What Kind of Democracy Do People Want?

Results of a Survey of the UK Population
First Report of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit Project

DEMOCRACY IN THE
UK AFTER BREXIT

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Introduction

The past decade in UK politics has raised fundamental questions about the kind of democracy we want to live in. What role should be played by referendums? Where should the balance of power lie between government and parliament? How far should the courts be involved in adjudicating disputes or upholding basic rules? What standards of behaviour do we expect from our politicians, and how should these be maintained?

To address these questions, we conducted a major new survey of UK public opinion in the summer of 2021. We asked for people's views on the fundamentals of the democratic system and how democracy is working in the UK today. The survey was fielded by YouGov in late July 2021, with a sample of almost 6,500 people, representative of the voting age population across the whole of the UK.

This large sample size allowed us to investigate attitudes across different parts of the population. It also meant that we could ask different versions of many questions to different respondents – as described in the following pages – leading to more precise and detailed understanding.

The timing of the survey should be noted: it was conducted when support for the Conservative government led by Boris Johnson remained high, before confidence weakened in the final months of 2021.

The survey is part of a wider research project – funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Governance after Brexit research programme. The project also includes a Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK and a further follow-up survey of the UK population, to be conducted in spring 2022. We will report on these additional elements, and bring them together, in further reports later in the year.
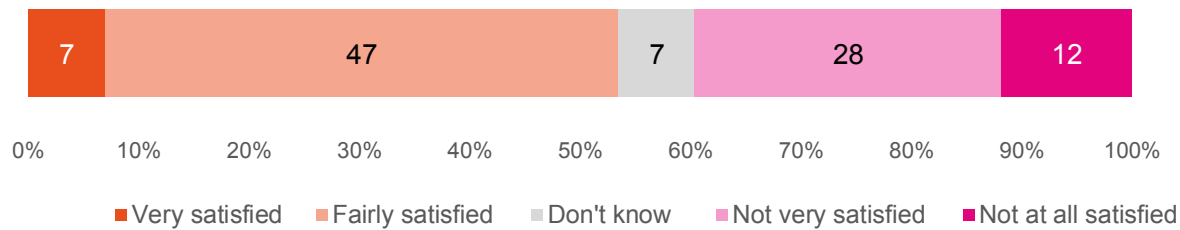
Key Findings

- Most people in the UK expressed broad satisfaction with democracy, but had very little trust in politicians.

- Most people wanted politicians who are honest, have integrity, and operate within the rules.

- People generally preferred not to concentrate power in the hands of a few politicians, but to spread it to parliament, non-politicians, and the public.

- Most people showed notably higher support for judicial interventions than is often supposed.

- Most people thought that people like themselves had too little influence. But many were reluctant to get actively involved themselves.

- There was support for mechanisms such as referendums (though often relatively muted) and for citizens' assemblies.

- Conceptions of democracy varied across the population, and were related particularly to attitudes on Brexit and partisanship. But it is important not to exaggerate these differences. On key points there was widespread and high agreement.

Satisfaction with Democracy

The most basic measure of people's views on democracy in the UK today is whether they are satisfied with how the system is working. Most people said that they were broadly satisfied with how democracy works in the UK: 54% said they were 'very' or 'fairly satisfied', against 40% who said they were 'not very' or 'not at all satisfied'. The proportion describing themselves as 'very satisfied' was, however, very low – at just 7%.

