowledged. There would be a stronger relationship between elected representatives and their constituents – with both being responsible for this!

But a fourth group felt that effective public engagement is currently hindered by the system:

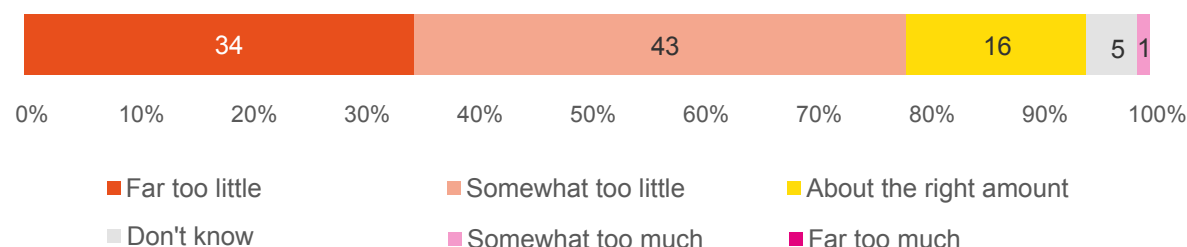
We feel **disappointed** with how democracy is working in the UK today because there are not enough 'ordinary people' in parliament and government. In a 'good' UK democracy people wouldn't feel inhibited to stand for election to represent their communities and the barriers that stop ordinary people being elected would be removed.



Similar views were evident in the surveys. For example, Figure 2.6 showed that, when respondents were asked who, if anyone, should have more power in the political system, the most popular of a range of options was 'voters in general'. And, as Figure 6.1 shows, an overwhelming majority of respondents thought that people like them had either 'somewhat too little' or 'far too little' influence over how the UK is governed.

### Figure 6.1. Influence over how the UK is governed

Question: How much influence do you think people like you have on how the UK is governed?



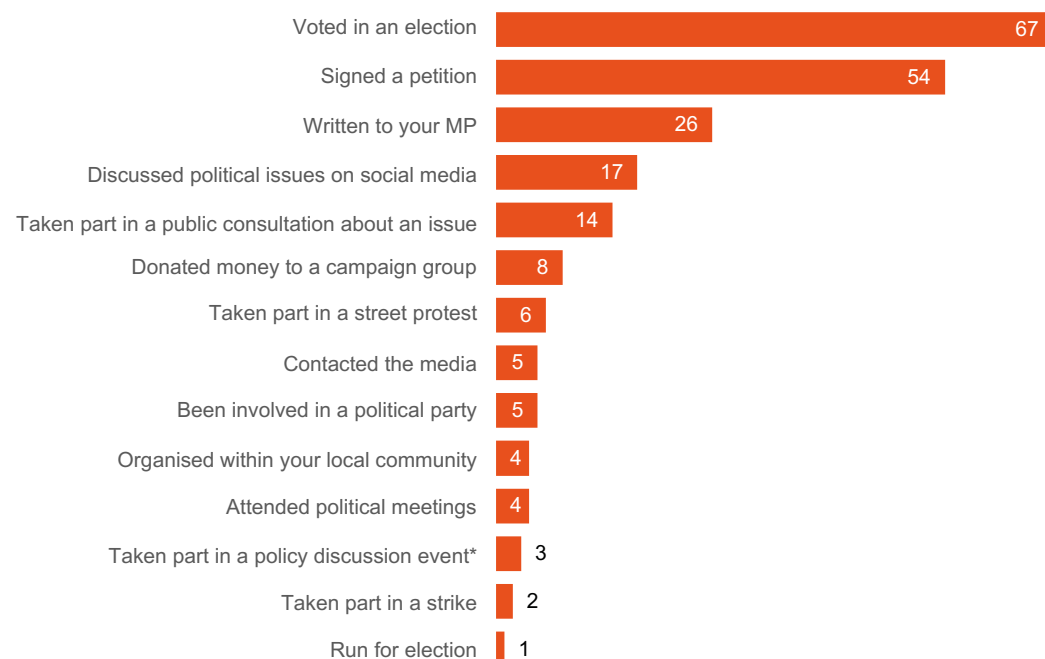
Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

## Attitudes to taking part

Notwithstanding their desire for a democracy that is responsive to public wishes, most survey respondents indicated that they had not recently taken part in political activities beyond voting or signing a petition (Figure 6.2). Indeed, fewer than half (43%) of respondents said they had participated in any of the activities listed other than those two. Furthermore, as Figure 6.3 shows, most said that they did not want to take part more.

### Figure 6.2. Reported participation in politics

Question: Which of the following have you done in the past five years? Please choose as many as apply.



\* The full text of this option was 'Taken part in a process that brought people with different views together to discuss an issue and come up with recommendations'.

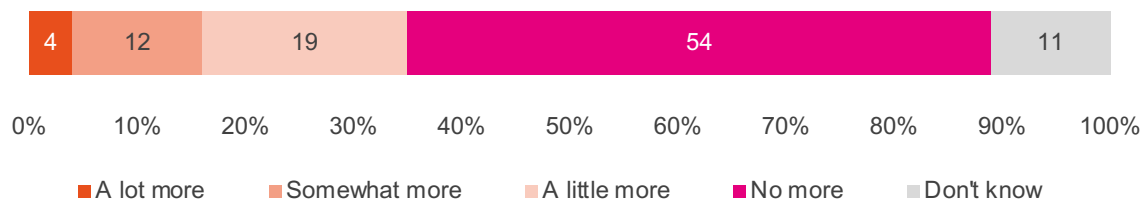
Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.





### Figure 6.3. Preferences for taking part in politics

Question: To what extent, if at all, would you ideally like to get involved in politics more than you are?

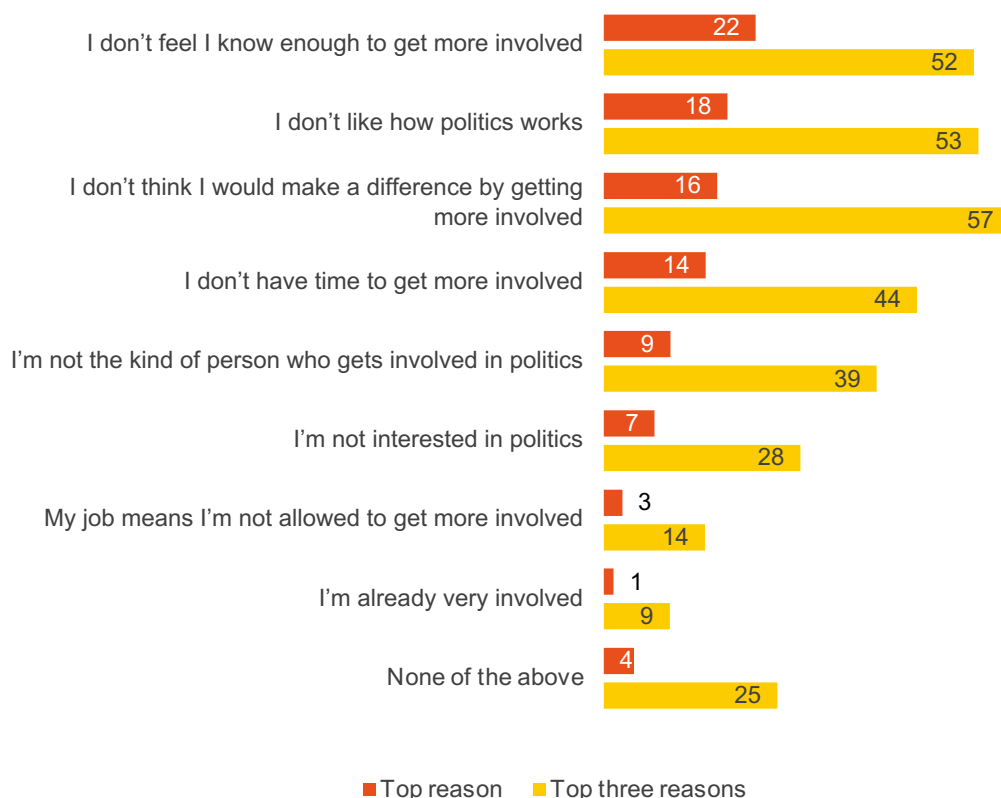


Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

When asked about why they did not get more involved, the greatest number of respondents said that they felt they didn't know enough to do so (Figure 6.4). Many also said they didn't like how politics works, or didn't think they could make a difference. There were few marked differences between different groups, though Labour voters were slightly more likely than Conservatives to cite a dislike for how politics works.

### Figure 6.4. Reasons for not getting involved in politics

Question: What are the main reasons you don't get involved in politics more?



Note: Respondents could rank up to three options from a fixed list. The chart shows the proportion of respondents choosing each option as their top-ranked reason (orange) and as one of their top three (yellow).

Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

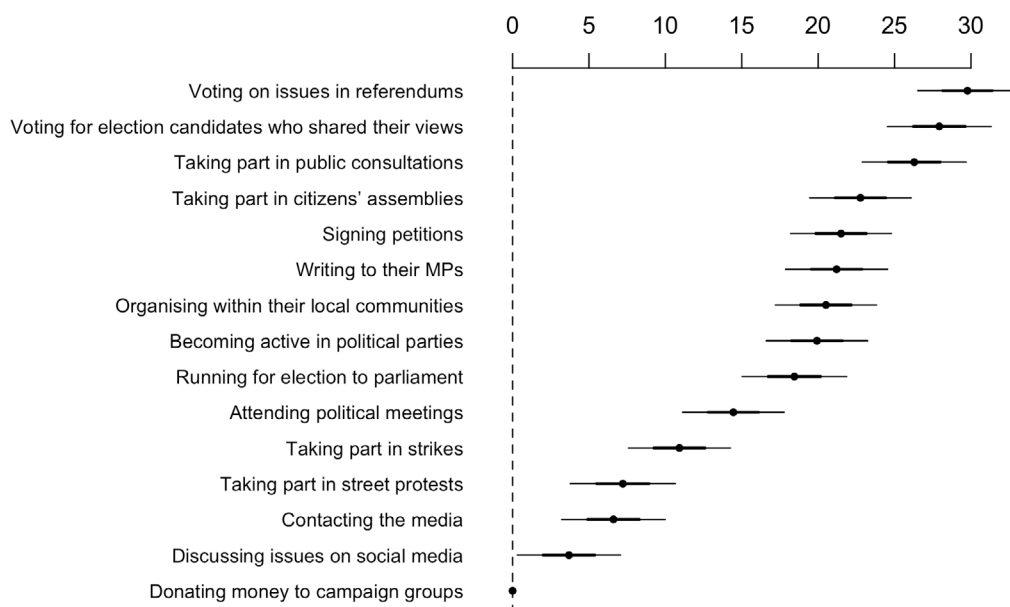
As for what form people would want participation to take, respondents were asked which forms they thought should have more impact in an ideal democracy (Figure 6.5). They favoured mechanisms involving broadly representative participation by all – referendums and elections – and more deliberative mechanisms, such as consultations and citizens' assemblies. They did not want donations to yield an impact. They were



also sceptical towards mechanisms in which only small and perhaps unrepresentative proportions of the population in practice take part, such as media engagement, protests, and strikes. On the last of these, it should be remembered that the survey was conducted before the widespread strikes of 2023.

### Figure 6.5. Attitudes to what forms of participation should have influence

Question: Thinking now about how an ideal democracy would work, should people be able to have more impact by [A] or by [B]?



*Note: In place of '[A]' and '[B]', each respondent saw two of the options shown. The chart shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these, with the least favoured option set at 0. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, if faced with a choice between 'Voting on issues in referendums' (30) and 'Donating money to campaign groups' (0), the number choosing the former would be 30 percentage points higher than the number choosing the latter.*

*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

## Enabling public engagement

The findings in the preceding sections might be taken as evidence that the public want to have their cake and eat it: they want to have influence in politics; but they do not want to take part actively themselves. Yet there are also indications of three principal reasons for people's limited participation: they feel they lack the information to take part confidently; they are put off by the nature of politics; and they feel they will have little influence even if they do take part. Of course, it is legitimate to ask whether the reasons that respondents offer for not taking part more are accurate: people may be reluctant to admit that they are just not very interested; they may not have thought much about why they do not engage, so they may not know the true reasons themselves.

Nevertheless, the posited reasons are not implausible. Engaging with a subject – any subject – is harder if you know less about it. Many people, as previous chapters have suggested, clearly do feel a moral repugnance towards the world of politics from which they may recoil. And the view that your own participation is unlikely to make much difference is often accurate. These reasons therefore deserve to be engaged with.

The thinking of members of the citizens' assembly followed very similar lines. Members agreed two overarching resolutions on the general issue of public participation, and eight specific recommendations that sat beneath these (Box 6.1). The first resolution emphasised the importance of participation, but also said that people are unlikely to take part more unless they 'have more reason to believe that they can make a difference'. The second resolution focused on the need, as members saw it, for voters to be informed and to consider a range of points of view.



Members thought that, to achieve these ends, politicians needed to be visible in their communities (Recommendation 2.1). Many thought – whether fairly or not – that this was not true of all politicians at present. A concern that often emerged during the assembly discussions – and that was reflected in Recommendation 2.2 – was that education about politics in schools needed to be improved. Many members said they personally felt ill-prepared by their formal education to engage with politics and the workings of the democratic system. Although schools in all parts of the UK now provide teaching on democracy and citizenship, even members who had learned about the formal structures of the system said that their education and the wider public discourse about democracy failed to emphasise their rights and responsibilities, and the opportunities available for wider participation. One commented, ‘Young people shouldn’t be brought up thinking politics is a dirty word’.

Assembly members also identified a perceived lack of trustworthy and unbiased information about politics and the workings of the political process as a significant barrier to motivating wider public involvement. And they focused on the need for information to be accessible – i.e. both easily found and easily understood (Recommendations 2.3 and 2.4). Many members expressed considerable concern throughout the assembly about media bias, a lack of trust in the media, and the growing prevalence of disinformation on social media. Although some feared that greater media regulation would undermine free speech, most thought more was needed (Recommendation 2.5). We look further at attitudes to the media in the following section.

Recommendation 2.6, on free speech and protest, is also picked up later in this chapter. Recommendation 2.7, on parliamentary representation, was discussed in Chapter 4. Members saw the former as highlighting important forms of participation and the latter as vital for enabling all people to feel that they have a place in the political system.

### Box 6.1. Citizens’ assembly recommendations: engaging the public

#### Resolution 2a

We believe that the UK public as a whole has to become more engaged with the existing opportunities to influence our representative system (voting, contacting MPs, supporting/joining political parties or campaign groups etc.) but we don’t think that will happen unless people have more reason to believe that they can make a difference.

Supported by 97%

#### Resolution 2b

We believe that a good democracy in the UK needs voters who are engaged, well-informed and able to consider other points of view and opposing arguments in a constructive way.

Supported by 98%

Recommendation 2.1: The public need to see honest and transparent politics taking place on a day-to-day basis. All politicians should be close to and visible in the communities they represent, in order to help build connections and trust. That should include through in-person and online surgeries, and other events such as ‘town hall’ meetings, coffee mornings, etc.

Supported by 98%

Recommendation 2.2: The education systems across the UK need to give more focus to educating young people and life-long learners to be ‘political citizens’ – ensuring they understand the system and the opportunities they have to influence decision-making.

Supported by 95%

Recommendation 2.3: To make democracy in the UK the best it can be, members of the public need to take responsibility for ensuring that they educate themselves to make an informed choice when they cast their vote, but to support this they need to be able to easily access clear, unbiased information about the political process, political parties and individual candidates.

Supported by 96%



**Recommendation 2.4:** Information on what is happening in parliament and government should be freely available to all in a form that is concise, factual, accessible, and unbiased. More work is needed so that people know where to look, and can quickly find the information they want.

Supported by 95%

**Recommendation 2.5:** We need a strong, independent media, supported by enhanced regulation, to ensure the fair and balanced reporting of political issues and increased public access to reliable fact-checking services.

Supported by 97%

**Recommendation 2.6:** To allow for effective public participation in political debate and scrutiny, freedom of speech and the right to protest need to be protected.

Supported by 95%

**Recommendation 2.7:** The people elected to represent the public in parliament need to be more diverse and more closely represent the make-up of the UK population so that people can recognise themselves and their interests within the representative system.

Supported by 83%

**Recommendation 2.8:** Ministers need to be knowledgeable in the field they are appointed to so that the public can be confident that the decisions they are recommending are responsible and evidence-based.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 2.8 – arguing that ministers should be knowledgeable about the area of their responsibilities – reflected a recurring theme in both the assembly and the surveys: that people valued expertise, and a process of policy-making based on careful examination of evidence and options. But they perceived that the current process is based on partisan point-scoring. Assembly members thought people would be more willing to take part in politics if issues were discussed sensibly. Similar concerns also relate to Recommendation 1.3 (see Chapter 3), which called for publication of the advice given to ministers, to enhance public confidence that policy decisions are evidence-based.

Three of these recommendations were put to respondents in survey 2. Reactions to Recommendation 2.7 (that parliament should be more diverse and representative) were discussed in Chapter 4. Recommendation 2.4 (calling for factual and accessible information on what is happening in parliament and government) received overwhelming backing: 78% agreed or strongly agreed with it, while just 2% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Recommendation 2.2 (better education about politics for young people and lifelong learners) was also strongly supported, by 57% to 8%. This confirms that the desire for better information and better education about political matters was not simply a product of participation in a deliberative forum where the value of informed decision-making was highlighted; it appears also to be the preference of the public at large.

## The role of the media

Most people experience politics largely through the media, and it is important therefore to examine how they see the media and what role they think the media ought to play. As set out in the preceding section, members of the citizens' assembly regarded strong, independent media as essential, but also had grave concerns about what they saw as media bias and poor quality information. Similarly, survey 2 found that one of the most widely supported changes to the functioning of the system was if 'media reporting of politics was more factual and less based on opinion': 73% thought this would improve how democracy works, against just 3% who thought it would make things worse (Figure 2.11).

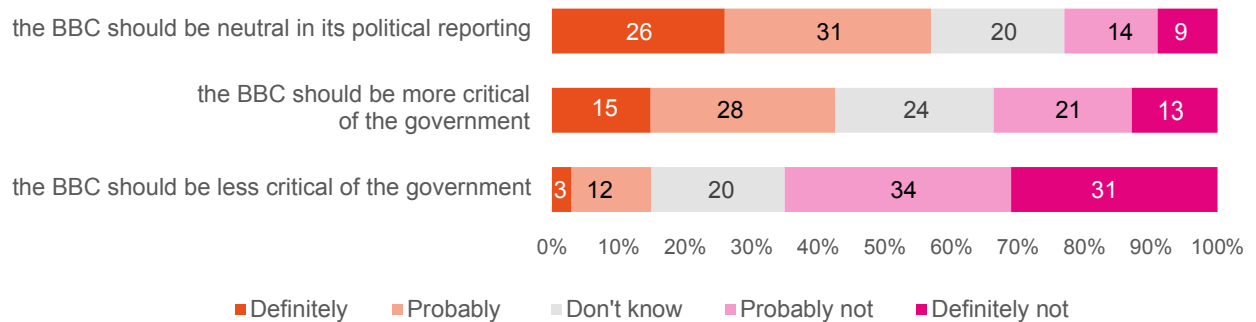
Survey 1 included a question designed to elicit attitudes to the principle of impartial broadcasting. This described a hypothetical candidate for the role of Chair of the BBC and asked whether respondents thought this person suitable for the job. Several aspects of the description were varied, but the important one concerned previous statements attributed to the candidate: that the BBC should be neutral in its



political reporting, more critical of the government, or less critical of the government. As shown in Figure 6.6, respondents were much more likely to think the candidate suitable if they had backed the principle of impartiality than in either alternative scenario. In addition, far more respondents thought it might be appropriate for an incoming Chair to wish the BBC to be more critical of the government than would welcome a less critical approach. These responses fit the general pattern of favouring strong checks and balances.

### Figure 6.6. Views on impartial broadcasting

Question: The UK government has the power to appoint the Chair of the BBC. Imagine that the preferred candidate ... has previously said that [POLICY]. Do you think this person could be a suitable candidate to be Chair of the BBC?



Note: [POLICY] was replaced for each respondent by one of the statements to the left of the chart.

Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

It is clear from the evidence here and in the previous section that most people think democracy ought to be founded on high-quality public discussion rooted in hard facts and evidence. Yet many politicians, journalists, and others may look at such attitudes wryly, pointing out that information such as this does exist, but few people choose to access it – and that, if mainstream media outlets adopted this approach, they would soon see their audiences shrink. It may be that we know what is good for us, but don't like it when it is offered to us. Yet there is an evident public desire to bridge that gap, and it is the job of those wanting to improve democracy to work out how that might be done. The concluding Chapter 8 returns to this theme.

## Freedoms of speech, association, and protest

The project yielded several strands of evidence regarding attitudes to core democratic freedoms, such as freedom of speech, association, and protest. These suggested strong support for free speech, while attachment to other freedoms was somewhat more muted or equivocal.

As discussed in Chapter 2, that 'all citizens have equal political rights' was one of the components of democracy that survey respondents regarded as most important, closely followed by 'people are free to express their political views openly'. But freedoms to join or organise pressure groups or political parties, and the freedom to take part in protests and demonstrations ranked much lower (see Figure 2.8).

In another of the questions reported in Chapter 2, respondents were asked how much better or worse they thought democracy in the UK would work if (among a range of possible changes) 'people were more free to take part in protests, even if that causes disruption for others'. As shown in Figure 2.11, 35% thought this would make democracy work a lot or a bit better, while 13% thought it would make things a lot or a bit worse. This question elicited a sharper divergence of opinion between supporters of different political parties than any other in either survey: just 7% of 2019 Conservative voters thought more freedom for protests would make democracy better, while 50% thought this would make it worse; among Labour voters, the equivalent figures were 59% who thought democracy would be improved and 6% who thought it would be harmed.



Members of the citizens' assembly, however, did not share this equivocation. One of the assembly's most popular principles for a good democracy – backed by 98% of members – was:

### Freedom of thought and speech

... so that divergent views are welcomed and recognised in the public domain and there is an ability to question and protest to drive change.

(Principle 2)

At the time members were developing this principle, there was widespread coverage of and public concern about proposed or actual moves towards limiting protest. Members considered the principle particularly important for a good democracy, as it allows for open dialogue between those in power and the public. They also focused specifically on the importance of everyone feeling welcome to engage with questions of democracy, including people with minority views. Overall, they believed a good democracy should welcome different views in a culture of mutual respect.