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

7	47	7	28	12

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

■ Very satisfied   ■ Fairly satisfied   ■ Don't know   ■ Not very satisfied   ■ Not at all satisfied
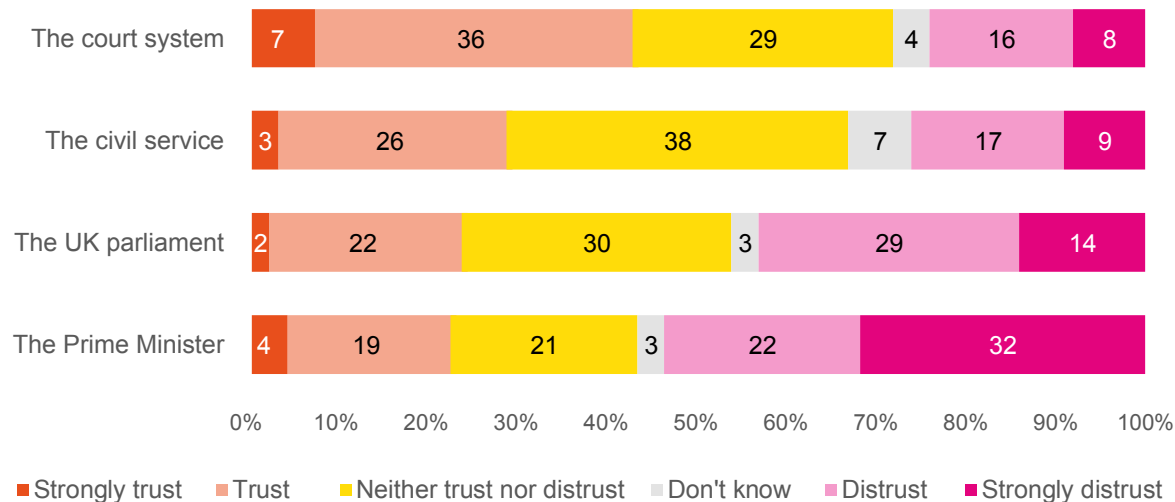
Satisfaction with democracy was highest among those who had tended to be successful in recent electoral events. Among those who voted Leave in the 2016 European Union referendum, 65% said they were 'fairly' or 'very satisfied', as did 76% of those who voted Conservative in the 2019 general election. In contrast, only 45% of 2016 Remain voters, and 35% of 2019 Labour voters said the same. Satisfaction among those over 60 was at 63%, compared to 45% among under 40s.

This survey finds somewhat higher satisfaction with democracy than did the British Election Study conducted at the time of the 2019 general election, when 37% of respondents reported being 'satisfied' with democracy and 5% 'very satisfied'. That shift is in line with the most recent British Social Attitudes survey, which found that trust and confidence in the government had risen since 2019. It should be recalled, however, that our survey was conducted in the summer of 2021, before support for the Conservative Party and Boris Johnson dipped.

Trust

To go deeper into how people relate to the democratic system, we asked respondents how much they trusted four central parts of the system. Overall, trust was highest in the courts, followed by the civil service and parliament, with the Prime Minister coming last.

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

	Strongly trust	Trust	Neither trust nor distrust	Don't know	Distrust	Strongly distrust
The court system	7	36	29	4	16	8
The civil service	3	26	38	7	17	9
The UK parliament	2	22	30	3	29	14
The Prime Minister	4	19	21	3	22	32

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

■ Strongly trust   ■ Trust   ■ Neither trust nor distrust   ■ Don't know   ■ Distrust   ■ Strongly distrust

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Levels of trust in the Prime Minister and parliament unsurprisingly reflected past voting patterns. Trust in the Prime Minister was much higher among Conservative voters (47% positively trusting) and Leave voters (37%) than it was in other groups. Non-Conservatives trusted parliament more than they trusted the Prime Minister, though still at a much lower level than did Conservatives.

Political views also influenced trust in the two non-political institutions. The courts were trusted by a higher proportion of Remain voters (56%) than Leave voters (36%) – though even among Leave voters, net trust remained positive, at +5%. There was little difference between Conservative and Labour voters in terms of trust in either the courts or the civil service – though Liberal Democrat voters were much more trusting of both.

The survey also gauged trust in a wider range of political actors. Each respondent was presented with two such actors, randomly selected from a list of twelve, and was asked which they trusted more. From this, we calculated the ranking across all types of actor. Non-politicians – especially experts of various kinds, but also 'voters in general' – were trusted above politicians. These results fit one of the core findings of the following pages: people attach significant value to constraints on the powers of Westminster politicians.

Question: Who do you tend to trust more (or distrust less) to act in the best interests of people in the UK?

We have scaled the least trusted option – newspapers – to 0. The numbers show the size of the gap between any two of the options. So, for example, the most trusted option – the government's scientific advisers – scored 35 percentage points higher when respondents were asked to choose between these advisers and newspapers, and 28 percentage points higher when compared to ministers in the UK government.
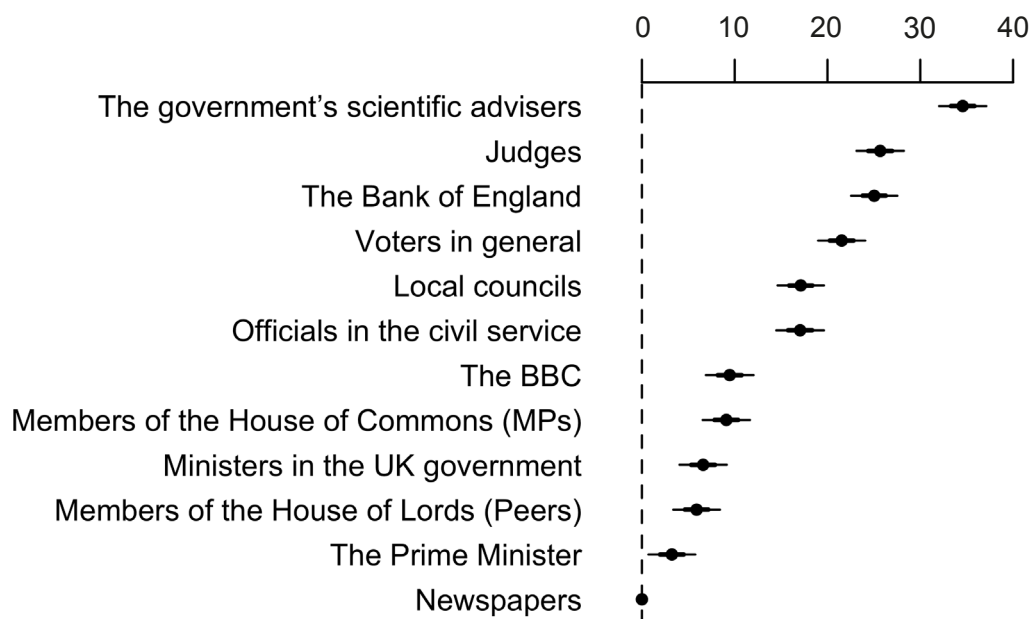
Integrity in Politics

The final months of 2021 saw an avalanche of concern about integrity in politics, triggered by government U-turns, rows about parliamentary standards and MPs' second jobs, and claims about breaches of the Covid rules.

Our survey was conducted in July 2021, before any of these events. Yet it shows how, even at that stage, public appetite for greater integrity in politics was high.

We presented respondents with a random pair of personal characteristics, and asked them which they thought it was more important for a politician to have. Respondents most valued politicians being honest and owning up when mistakes were made. They attached least value to being clever or inspiring.