This principle led on to Recommendation 2.6 (see Box 6.1, above) emphasising the need to protect 'freedom of speech and the right to protest'. Members argued that the ability to freely express political views and demonstrate against 'bad' decisions was essential to a good democratic system, and was a route for people to have influence and hold governments to account. Members were explicit in their discussions that free speech should extend to media commentary, while saying that this needed also to be balanced against regulation to prevent 'fake news'.

## Petitions

Reflecting their concerns over low system responsiveness, citizens' assembly members were keen to examine how members of the public could force politicians to act in certain ways. That led them to explore the role of petitions, and to produce the resolution and specific recommendations set out in Box 6.2.

The overarching resolution stated support for extending the use of petitions as a way of influencing government and parliament. Assembly members wanted public awareness of the parliamentary petition system to increase (Recommendation 3.1), and they wanted parliamentary debate following a successful petition to be meaningful and to lead to a substantive vote (Recommendations 3.2 and 3.3). They did not say that such a vote in parliament should necessarily be simply on whether to accept the proposition in the petition: it might, for example, be on a proposal for a select committee to investigate the issue further. But members did think that a decision either to take further action or not to do so should be made; and, in the event that no decision was made, they thought that an explanation should be provided.

Assembly members also thought that the range of next steps that could be triggered by a petition should be extended beyond a government response or parliamentary debate, as at present. They proposed that, subject to a higher signature threshold than the current one, it should be possible for a petition directly to trigger a citizens' assembly or a public inquiry into an issue (Recommendations 3.4 and 3.5)



## Box 6.2. Citizens' assembly recommendations: petitions

### Resolution 3

We believe that Petitions are an important way for the public to influence government policy and what is debated in parliament, and that the use of petitions should be extended.

Supported by 83%

Recommendation 3.1: To encourage more participation, and to give people a practical experience of involvement in the political process without being connected to any political party position, there needs to be much wider public awareness of the petitions process, the petitions that are 'live' and what they can deliver as an outcome.

Supported by 91%

Recommendation 3.2: The powers of the petitions system should be extended to ensure that when a petition is debated in parliament it leads to a vote that can be acted on.

Supported by 82%

Recommendation 3.3: Any parliamentary debate initiated through the petitions process should be meaningful, with government and parliament engaging seriously with the issues. One way to achieve that might be to require a minimum number of MPs to attend (perhaps a percentage of the number of seats held by a party).

Supported by 77%

Recommendation 3.4: The powers of the petition system should be expanded to allow the public, once a petition has a 'high' number of signatures, to demand a citizens' assembly be convened to provide advice to ministers on the considered view of a representative group of the public on an issue.

Supported by 79%

Recommendation 3.5: The powers of the petition system should be expanded to allow the public, once a petition has a 'high' number of signatures, to demand a public inquiry into an issue.

Supported by 68%

These recommendations provide an important window into public thinking on how to overcome the perceived low responsiveness of the system at present. Two of them – Recommendations 3.2 and 3.5 – were put to respondents to the 2022 survey. Both received strong endorsements: 67% agreed with the first, while only 7% disagreed; 55% agreed with the second, against 9% who disagreed.

At the same time, what is absent from the recommendations in Box 6.2 is as meaningful as what is included. In particular, the assembly seriously considered recommending that a petition should be able to trigger a referendum, as is the case in some US states, Switzerland, New Zealand, and a range of other democracies. But they ultimately decided not to put this idea to a vote, feeling that, while referendums were important tools for direct democracy, small sections of the population should not be able to trigger them. As set out in the following section, they also thought that referendums should be reserved only for issues of significant national or regional importance. Many members were concerned that putting an issue directly to a referendum would cut out space for thorough deliberation on the proposal.

## Referendums

Both surveys included a question asking whether decisions on important issues should be made by the public in general or by MPs. The results from survey 2, shown in Figure 6.7, indicate that respondents favoured the former by more than a two-to-one margin. Compared with many other questions asked in both surveys, these responses were notably stable between the two surveys, both at the aggregate level and at the level of individual respondents. This may suggest that, with a contentious referendum having been one of



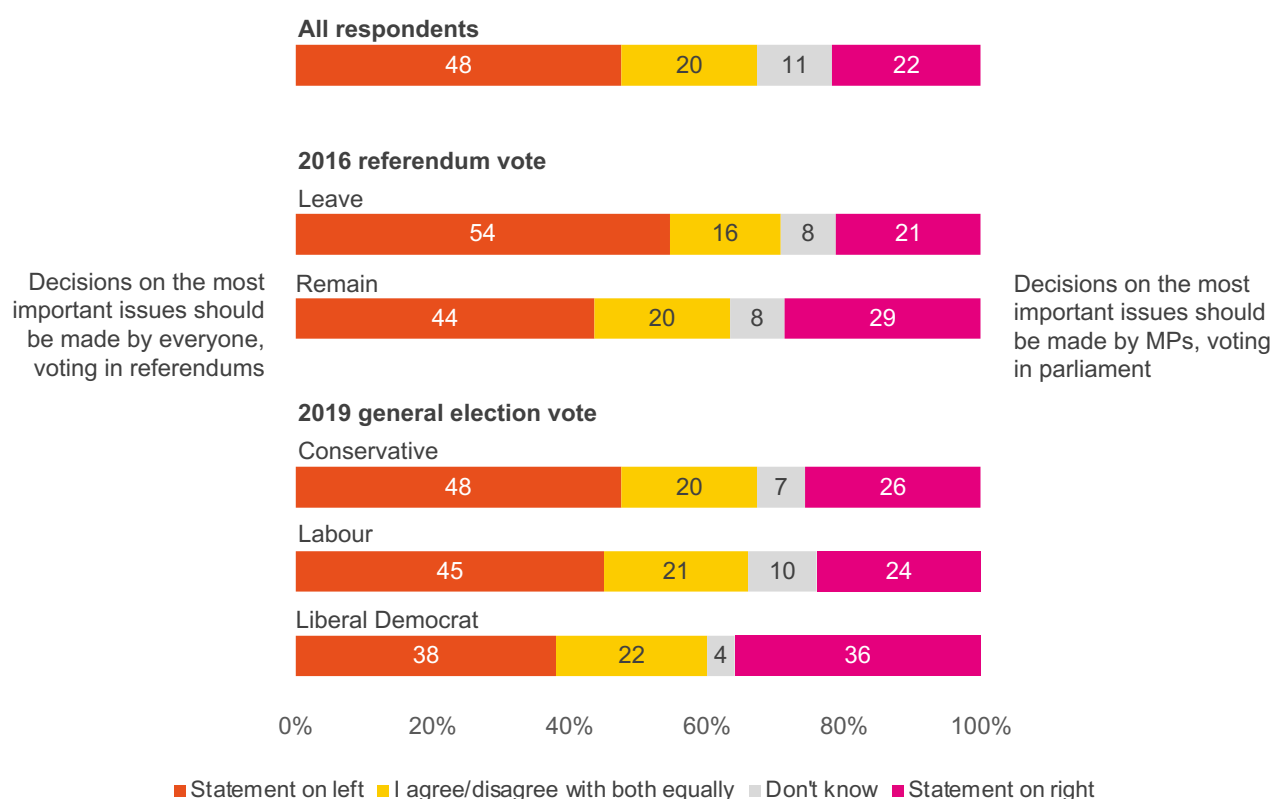


the central events in UK politics over the past decade, many people have developed clear views on whether they welcome such votes or not.

It might initially be expected that views would differ between respondents who voted Leave in the 2016 Brexit referendum and those who voted Remain. But Figure 6.7 shows only a moderate divergence between these groups in their attitudes to referendums. Hansard Society research found that, immediately following the 2016 ballot, Brexit supporters were overwhelmingly favourable to referendums, while opponents of Brexit were much more ambivalent (Hansard Society 2017: 23). But such reactions appear not to have left a lasting legacy of sharply differing views.

### Figure 6.7. Attitudes to referendums in general

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

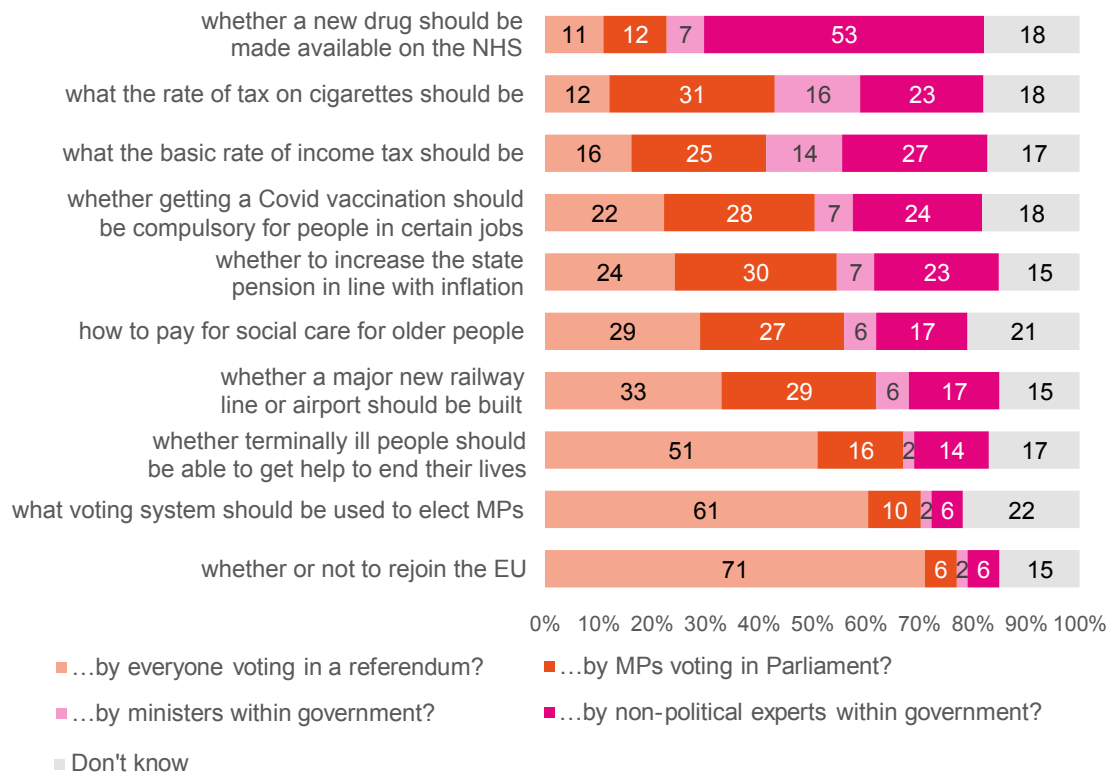
Despite these results, other evidence from the project indicates that many people feel ambivalent about referendums, and some are actively hostile. That hostility was visible in the list of possible democratic reforms shown in Figure 2.11: as many respondents to survey 2 thought holding more referendums would make democracy in the UK worse as thought doing so would make it better. In a set of questions that generally elicited very few negative responses, 15% of respondents thought increasing the frequency of referendums would make democracy 'a lot worse'.

Meanwhile, when survey 1 asked about referendums not in the abstract, but on specific issues (see Figure 6.8), most people appeared to want referendums only on the major constitutional questions for which they have already been used, or on a moral issue (the one included in the survey was assisted dying). On other matters – such as taxes, benefits, public services, and infrastructure projects – most respondents favoured more conventional representative decision-making procedures.



## Figure 6.8. Attitudes to referendums on specific issues

Question: Please imagine that the UK is deciding [ISSUE]. Do you think this should be decided...



Note: In place of '[ISSUE]', each respondent saw one of the statements listed on the left of the chart.

Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

The views on referendums expressed by the members of the citizens' assembly were very similar to those offered by survey respondents. They too saw referendums as an important tool for public participation, but one that should be used only sparingly. Their overarching resolution and specific recommendations on the issue are shown in Box 6.3.



### Box 6.3. Citizens' assembly recommendations: referendums

#### Resolution 4

We believe that referendums are an important tool for direct democracy that can add to a good democracy in the UK by handing important decisions back to the people.

Supported by 83%

Recommendation 4.1: Referendums should be used sparingly and predominantly for constitutional issues of significant national (or regional) importance.

Supported by 88%

Recommendation 4.2: The use of referendums should be restricted to when there are clearly defined, but contentious, choices where the consequences of the decision can be accurately set out in advance.

Supported by 90%

Recommendation 4.3: In order to generate the trust needed for genuine, free and authentic conversations, involvement and outcomes, when a referendum is called there should be an impartial, non-political body (like the Electoral Commission) that is responsible for providing the public with clear, unbiased, factual information that they can use to understand the issues involved.

Supported by 96%

Recommendation 4.4: Referendums should only be considered as binding instructions to government if there is a supermajority result. 50% +1 support is not enough to be considered a mandate from society.

Supported by 76%

As Resolution 4 states, assembly members thought that referendums could aid democracy 'by handing important decisions back to the people'. This was agreed by 83% of members: a large majority, but lower than for all but one of the other resolutions (the resolution on petitions received the same level of support), pointing again to the significant reservations about referendums felt by some. All four specific recommendations then specified restrictions on referendums or ways in which such votes should be conducted with care: members said that they should be used primarily only on constitutional issues (Recommendation 4.1) and only on clearly defined questions (Recommendation 4.2). Reflecting on their own experiences of the Brexit and Scottish independence referendums, members expressed concerns about how much 'spin' and misinformation was produced by campaigners on each side, and the challenges that many people faced in finding trusted sources. They therefore called for 'clear, unbiased, factual information' on the options (Recommendation 4.3). Finally, they argued for the use of supermajority thresholds (Recommendation 4.4), to ensure that any changes implemented had high support that was likely to endure. All but the last of these recommendations received very high support, confirming the impression given by Figure 6.7, that attitudes to referendums may not be as divided following the 2016 vote as some might suppose.

Three of these recommendations were put to respondents in survey 2. Support for Recommendation 4.3, calling for 'clear, unbiased, factual information' during referendum campaigns, was overwhelming: 77% of respondents said they agreed with it, while only 2% disagreed. Support was strong also for Recommendation 4.2, on restricting the use of referendums: 58% agreed, while 10% disagreed. Views were most ambivalent for Recommendation 4.4, proposing a supermajority threshold: 48% agreed, while 19% disagreed – the highest level of disagreement for any of the assembly recommendations included in the survey. These figures broadly mirror those in the assembly voting itself, though with many more survey respondents being unsure.



## Citizens' assemblies

It is perhaps unsurprising that, at the end of a successful deliberative process, most members of the citizens' assembly thought that such deliberative exercises should be used more often as part of our democracy (see Resolution 5, in Box 6.4). The reasoning that underpinned this conclusion is nevertheless insightful. During their discussions, members highlighted two main benefits of these exercises. First, they valued the fact that, if recruitment is done well, participants can be broadly representative of the wider population. By contrast, they reflected that most other existing avenues for direct public voice – such as consultations, public meetings, and demonstrations – mostly give the perspectives of those who are already engaged. One member said:

We are all so different and coming from different places – but all focused on how to make things better once we got into it. It made it hard but exciting. This way you get a real range of the population involved and people learn from each other.

Second, members valued deliberation, which they thought gives space for reasoning, evidence, and thoughtful exchange of views. One said:

In the deliberative process, more ideas come into the pot to be considered and either rejected or accepted. But they all go into the pot. And that means, at the end of the day, the final conclusion is based on more rational thinking than just a yes or no. It's been thought out. So I think it's a good process and that's an opportunity which this provides for our political system.

### Box 6.4. Citizens' assembly recommendations: the use of citizens' assemblies

#### Resolution 5

We believe that deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies should be used more often by governments and parliaments throughout the UK to understand the views of the public.

Supported by 90%

Recommendation 5.1: Deliberative processes should be used on divisive issues that are really important to people, either locally or nationally, and widely publicised and scrutinised so that they become trusted by the public and politicians.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 5.2: The results of a deliberative process like a Citizens' Assembly should provide advice to decision makers but should not be binding, as that would be undemocratic since the members are not elected.

Supported by 85%

Recommendation 5.3: The results of deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies that are initiated by government or parliament need to have an impact. When they are convened, there should be a guarantee that their results will be made public, their recommendations will receive a detailed response from the convening body, and they will be debated in parliament.

Supported by 93%

Recommendation 5.4: Citizens' Assemblies or Citizens' Juries should be convened to advise on and sense-check new laws proposed by the government that are outside their manifesto commitments, as a formal mechanism of public scrutiny of new proposals. Their findings should be published.

Supported by 80%

Recommendation 5.5: Deliberative processes should be used to enhance local as well as national decision-making, so that decisions are made that are informed by what local people want.

Supported by 91%

Recommendation 5.6: MPs should hold locally based deliberative processes with a cross-section of their constituency before voting on controversial policy issues so that they can better understand the concerns of their electorate.

Supported by 85%



The specific recommendations in this area focused on when and how deliberative processes might be used. Recommendation 5.1 suggested they might be particularly valuable on issues that are important but divisive. Recommendations 5.4–5.6 proposed several particular contexts in which they could be deployed.

Recommendations 5.2 and 5.3 were perhaps most illuminating. Recommendation 5.3 insisted that processes such as citizens' assemblies should be taken seriously in government and parliament, with a guarantee that their results be made public and lead to debate in parliament. At the same time, Recommendation 5.2 said that assembly recommendations should not be binding on decision-makers, 'as that would be undemocratic since the members are not elected'. In developing these recommendations, members built on their underpinning principles for democracy, set out in Chapter 2 (Box 2.1). Principle 16 held that those elected to represent the public must ultimately be responsible for the decisions taken. But Principles 10 and 11 emphasised the importance of evidence and expertise in decision-making, while Principle 13 focused on the value of coming together to examine issues and develop solutions that work for society as a whole.

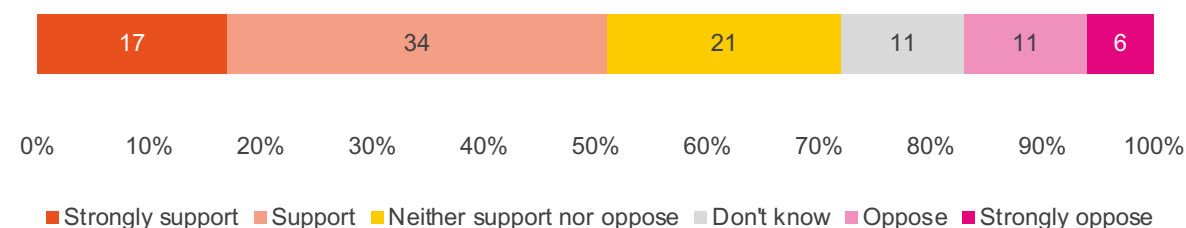
The assembly's Recommendation 5.1 hinted at a concern that citizens' assemblies are not yet widely known or trusted by the public at large. This appeared to be reflected in survey responses. Both surveys included a question that explained what a citizens' assembly is and then asked whether respondents thought this a good idea. As Figure 6.9 shows, a (bare) majority said that it was, and opposition was low; but around a third of respondents were unsure, presumably in many cases reflecting unfamiliarity with the concept.

### Figure 6.9. Attitudes to citizens' assemblies

Question: One possible way to resolve a difficult political issue is to get a group of ordinary people together in what's called a 'Citizens' Assembly'.

In this approach, a group of people are selected by lottery, in much the same way as for jury service. Organisers try to make sure people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, class backgrounds and political views are represented. These people are given information about the issue and hear different arguments. They get to ask questions, think about the evidence, and discuss different views among themselves. Then they vote on what they think and their conclusions are made public.

To what extent would you support or oppose having this kind of Citizens' Assembly become part of how the UK decides difficult political issues?



Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.

Similar uncertainty was evident when two of the assembly's recommendations relating to citizens' assemblies were put to survey respondents. On Recommendation 5.1 (calling for the use of deliberative processes on divisive issues), 49% expressed agreement and only 13% disagreement, but 38% said either that they neither agreed nor disagreed or that they didn't know – the highest such figure for any of the recommendations. At 35%, these uncertain responses were almost as high in relation to Recommendation 5.4 (advocating a citizens' assembly or jury when a government proposes a new law that was not in its manifesto); 47% agreed and 17% disagreed.

At multiple points in this report, including the preceding paragraph, we have set out how survey respondents reacted to recommendations from the citizens' assembly that were put to them. In doing so, we varied the information provided about the source of these recommendations. Some respondents were told that they came from a citizens' assembly, while others were not. For those who were told this, the information provided

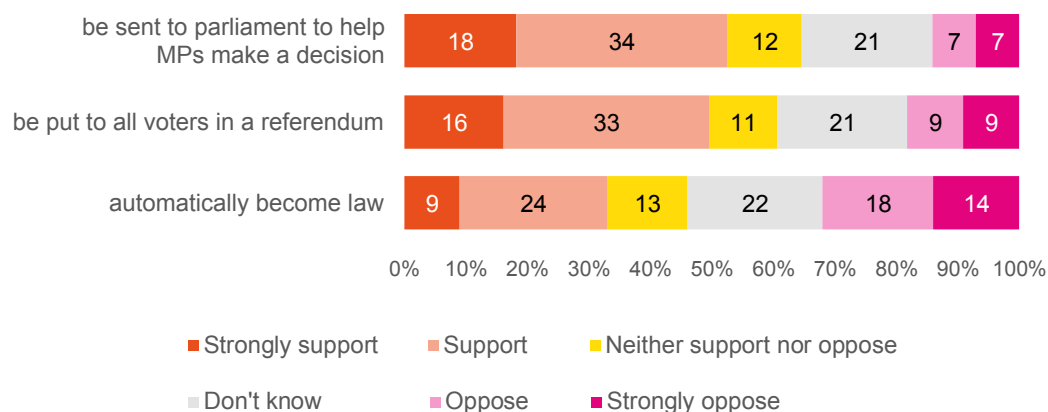
about the assembly varied: for example, some people were told about the number of participants, the representative character of the assembly, the duration of the process, or how the assembly worked. This was done in order to see whether knowing that a recommendation came from a citizens' assembly (and one of a particular kind) increased support for the recommendation. As set out in our third report, it did increase support, but only by an average of 3 percentage points in total. None of the particular pieces of information about the assembly had a significant effect. This again points to the conclusion that many people currently have little opinion on the merits of such exercises.

On the other hand, another question varied not only a feature of a hypothetical citizens' assembly in itself (its size), but also the role that the assembly would play in the wider political system: whether its proposals would go to parliament for discussion, be put to voters in a referendum, or be implemented automatically. Here there was a noteworthy effect: respondents were markedly less enthusiastic about the idea of an assembly whose proposals automatically became law (Figure 6.10). This suggests that the concerns of our own citizens' assembly about empowering such deliberative processes in this way (expressed in Recommendation 5.2) matched the instincts of the wider public.

### Figure 6.10. Attitudes to citizens' assemblies with different powers

Question: Imagine that an assembly like this was convened with [ASSEMBLY\_SIZE] members. [ASSEMBLY\_ISSUE]. Its proposal would [ASSEMBLY\_ROLE]. To what extent would you support or oppose holding a Citizens' Assembly in this way?\*

An assembly whose proposal would...



\* The question was preceded by the same description of a citizens' assembly as is shown in Figure 6.9. '[ASSEMBLY\_SIZE]' was randomly replaced for different respondents by 50, 75, 100, 150, or 200. This variation did not significantly affect the responses, and the results presented here aggregate across these alternatives. '[ASSEMBLY\_ISSUE]' was replaced by one of three alternatives, relating to tackling climate change, funding social care, or deciding whether to legalise cannabis. Again, effects on responses were small and are therefore not shown. '[ASSEMBLY\_ROLE]' was replaced by one of the alternatives shown to the left of the chart.

Source: Survey 1, 23–29 July 2021.

## Conclusion

A fundamental driver of current dissatisfaction with the state of politics is a perception that the democratic system is insufficiently responsive to public wishes and interests. At the same time, few people have much enthusiasm for engaging in politics as it is currently practised: they don't feel that they know enough about politics to get more involved; they don't like how politics works; and they don't think their participation would make much difference. There is therefore support for measures that would address these concerns. Such measures include some of those discussed in previous chapters – above all, enhancing standards of ethical behaviour in public life. They also include improving education about politics and making accurate, trustworthy, impartial information about political matters more readily accessible, through the media and other channels. There is overwhelming public support for free speech, while views on freedoms of protest and association are more mixed.

The final three sections of this chapter examined attitudes to petitions, referendums, and deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies. There is considerable support among the public for all of these, but in each case there are also qualifications. Regarding petitions and referendums, the primary concern is that these mechanisms should not be used in ways that cut out space for thoughtful deliberation about proposals. Thus, people tend to think that petitions should stimulate careful and meaningful examination of an issue – in parliament and government, or in a citizens' assembly or public inquiry. And they believe referendums should not be overused and should be accompanied by availability of trustworthy information. Regarding deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies, meanwhile, the concern is that, if used to make final decisions, they could cut out the role of representatives who are accountable to the electorate as a whole. Most people therefore think that such assemblies should be advisory – but also that their recommendations should genuinely be taken seriously, not brushed aside.





# Chapter 7. Do People Care about Political Process?

This report has shown that people are exasperated by the state of politics in the UK today. They value democracy, but do not believe that the system currently delivers on democracy's promise. They instinctively favour a range of changes – that would enhance ethical standards in public life, strengthen checks and balances, and advance a style of political discourse that better reflects the interests of all.

But there may still be doubts about how much all of this really matters to people. In our conversations with politicians and others over the course of the project, we have repeatedly heard the view that, whatever people say when confronted with survey questions or when participating in a citizens' assembly, what ultimately matters to them is whether the system delivers economic well-being and effective public services. That, many point out, is what determines how people vote at elections.

Some of the evidence earlier in the report has been relevant to the evaluation of this contention. Chapter 2 explored whether people see democracy as intrinsically or merely instrumentally valuable. Answering a question in survey 1, 32% of respondents said 'democracy is always the best form of government' while 54% said 'democracy is good so long as it delivers effective government' (see Figure 2.1). This might imply that most people are not particularly interested in political process in itself. On the other hand, Chapter 2 examined views on what a Prime Minister should do if faced with a choice between acting with integrity and delivering either what was best for the country or what most people wanted. Across most variants of this question, the majority of respondents chose the integrity option – suggesting that they do care about process (Figures 3.3 and 3.4).

This chapter therefore goes deeper into the evidence on such matters. This all comes from the surveys of public opinion: a citizens' assembly, where the broad agenda is determined in advance, cannot gauge public priorities between things that are on or off that agenda. But the surveys provide two kinds of evidence. The first section of the chapter examines answers to questions that asked respondents to state or reveal their priorities across a range of issues. This allows us to assess how important matters of political process are to people relative to other issues. The second section looks briefly at the degree to which responses were stable or unstable, both between the surveys and across different question wordings. This does not provide a measure of the priority that people attach to matters of process, but rather goes a step further back: very unstable preferences could suggest that people do not really have views on these matters at all.

Overall, the evidence suggests that people do have meaningful preferences in relation to political processes. While questions about the democratic system are not generally the most important for people, they do matter.

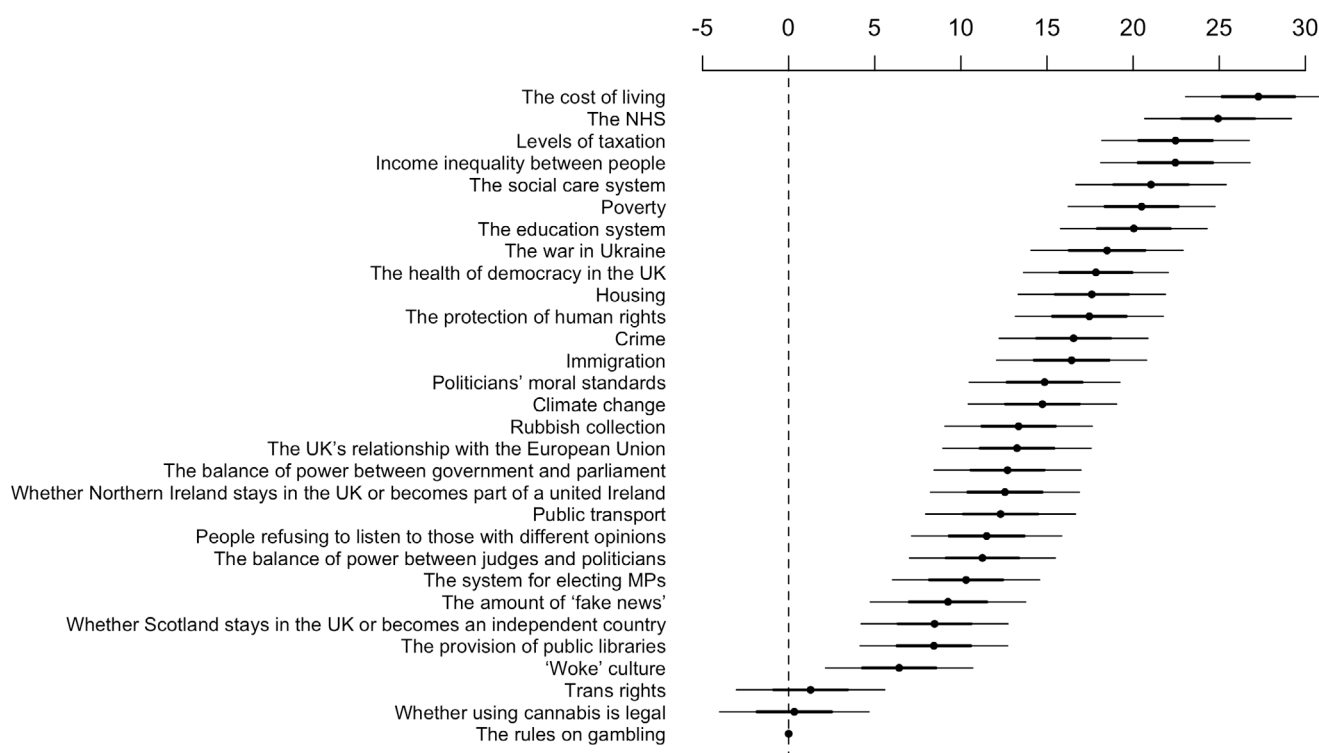
## Stated and revealed preferences about what matters to people

Survey 2 asked respondents directly what issues were more or less important to them. Specifically, it presented them with pairs of issues randomly selected from those listed in Figure 7.1 and asked them to say which mattered more. The cost of living was the issue that people identified as most important – unsurprisingly so, given that inflation was running at a 30-year high when the survey was conducted in the summer of 2022. It was followed by the NHS. But 'the health of democracy in the UK' mattered too: it was on a par with issues such as the war in Ukraine, housing, crime, and immigration. The same was true of 'the protection of human rights'. And 'politicians' moral standards' mattered as much as climate change. All of this suggests that, while economic issues predominate on most people's agendas, concerns about the state of politics also matter. Figure 7.1 also supports the point highlighted in Chapter 2, that people are generally more aware of the actors and behaviours of politics than they are of the institutions: more narrowly institutional items – the balance of power between government and parliament and between judges and politicians – ranked lower.



## Figure 7.1. Issues that matter to people

Question: When thinking about politics today, would you say that issues around [A] or around [B] are more important to you?

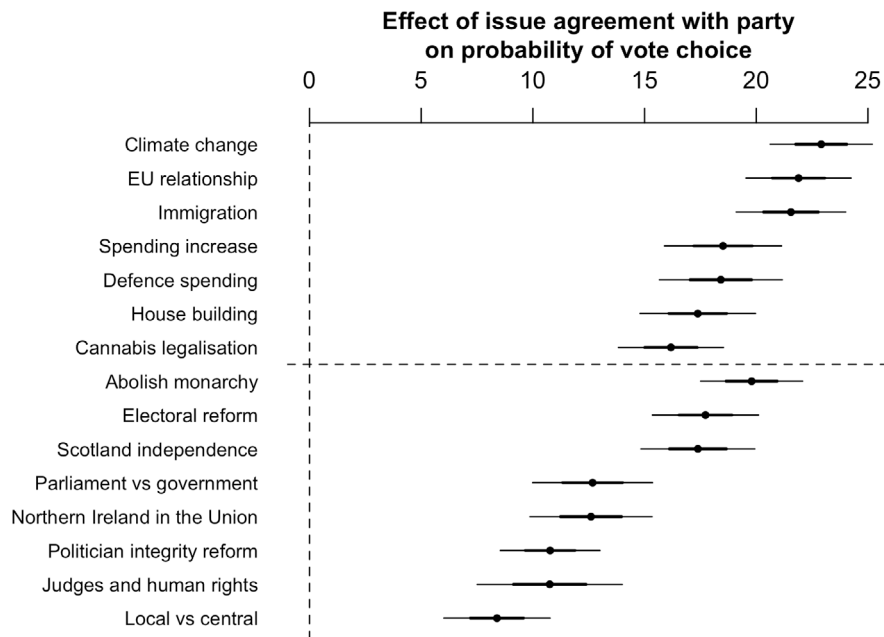


*Note: In place of '[A]' and '[B]', each respondent saw two of the options shown. The chart shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these, with the least favoured option set at 0. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, if faced with a choice between 'The cost of living' (27) and 'Immigration' (16), the number choosing the former would be 11 percentage points (27 – 16) higher than the number choosing the latter.*

*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

Another way of getting at what matters to people, rather than asking directly, is to ask a range of questions and see what makes a difference to the responses. In this case, we described the policy platforms of two notional political parties, and asked respondents to say which of these parties they would vote for if faced with the choice. By varying the issues included in the described policy platforms, we can gain a measure of which issues carry more weight in respondents' voting decisions. This provides information on so-called 'revealed preferences': respondents do not state their preferences (i.e., their prioritisation of issues) directly, but reveal their preferences through their answers.

Figure 7.2 shows the results. Specifically, it shows how much more likely a respondent was to say they would vote for the party that agreed with their position on a given issue rather than for the party that did not agree. Of the issues included, climate change, the UK's relationship with the EU, and immigration had the greatest impact. The constitutional issues generally scored somewhat lower. But some – the future of the monarchy, electoral reform, and Scottish independence – still had a marked impact.