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

We have scaled the least popular option – cleverness – to 0. The numbers show the size of the gap between any two of the options. So, for example, the most popular option – being honest – scored 32 percentage points higher when respondents were asked to choose between honesty and cleverness, and 19 percentage points higher when compared to getting things done.
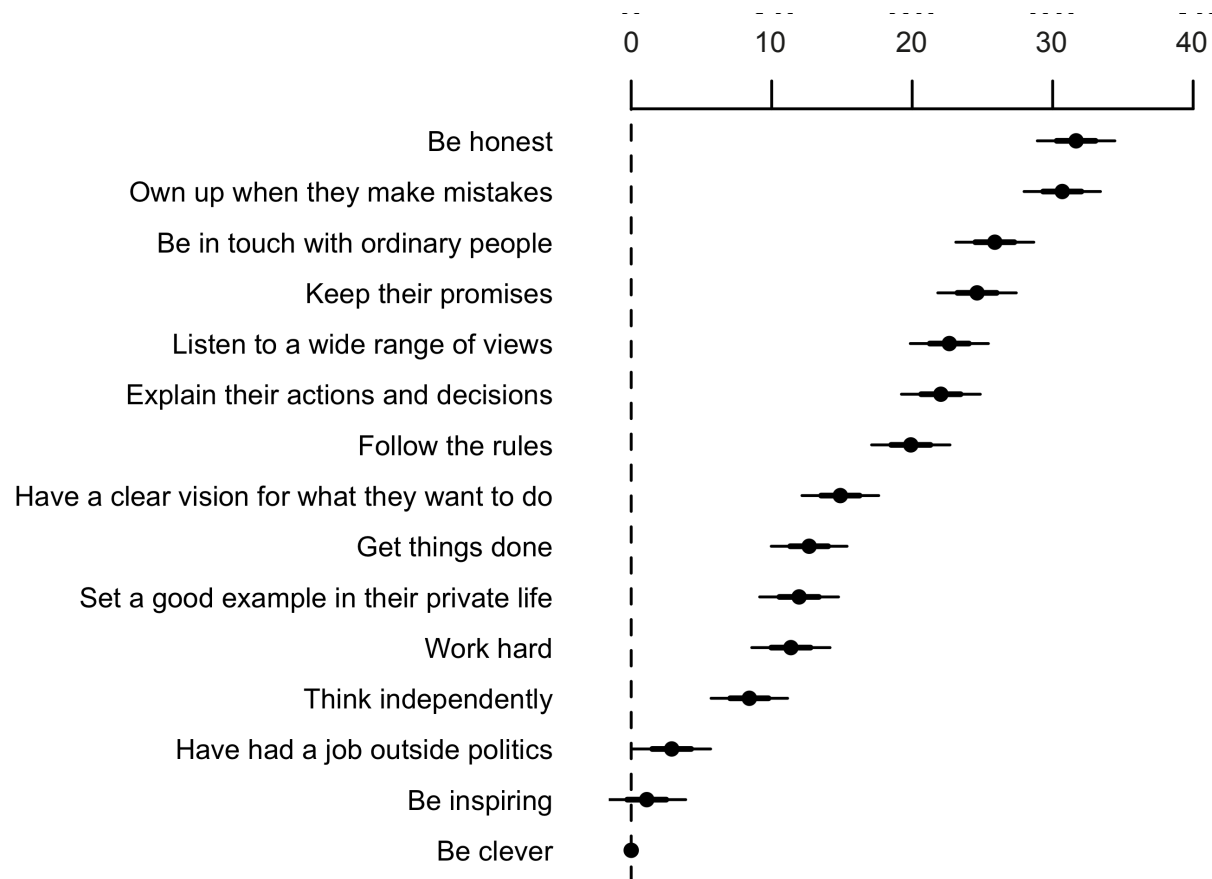
We also asked respondents to imagine a future Prime Minister having to choose between acting with integrity or delivering on outcomes. Respondents were randomly assigned different versions of the question, containing different forms of integrity and delivery.

Respondents placed three of the four forms of integrity – acting honestly, acting within the law, and acting transparently – ahead of delivery. Only in the case of honouring promises, a form of integrity connected to delivery, did more respondents favour the simple delivery option.

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

For each respondent, [INTEGRITY] was replaced with one of four options and [DELIVERY] with one of three options. The chart below separates out the [INTEGRITY] options.

	Integrity	Don't know	Delivery
Acting honestly	59	16	25
Acting within the law	53	17	30
Acting transparently	47	16	37
Honouring their promises	38	15	47
TOTAL	49	16	35

■ Integrity ■ Don't know ■ Delivery
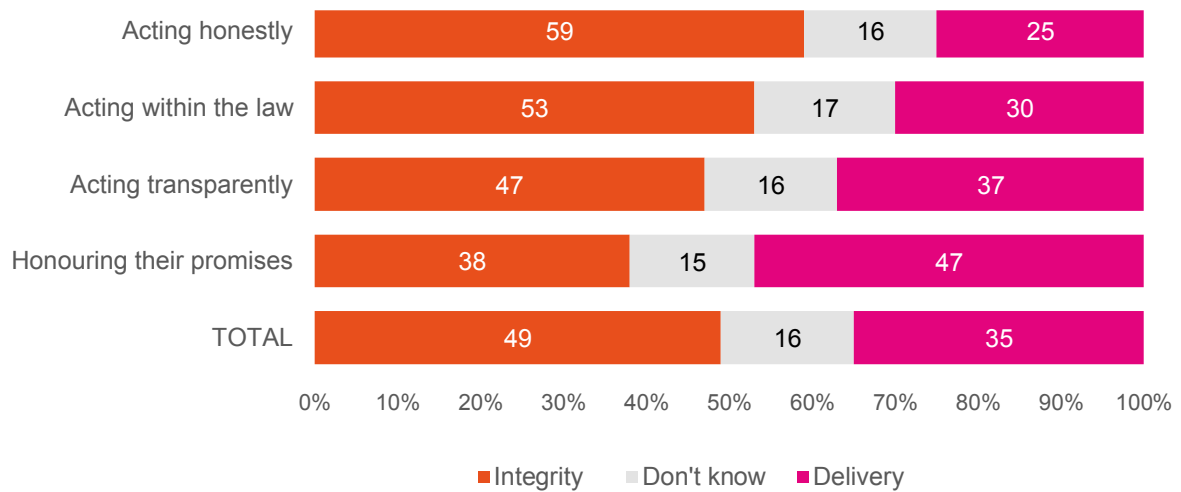
When we varied the form of delivery, meanwhile, respondents were generally reluctant to condone breaches of integrity to allow the Prime Minister to deliver the policy they thought best for the country or the policy that most people want. They were markedly more accepting of this in order to preserve the security of the country.

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

For each respondent, [INTEGRITY] was replaced with one of four options and [DELIVERY] with one of three options. The chart below separates out the [DELIVERY] options.

	Integrity	Don't know	Delivery
Delivering what is best for the security of the country	34	16	50
Delivering the policy that they think is best for the country	56	16	28
Delivering the policy that most people want	58	16	26
TOTAL	49	16	35

■ Integrity ■ Don't know ■ Delivery
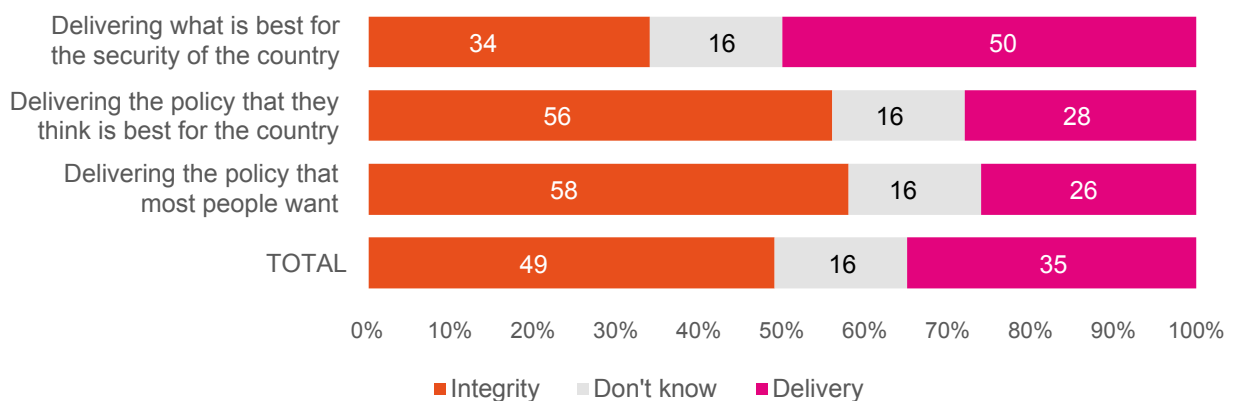
There were 12 possible combinations of the individual forms of integrity and delivery. For example, 71% of respondents favoured honesty over delivering the policy that most people wanted, while just 16% preferred the opposite. By contrast, 65% favoured delivering what is best for the security of the country, against 23% who prioritised honouring promises.