**Figure 7.2. The impact of issues on vote choice**

*Note: The scale indicates that, on average in this experiment, voters were, for example, 23 percentage points more likely to vote for the party that shared their position on climate change than for the party that did not. Given the hypothetical nature of the question, however, weight should not be placed on the precise numbers. What the results do show is which issues are likely to have larger or smaller effects on how people vote.*

*The full descriptions of the positions of the hypothetical parties on each issue are available on the [project website](#).*

*Source: Survey 2, 26 August – 5 September 2022.*

It may be noted that there are some considerable differences in issue rankings between Figures 7.1 and 7.2. This could partly be down to question wording, but it also indicates that what matters most to people is not straightforward. For a range of reasons, what people say matters to them may not always be the same as what influences their vote. Nevertheless, the findings across the two questions are consistent in suggesting that, while issues relating to the constitution and democratic process are not most people's top priority, they do still matter.

## Stability of answers

The second way of thinking about whether people have meaningful preferences about democratic processes is to look at the stability of their preferences: either stability over time, or stability in the face of slight changes in question wording. This gives evidence not on the priority that people give to different issues as such, but on whether people have meaningful preferences on these matters at all.

Beginning with stability over time, if respondents give 'top of the head' answers that do not reflect real opinions, they may well end up giving different answers at different times. By contrast, if they do have established views on the issues asked about, or if they have established views or instincts on related matters that give them a clear steer, then their answers are more likely to be stable.

To examine this, we have looked at the answers to the 11 trade-off questions set out above in Figure 2.9. These questions were put to respondents in identical form in both survey 1 and survey 2, and therefore provide a good measure of overall stability or instability. In fact, most respondents expressed stable preferences. Of those respondents who chose one of the two options in the first survey (rather than choosing 'I agree/disagree with both equally' or 'Don't know') an average of 61% chose that option in the second survey as well, while only 18% shifted to the other option (the remainder shifted to one of the intermediate options).

There was some variation in these proportions across questions, suggesting respondents had clearer views on some matters than on others. Stability was greatest for the choice between the statement that 'Once a decision has been agreed on democratically, people should accept it and move on, even if they disagree with it' and the alternative that 'In a democracy, it is good if people continue campaigning against decisions that they disagree with, even after a decision has been made'. Of those who chose the first option in survey 1, 75% chose it again in survey 2; for the second option, the proportion was 67%. This trade-off question related to a choice that became highly salient in the years before the survey was conducted – whether the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum should be treated as final – which likely explains the high stability. By contrast, stability was lowest for the choice between the statements 'Judges have an important role in ensuring that elected politicians operate within the rules' and 'Elected politicians must themselves be responsible for ensuring that they act within the rules': here, only 63% and 45% of respondents (respectively) maintained their original choice.

This appears therefore be an issue where people's views are less certain.

There was also variation within some questions depending on which option respondents had originally chosen. For example, of those who in survey 1 chose the option 'On big political questions, it is generally best to weigh the pros and cons of different options before deciding', 78% stuck with that option in survey 2, while only 8% switched to the alternative. But of those who chose the alternative in survey 1 – 'On big political questions, you can generally trust your instincts about what's right' – only 47% maintained that choice in survey 2, while 41% switched.

The second aspect of stability is the degree to which precise question wording affects survey responses. If people know what they think about an issue, their answer is unlikely to be affected by how the question frames that issue. By contrast, if people do not have clear preferences, their answers may be strongly affected by whether the question frames a given option in a favourable or unfavourable way.

As this report has set out, our surveys included many questions in which elements were varied to explore the content of respondents' preferences in detail. Most of these variations were about substance rather than framing. In two questions, however, the wording was varied specifically so as to frame the options in ways that respondents might view more positively or more negatively. One of these, relating to the roles of judges and of politicians in resolving disputes about governmental powers, was shown in Figure 5.7. This indicated that different framing had meaningful impacts on responses: for example, whereas 50% of respondents thought that judges should decide such disputes if they were described as 'independent judges' only 36% did so if they were described as 'unelected judges'. This difference did not affect which option was favoured overall: the greatest number of respondents in any case stated that judges should have a role. But there could clearly be cases where opinion was more balanced and framing did make a crucial difference.

The second question where framing was varied in this way related to the role of the House of Lords. Two overall ways of asking this question were shown in Figure 4.13. In addition, we varied the precise wording within each of these: MPs were described either, simply, as 'MPs' or as 'elected MPs'; peers were described either as 'members of the House of Lords' or as 'appointed members of the House of Lords'; likewise, sometimes the wording highlighted that MPs 'are accountable to voters' while other times it did not; and sometimes it noted that peers 'are often experts', while other times it did not. Whether the words 'elected' or 'appointed' were included did not make a difference to the responses. But mentioning the accountability of MPs to voters did make respondents significantly more likely to favour MPs having the final say, while mentioning the expertise of peers likewise had a significant (though smaller) effect on support for their role.

These two questions thus both suggest that framing has effects on responses, but that these effects are not overwhelming: a large body of opinion remains stable despite them.

## Conclusion

The second part of this chapter indicates that people do have meaningful preferences on matters of political process. They tended to express the same views on general questions of principle in two surveys held a year apart; and their answers tended to be resilient to slight changes in question wording. There was some evidence that people had clearer preferences on some such matters than on others.

The first part of the chapter suggests that these questions of political process do in fact matter to people. They are not most people's top priority: everyday issues such as the cost of living and the NHS understandably count more. But they remain important. At least in mid-2022, 'the health of democracy in the UK', 'the protection of human rights', and 'politicians' moral standards' were on a par with issues such as housing, crime, immigration, and climate change.



# Chapter 8. Implications for Democratic Reform

This concluding chapter does four things. First, it summarises the findings of previous chapters, outlining what the research indicates about public attitudes to democracy and the democratic system in the UK. Second, it places these findings in context, highlighting again the circumstances in which the research was conducted, and reflecting on how far the findings are likely to represent long-term patterns versus short-term responses to particular events. In doing so, it identifies points on which further research will be desirable in the future. Third, the chapter returns to the question raised in the Introduction – of whether and in what ways the public attitudes revealed through this project's research might matter. Finally, it considers the implications of the research findings. What should be done in light of what we have learnt? What reforms, if any, should be introduced? In what ways, if any, should politicians and others alter their behaviour?

## The findings of the research

The results set out in the report show that most survey respondents and citizens' assembly members were deeply dissatisfied with the state of democracy in the UK. Above all, they wanted politics and politicians to be honest, to be responsive to and representative of the public, and to serve the public interest. The claim that people do not care about political processes is wrong. While it is undoubtedly true that issues such as economic well-being (summed up by ongoing concerns over the cost of living) and the quality of public services mattered to respondents more, the widespread feeling that the political world treats members of the public with contempt ran deep. Even if they shift relatively few votes in the end, such perceptions can corrode public confidence in the system and, particularly, in politicians. As argued below, that is bad for democracy and for effective policy-making. By fuelling negative perceptions of politicians, it also harms politicians personally.

In thinking about possible reforms to the democratic system, participants often faced two conflicting priorities. On the one hand, they wanted voters to be in charge. They therefore thought that those who make important decisions should be elected by and accountable to voters, and they were wary of empowering unelected actors. They were also attracted to the idea that governments should be held to their manifestos, and should have the power to implement manifesto commitments without undue constraint. On the other hand, they did not think power should be too concentrated. That was partly for a negative reason: they distrusted politicians to pursue the public interest. But it was also partly for more positive reasons: many believed that, in a diverse country, it is vital to include a broad range of perspectives in decision-making. And most valued careful, considered decision-making in which evidence is weighed and experts, as well as the diverse views of the public, are heard – at least in part because this protects against overhasty decision-making, where policy mistakes are made.

Between these two priorities of wanting governments to be able to act but being wary of concentrated power, it was usually the latter that participants focused on more. This had two implications. First, few respondents supported 'strongman' politics, where a single leader or leadership group could operate unconstrained by the rule of law or the need for parliamentary approval. Much has been written in recent years about the rise of strongman leaders around the world, and the UK has been proposed as an example of that trend (e.g., Rachman 2022). But the evidence of this project suggested there may be less public appetite for such an arrangement than previous studies have implied. What we should make of this finding is a point that we return to in the next section.

The second implication, more concretely and specifically, was that most participants wanted a robust system of checks and balances. They wanted a strong parliament that can represent all points of view, scrutinise proposals, and hold those in power to account. They wanted courts to be able to uphold the rule of law and protect vital rights and liberties. They preferred an impartial civil service and independent, impartial media organs. They wanted politicians to be more responsive to public opinion than they thought was currently the case, and considered that this could be realised in part through mechanisms such as petitions, referendums, and citizens' assemblies. But they also thought that these mechanisms should themselves be subject to constraints: enabling more thoughtful public debate, rather than allowing one group to exert undue power over others.





Regarding public participation, many survey respondents and citizens' assembly members were again somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, they wanted the system to be responsive to public wishes and interests. But, on the other, their distaste for and disillusionment with current politics meant that few had much appetite to become actively involved themselves. Nevertheless, as just noted, they supported mechanisms such as petitions, referendums, and citizens' assemblies. They also wanted barriers to effective participation to be lowered, through better education about politics and through the provision of accurate, trustworthy information about political matters.

The findings indicated the presence of some divergences of opinion on these matters across different groups within the population. Those who voted for the Conservatives in the 2019 general election and (to a lesser extent) those who voted Leave in the Brexit referendum of 2016 tended to be more favourable towards concentrating power in the hands of the executive than were others – who voted for Remain or for other parties. The former groups also expressed somewhat more 'populist' ideas about democracy as a whole, being more favourable to speedy decision-making by elected leaders, whereas the latter exhibited more 'liberal' views that emphasised deliberation, inclusion, and checks and balances. But such differences were not as great as might have been expected, and should not be exaggerated. The evidence suggested that the public in the UK do not hold polarised visions of democracy. The basic patterns described in the preceding paragraphs applied to all or most groups.

## Placing the findings in context

As the Introduction to the report indicated, the research for this study was conducted in relatively unusual circumstances. Most notably, the fieldwork for the 2022 survey took place after the then Prime Minister – Boris Johnson – had been forced to announce his resignation, because most of his colleagues (and most of the public) had concluded that his record of disregard for the truth rendered him unfit for office. Those concerns had already been rising during the course of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, which met between September and December 2021: the Owen Paterson affair and the 'Partygate' scandal both broke in this period. Even at the time of the first survey, in July 2021, concerns over Johnson's conduct, as well as of his colleagues such as Dominic Cummings and Matt Hancock, had been running high. As is evident particularly from the analysis of citizens' assembly discussions in Chapter 2, such events were very present in the research participants' minds.

To what extent should this context colour our interpretation of the research findings? To what extent, in particular, may the patterns observed – including the low trust in politicians, the emphasis on integrity and honesty, the widespread dislike of 'strongman' leadership, the preference for checks and balances, and the importance given to the health of democracy – have been heightened by the particular circumstances in which the evidence was gathered?