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Conceptions of Democracy

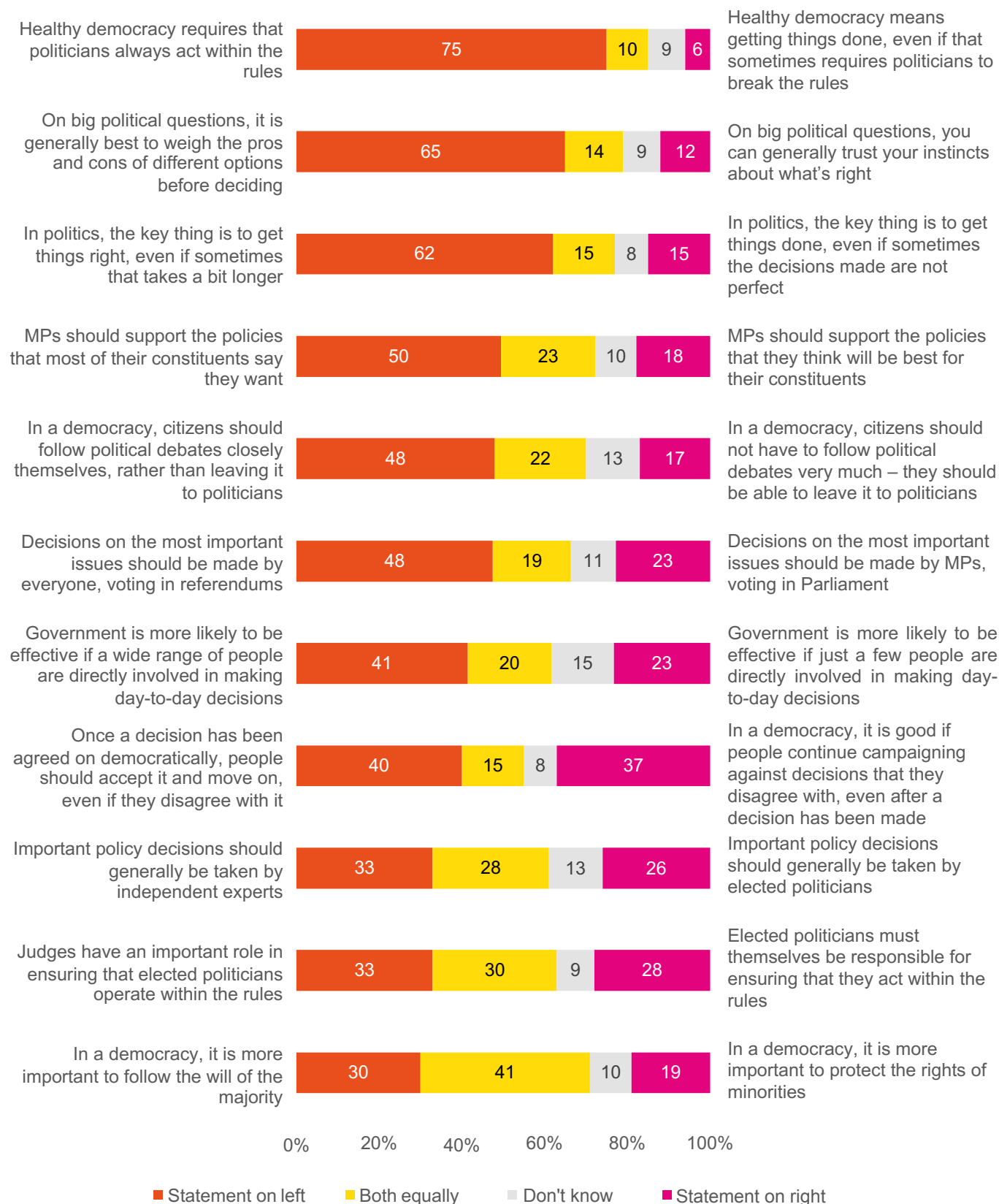We presented respondents with eleven choices between different conceptions of how aspects of democracy should operate.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