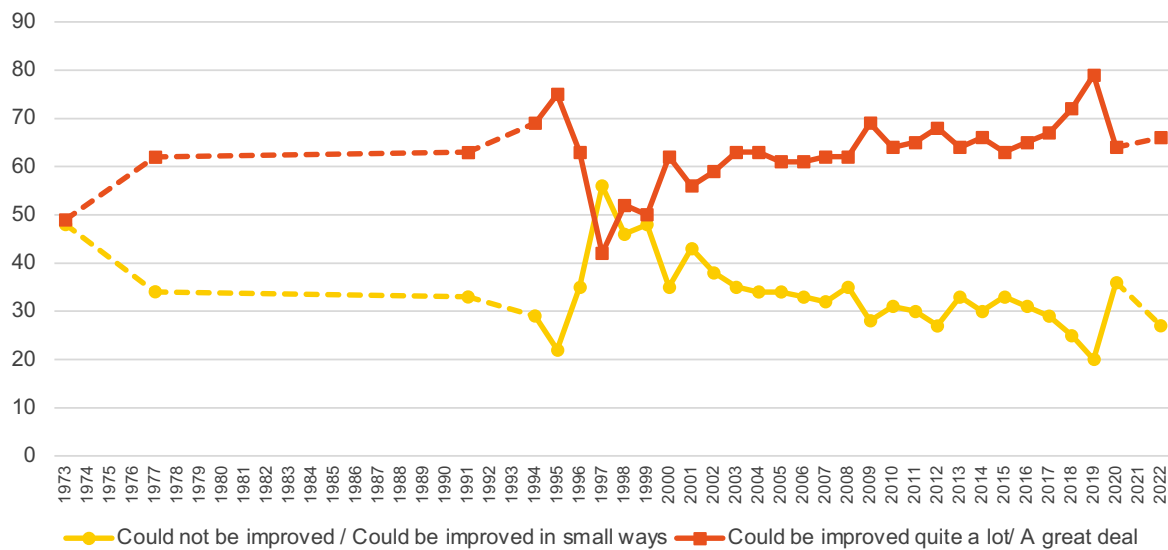
To a degree, the answers to these questions are unknowable. The citizens' assembly was a unique event, and most of the survey questions had not been asked before. On the whole, direct comparisons with longer time series are therefore not possible. Only further research in the future will be able fully to overcome this constraint, through repeating some of the survey questions in different contexts. Such further research will also make it possible to address some of the other unanswered questions highlighted in this report, such as whether differences in the attitudes of Conservative and Labour voters reflect enduring contrasts in their ideas about democracy, or merely responses to whether these voters' preferred party was in power or not.

But some further evidence placing certain findings in context does exist. Several of our survey questions were taken from previous studies. Most notable among these was that shown in Figure 1.2, asking respondents how far (if at all) they thought the present system of governing in the UK could be improved. To our knowledge, this question was first used in 1973, and it has been asked in at least one large-scale survey almost every year since 1994. Figure 8.1 shows the patterns. This evidence suggests that attitudes in 2022 were, on this question, entirely in line with those seen over recent years. There were peaks in dissatisfaction with the status quo in 1995 and 2019. Aside from these years, and a brief period of greater contentment during the Blair honeymoon in the late 1990s, the 2022 findings were not very different from those found much of the time since the late 1970s.



### Figure 8.1. Views on scope for improving the UK's system of governing, 1973–2022

Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing the UK?



Note: Dashed lines indicate gaps between surveys greater than a year. Where there were two or more surveys in the same year, the figure shows the average of the results.

Sources: Curtice and Scholes (2021: 6); Hansard Society (2019: 8).

Lengthy time series are also available for levels of trust in politicians and other actors. The longest such series, from Ipsos, dates back to 1983 and focuses on trust in politicians (and others) to tell the truth. In 2022, such trust was indeed low, but it was broadly comparable to that seen at a previous low point in the mid-1990s, and it was only slightly below the general pattern observed since a sharp drop in 2009 amidst the MPs' expenses scandal and global financial crisis (Ipsos 2022a). Another series, from the British Social Attitudes survey, starts in 1986 and focuses on trust in governments to pursue the national interest. It finds a clearer pattern of falling trust over time, with a nadir hit in 2019 followed by some recovery in 2020 (Curtice and Scholes 2021: 7). The questions used in these surveys are not directly comparable to our own. They suggest, however, that, while our 2022 data were gathered at a time of particularly low trust, the gap in attitudes between that year and other recent years is unlikely to have been large.

A final point of comparison is provided by the Ipsos Issues Index, which for decades has examined what people see as the most important issues facing Britain. Since 2017, Ipsos has included a category called 'Lack of faith in politicians/politics/government'. This reached its highest recorded level in June 2022, when 26% of respondents mentioned it as one of the most important issues – behind only 'Inflation/prices' at 40% and 'Economy' on 30%. Since then, it has fallen back somewhat, standing at 15% in September 2023. But it remains at a heightened level compared to the period before late 2021 (Ipsos 2022b, 2023). This suggests that our second survey measured the salience of concerns about the health of democracy at a time – the summer of 2022 – when such concerns were exceptionally high, but that these concerns remain considerable today.

Looking across this evidence in the round, it appears that public attitudes towards democracy in the UK were in a somewhat unusual state during the period of our research, but that differences from wider patterns were no more than moderate. It is highly likely that dissatisfaction with Boris Johnson raised the attention given to integrity and honesty, fuelled support for checks and balances, and dampened enthusiasm for 'strongman' leadership. But distrust in politicians and dissatisfaction with the way the system operates are long-standing and deep-rooted, as is the view that those in positions in power are a class apart who seek primarily to advance their own interests. The findings set out in this report can reasonably be taken as reflecting the state of public attitudes towards democracy in the UK today. Such attitudes may change in the future – as they did following changes of government in 1997 and, to a lesser extent, 2010. But widespread disillusionment is unlikely to go away anytime soon – at least without concerted action.





## Do these views matter?

The preceding section suggested that the findings presented here do provide a reasonable snapshot of public attitudes towards the democratic system in the UK. But do such attitudes actually matter?

Public views on how the democratic system should be structured are not necessarily well founded. Many people do not know the details of how the current system works, and may not have a clear view of the side effects that could be triggered if certain changes were introduced. Their ideas may be coloured by a rather jaundiced view of politicians. They may not be able accurately to envision how they would think or behave differently if politics were structured or conducted in different ways. The conclusions of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK offer evidence on more considered public views. But it covered a relatively wide set of issues compared to some other citizens' assemblies. Its conclusions deserve close attention but should not be thought definitive – as the members themselves recognised.

These factors mean that it would be bold to claim that, just because members of the public back a given political reform, such a reform should necessarily be adopted. Nevertheless, the evidence presented in this report does deserve careful attention. It is part of the essence of democracy that the system should be responsive to public opinion and should serve the public at large. So what people think is important. And if people think the system is unresponsive, that matters a great deal.

More practically, democracy works better if people have confidence in it. Healthy democracy requires participation that is both wide and deep: wide so that all voices can be heard; deep so that decisions are driven not by whims or passing observations, but by thoughtful consideration. But politics at present puts many people off, leaving them unenthusiastic about getting involved. Furthermore, effective policy-making requires careful consideration of competing perspectives, and sometimes difficult trade-offs. It often requires elected representatives, alongside officials and experts, to discuss matters carefully and devise compromises. If large numbers of people distrust these actors to pursue the public interest, and instead see them as self-serving, it becomes harder for policy-makers to do their jobs well. On many of the fundamental challenges of our day – relating to climate change, shepherding the economy, and others – policies may fail unless they are widely accepted as reasonably fair.

For all these reasons, public confidence in the democratic system – that it is well designed and functioning effectively – is essential. Given that this is currently in short supply, the evidence in these pages should be taken seriously, and we should explore what can be done in response to it.

## So what should be done?

The evidence in this report has focused on three main aspects of the democratic system: ethical standards in public life; the value of checks and balances; and the roles of the public. The following paragraphs reflect on what should be done in each of these areas in turn.

Regarding ethical standards, the first, key point is that politicians and others in public life should acknowledge that such standards matter. Some politicians have recently appeared to doubt that, believing that delivery is all. They are wrong. The low standards of some in positions of power corrode public confidence, to the detriment of the democratic system as a whole.

The value that came up in our research more than any other was honesty. That is about more than just not lying. Many people see little difference between lying and spinning. They feel equally disrespected by both, and by politicians who evade the question. In all of these cases, people feel that politicians are trying to pull the wool over their eyes, rather than taking them seriously.

But what can be done about this? The simple answer may be that politicians should just speak honestly, including about the trade-offs and uncertainties that they necessarily face – but what will the consequences be if they do so? They may be accused of a gaffe or worse in the media. They may destabilise a delicate set of compromises that have been pieced together in order to make progress on a difficult issue. They may find their support falling, because many voters dislike the message. Just calling for honesty therefore isn't enough: deeper thinking about how to shift the political discourse is needed. This is not the place to provide that thinking, but a few pointers might encourage discussion. Politicians might show greater willingness to acknowledge complexity, accepting that some decisions involve tough compromises. Ministers, while maintaining collective responsibility, might have a little more latitude to acknowledge that certain decisions



were hard for them, but that they were willing to back the team view. Yet such moves would be possible only if the media did not pounce on such statements as evidence of indecision or splits. Developing such discourse is easier if there is a degree of public trust, and if people are sufficiently engaged to see simplistic or manipulative headlines for what they are. This creates a quandary: trust will grow only if behaviour is trustworthy; but trustworthy behaviour is easier if trust is already high. If the problem isn't dealt with, however, it creates a risk: that untrustworthy politicians actively seek to profit from the public's existing distrust, concluding that they can behave dishonestly, and consequently eroding trust further. Some fear that this has already happened in the UK.

Chapter 3 showed high public support for a role for regulators in helping to uphold standards. The clearest finding was a view that regulators should be able to investigate allegations of wrongdoing independently. That accords with the view of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) and many other bodies. The most notable change that it implies from current arrangements is that the Prime Minister's Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests should be able to launch investigations without requiring the Prime Minister's prior authorisation. That would be a significant change, but would clearly be insufficient on its own to shift the dynamics substantially. CSPL has also suggested that other regulators should be strengthened by being put on a statutory basis.

Parliamentary regulators have taken several important steps in the period since the evidence in this report was collected. Notably, the high-profile Privileges Committee investigation into Boris Johnson concluded and recommended significant sanctions against the former Prime Minister; and the new Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards has taken a more public role, seeking to explain his responsibilities and approach, and thereby to foster public understanding of the system. The evidence we gathered suggests that such developments could have positive effects: at the time of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, many members' perception was that wrongs were being committed, but that nothing was being done about them. Demonstrating that a robust system exists is therefore crucial for public confidence. Polling on the Privileges Committee's report indeed suggested that most people supported its conclusions (Peacock 2023). Greater speed of action could also aid confidence – though this would clearly have to be balanced against the need to ensure fair treatment.

Turning to the role of checks and balances, public attitudes appear to chime with the views of most experts. Both survey respondents and members of the citizens' assembly saw it as crucial for parliament – as the body that represents all points of view and all parts of the country – to play a central role in the policy process. Mechanisms for achieving this include giving MPs greater control over the parliamentary agenda, limiting the use of delegated legislation, strengthening public bill committees, and allowing a greater role for private members' bills. In the wake of the expenses scandal in 2009, MPs recognised that restoring parliament's reputation required demonstrating that the institution had a valuable role to play, and they pursued that through reforms including a strengthening of select committees. A similar attitude seems necessary today. Reform to the system of appointments to the House of Lords would, meanwhile, help reduce reputational damage to parliament.

At the same time, parliamentarians should understand that just boosting their own role will be insufficient to restore public confidence: they must also execute that role well. Many people view current parliamentary debates with a sense of despair, seeing them as dominated by partisan point-scoring rather than serious discussion of important issues. That view is a partial one: much good work does take place within parliament behind the scenes; as regards public debates, the media often focus on the brief moments of drama and conflict rather than the more frequent periods of sober and thoughtful discussion. Yet many MPs and peers would agree that there is considerable room for improvement. Again, working out how to address the problems is hard, but deserves careful attention.

The message from the research in relation to some other checks and balances is very clear: politicians should not mess with the impartiality of the BBC and other broadcasters, or with that of the civil service, or with the ability of the courts to prevent abuses of power. Public wariness over weakening court powers – which ministers have toyed with repeatedly in recent years – is particularly noteworthy. The evidence suggests that public unease about the political system would only be deepened if the existing role of the UK courts were not maintained. The evidence is slightly more mixed in relation to the European Convention and European Court of Human Rights, but even here a majority supported a role for the Court, and only a minority thought that it should play no role.

Finally, we turn to the roles of the public. As already pointed out, re-engaging the public in democracy in the UK is badly needed. Cleaning up standards would help with that: trust has been badly undermined by



events in recent years; people feel fed up with the state of political discourse and are inclined therefore to disengage. Both survey respondents and members of the citizens' assembly expressed a desire for issues to be discussed more seriously, for the media to do a better job of delivering accurate, unbiased reporting, and for information about what is happening in politics to be more readily accessible. Demonstrating responsiveness to public concerns is also badly needed.

Yet here too there are quandaries. The system would likely become more responsive if members of the public engaged with policy-making in a more sustained way; but few are willing to invest such time because they expect that the system will not listen to them. People say that they want more serious political discussion and more factual news reporting; but they often turn off when that is provided. Politicians, campaigners, journalists, and commentators all compete for brief snippets of public attention with soundbites of exaggerated, one-sided, or misleading spin; but the risk of such activity is that it alienates people even more.

There are no quick fixes to such dilemmas, but various positive steps appear possible. Politicians could do more to show that they are listening seriously: government could avoid responding to petitions dismissively, for example, but rather treat them as opportunities for genuine dialogue. Media organs such as the BBC have an essential role to play in working continuously in developing ways of conveying information and discussion that serve the health of democracy and attract audiences. As young people increasingly move away from traditional news sources, these challenges become greater, but also more important to overcome. The education system can make significant contributions too. One reason people do not engage with politics is that they feel they do not understand it. Education about politics – rigorously designed to maintain neutrality – could help. Fostering media literacy and awareness of cognitive biases could bring benefits as well, so that people understand the nature of the discourse they are immersed in and the ways in which they react to it. And there is evidence that greater use of deliberative processes such as the citizens' assembly that was part of this project could – if embedded meaningfully into the policy-making process – help to encourage more thoughtful dialogue.

This report is not the place to set out a detailed programme for political reforms. But it has demonstrated that action is needed to address deep public disaffection with the state of democracy in the UK. And the preceding paragraphs offer some initial ideas about where such action might be directed.



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# Appendix: Project Details

The Democracy in the UK after Brexit research project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Governance after Brexit research programme (grant number ES/V00462X/1).

Both surveys were conducted online by YouGov. Samples were representative of the UK voting-age population. The fieldwork dates and sample sizes were:

- Survey 1: 23–29 July 2021; 6,432 respondents.
- Survey 2: 26 August and 5 September 2022; 4,105 respondents.

All respondents to the 2022 survey had also completed the survey in 2021, meaning that the views of the same group of people can be compared over time. The full survey questionnaires are available on the project website: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/deliberative-democracy/democracy-uk-after-brexit>. Response datasets will be archived with the UK Data Service after the completion of the project.

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK met online over six weekends between September and December 2021. The assembly had 67 members, who were carefully recruited to be representative of the UK population in terms of factors such as gender, age, region, and political attitudes (Table A.1). The details of the recruitment process were set out in the assembly's report (Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK 2022: 14–15).

The assembly's agenda was determined by the research team, with adjustments over time in response to members' interests. Meetings were designed and facilitated by Involve, the UK's leading public participation charity. Members heard from and questioned a wide array of experts, and they discussed the issues in depth among themselves in small groups, gradually working towards conclusions at each stage. The assembly's report summarises the content of the six weekends (Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK 2022: 21–27). Recordings of all of the assembly's plenary sessions are available on the project website.

Beyond the assembly's own conclusions, this report includes the results of analysis of the discussions within the assembly. These discussions took place in small groups, each of which was aided by a facilitator. There were 11 groups at any time, whose membership rotated between weekends. A subset of group discussions were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed using a specially developed coding scheme. The coding covered all but the assembly's first, introductory weekend: most small-group discussion sessions were included from weekends 2 and 6, and Sunday sessions were included from weekends 3–5 (the Saturdays having been heavily focused on listening to and reflecting on evidence from experts). Four or five of the 11 groups were included for weekends 2–5, but only one group per session (not always the same group) for weekend 6. In total, 79 transcripts were coded (representing individual sessions for individual groups). These covered around one seventh of all the discussion that took place in small groups within the assembly. The coding scheme was designed to capture the events, people, and countries that were mentioned, and the ideas that were voiced about how democracy should work and how it in fact works in the UK. Each transcript was looked at by at least two coders; they discussed any divergences in their coding; following these two-way discussions, any remaining disagreements were taken to the coding group as a whole for resolution.



**Table A.1. Composition of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK**

Criteria	Categories	Target (%)	Original 74 members (%)	Final 67 members (%)	Final 67 members (no.)
Gender	Male	49.4	47.3	49.3	33
	Female	50.6	51.4	49.3	33
	Non-binary/Other*	-	1.4	1.5	1
Age	18-29	19.3	16.2	14.9	10
	30-44	24.5	27.0	28.4	19
	45-64	32.7	35.1	34.3	23
	65+	23.5	21.6	22.4	15
Ethnicity	Asian or Asian British	7.2	6.8	9.0	6
	Black or African or Caribbean or Black British	3.2	5.4	4.5	3
	Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	1.6	1.4	1.5	1
	White British	80.0	79.7	80.6	54
	White other	6.4	5.4	3.0	2
	Other	1.7	1.4	1.5	1
Disability	No	81.4	81.1	76.1	51
	Yes	18.6	18.9	23.9	16
Level of formal education	No qualification, none yet, & Level 1	36.3	35.1	29.9	20
	Level 2, Level 3, Apprenticeship, & Other	36.5	37.8	38.8	26
	Level 4 and above	27.2	27.0	31.1	21
Region	North East	4.0	2.7	1.5	1
	North West	11.0	10.8	10.5	7
	Yorkshire and the Humber	8.2	8.1	7.5	5
	East Midlands	7.2	6.8	9.0	6
	West Midlands	8.9	10.8	7.5	5
	East	9.3	8.1	10.5	7
	London	13.4	13.5	10.5	7
	South East	13.7	12.2	16.4	11
	South West	8.4	9.5	9.0	6
	Wales	4.7	4.1	4.5	3
	Scotland	8.2	9.5	9.0	6
	Northern Ireland	2.8	4.1	4.5	3



2016 EU referendum vote	I wasn't eligible to vote	9.1	9.5	10.4	7
	I didn't manage to vote, or I chose not to	28	24.3	19.4	13
	Voted to leave the EU	32.7	36.5	37.3	25
	Voted to remain in the EU	30.3	29.7	32.8	22
2019 general election vote	I wasn't eligible to vote	3.0	2.7	1.5	1
	I didn't manage to vote, or I chose not to	32.2	28.4	25.4	17
	Conservative	28.3	29.7	25.4	17
	Labour	20.8	21.6	25.4	17
	Scottish National Party (SNP)	2.5	2.7	3.0	2
	NI unionist party	0.7	1.4	1.5	1
	NI nationalist party	0.6	1.4	3.0	2
	Other	11.9	12.2	14.9	10
Attitudes to the role of citizens in a democracy: prospective members were asked, 'Which comes closer to your view?'	In a democracy, citizens should follow political debates closely themselves, rather than leaving it to politicians	47.9	48.6	52.2	35
	In a democracy, citizens should not have to follow political debates very much – they should be able to leave it to politicians	16.8	16.2	13.4	9
	I agree/disagree with both equally	22.1	24.3	28.4	19
	Don't know	13.2	10.8	6.0	4

\* We did not have a recruitment target for people with non-binary gender identities, but the recruitment process ensured that they had the same probability of selection as others.





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The team at YouGov, led by Adam McDonnell and Lukas Paleckis, bore our requests for often complex and interlinked survey questions with great patience, and deployed considerable ingenuity to deliver the survey that we had hoped for.

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK was delivered in partnership with the Sortition Foundation – which carried out the early stages of member recruitment – and Involve – which, with the Constitution Unit team, designed, facilitated, and managed the assembly. We are especially grateful to Tim Hughes, who worked with us in the early stages of project development, and Kaela Scott, who led on design and execution, and with whom we worked closely in preparing the assembly's report (Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK 2022). Some of Kaela's words appear in this report as well, where the assembly's conclusions are described and explained. The facilitators, support staff, and expert speakers are named in the assembly's report (Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK 2022: 84), and we again extend our deep thanks to them all.

Other members of the Constitution Unit team have contributed invaluable. The project's Research Assistants, James Cleaver and Alice Hart, took part in project design and management and did much to interpret the findings. They led the analysis of the transcripts from the citizens' assembly, shaping the design of that analysis and shepherding a team of coders. Those coders – Rohan Bainbridge, Hashmath Hassan, Billy Hohnen-Ford, Lydia Mourselas, Peter Mumford, Will Noble, and John Sheridan – worked with great expertise and skill, and we thank them all. We are also grateful to Hanna Vine and Dimitra Prekka, who helped with analysing the coding results and finalising aspects of this report. Finally, we thank Sophie Andrews-McCarroll, Tom Fieldhouse, Rowan Hall, and Edd Rowe for their assistance in the preparation and promotion of this report, and Janine Clayton for her expert work on report design.

All errors or other weaknesses remain, of course, our own.



Public disaffection with the state of democracy in the UK today is high. That matters, as it harms the effective working of the democratic system. Over the last three years, a team at the UCL Constitution Unit has therefore conducted detailed research into these public attitudes. Comprising two large-scale surveys of the UK population, and a Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, the research has been designed both to provide a broad overview of public perceptions and to drill deeper into what people think when they have had a chance to reflect in detail.

This final report from the project draws together those three strands of research and sets out the findings. Contrary to what is sometimes said, the public in the UK do care about the health of the democratic system. They want politics to be honest and politicians to act with integrity in pursuit of the public interest. They perceive deficits on all these points at present, and want action to address them. Given their low trust in politicians, they want a robust system of checks and balances, with parliament, the courts, regulators, civil servants, the media, and the public themselves all placing some limits on what holders of executive office can do. They also want action to enable more effective public participation.

The report's last chapter reflects on the implications of these findings for policy-makers. Fostering greater honesty in political discourse requires politicians, campaigners, and those in the media to reflect on their responsibilities. Proposals already exist to strengthen parliament and regulators. Any moves to weaken the neutrality of the civil service, the ability of the courts to check abuses or the BBC's impartiality would not find public favour. While enabling effective and widespread public participation is hard, areas for further consideration include improved education, media coverage that better enables understanding, and greater use of deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies.

## About the Constitution Unit

The Constitution Unit is a research centre based in the UCL Department of Political Science. We conduct timely, rigorous, independent research into constitutional change and the reform of political institutions. Since our foundation in 1995, the Unit's research has had significant real-world impact, informing policy-makers engaged in such changes – both in the United Kingdom and around the world.

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