Statement on left	75	10	9	6	Statement on right
Healthy democracy requires that politicians always act within the rules	75	10	9	6	Healthy democracy means getting things done, even if that sometimes requires politicians to break the rules
On big political questions, it is generally best to weigh the pros and cons of different options before deciding	65	14	9	12	On big political questions, you can generally trust your instincts about what's right
In politics, the key thing is to get things right, even if sometimes that takes a bit longer	62	15	8	15	In politics, the key thing is to get things done, even if sometimes the decisions made are not perfect
MPs should support the policies that most of their constituents say they want	50	23	10	18	MPs should support the policies that they think will be best for their constituents
In a democracy, citizens should follow political debates closely themselves, rather than leaving it to politicians	48	22	13	17	In a democracy, citizens should not have to follow political debates very much – they should be able to leave it to politicians
Decisions on the most important issues should be made by everyone, voting in referendums	48	19	11	23	Decisions on the most important issues should be made by MPs, voting in Parliament
Government is more likely to be effective if a wide range of people are directly involved in making day-to-day decisions	41	20	15	23	Government is more likely to be effective if just a few people are directly involved in making day-to-day decisions
Once a decision has been agreed on democratically, people should accept it and move on, even if they disagree with it	40	15	8	37	In a democracy, it is good if people continue campaigning against decisions that they disagree with, even after a decision has been made
Important policy decisions should generally be taken by independent experts	33	28	13	26	Important policy decisions should generally be taken by elected politicians
Judges have an important role in ensuring that elected politicians operate within the rules	33	30	9	28	Elected politicians must themselves be responsible for ensuring that they act within the rules
In a democracy, it is more important to follow the will of the majority	30	41	10	19	In a democracy, it is more important to protect the rights of minorities

0%　20%　40%　60%　80%　100%

■ Statement on left　■ Both equally　□ Don't know　■ Statement on right

There was again a striking emphasis on integrity here: 75% of respondents agreed that 'Healthy democracy requires that politicians always act within the rules', while only 6%, in contrast, supported 'getting things done, even if that requires politicians to break the rules'. Large majorities also favoured a thoughtful approach to policymaking: weighing pros and cons rather than simply following gut instincts; and taking time to get things right rather than making quick but imperfect decisions. These majorities applied, with only some variations in their size, across all demographic groups and past voting patterns.

People generally wanted the system to be more responsive to citizens – through MPs following their constituents' wishes and through referendums on important issues. Respondents also thought that citizens should actively follow political debates, and that government is better if many people are involved, rather than just a few. Again, these priorities applied across all demographic groups and past voting patterns.

Regarding the opposing statements that people should accept democratic decisions and move on, or, in contrast, that it is good if people continue to campaign against decisions that they disagree with, there was more of an equal split. This question clearly tapped into views on Brexit: Leave voters agreed with the first statement by a margin of three to one, while Remain voters backed the second by two to one.

Finally, on the roles of experts and judges compared to politicians, and on majority will versus minority rights, many respondents were actively reluctant to choose.

There were some general differences in conceptions of democracy between different parts of the population. Conservative and Leave voters were somewhat more likely to support speedy and decisive governmental action, where decision-making is confined to just a few key individuals. Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, and Remain voters, by contrast, tended to favour slower, more consultative processes, bringing a wide range of perspectives into decision-making, giving important roles to judges and experts, and prioritising minority rights. Unsurprisingly, support for referendums was highest in two distinct groups: those who voted Leave in the 2016 Brexit referendum; and supporters of the Scottish National Party (SNP). Yet none of these differences should be exaggerated. Many respondents had much more mixed views.

Components of Democracy

A healthy democracy has many components. We developed a long list of these to gauge which people valued most. Each respondent saw two random pairs from this list and was asked which they considered more important.

Fitting with other results throughout the survey, respondents most valued components that give voters control over politicians. They also prioritised serious discussion, willingness to listen, and equality of political rights and influence. In contrast, components requiring active public participation tended to be seen as less important. Many people evidently wanted a democracy that runs well without their having to invest much time in it themselves – what is sometimes called 'stealth democracy'. They also valued mechanisms of accountability more highly than the government having the power to get things done.

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?

We have scaled the least favoured option – that people are active in their local communities – to 0. The numbers show the size of the gap between any two of the options. So, for example, the most popular option – that those in power can be voted out if they do a poor job – scored 24 percentage points higher when respondents were asked to choose between it and people being active in their local communities, and 15 percentage points higher when compared to people being able to decide some big issues directly through referendums.
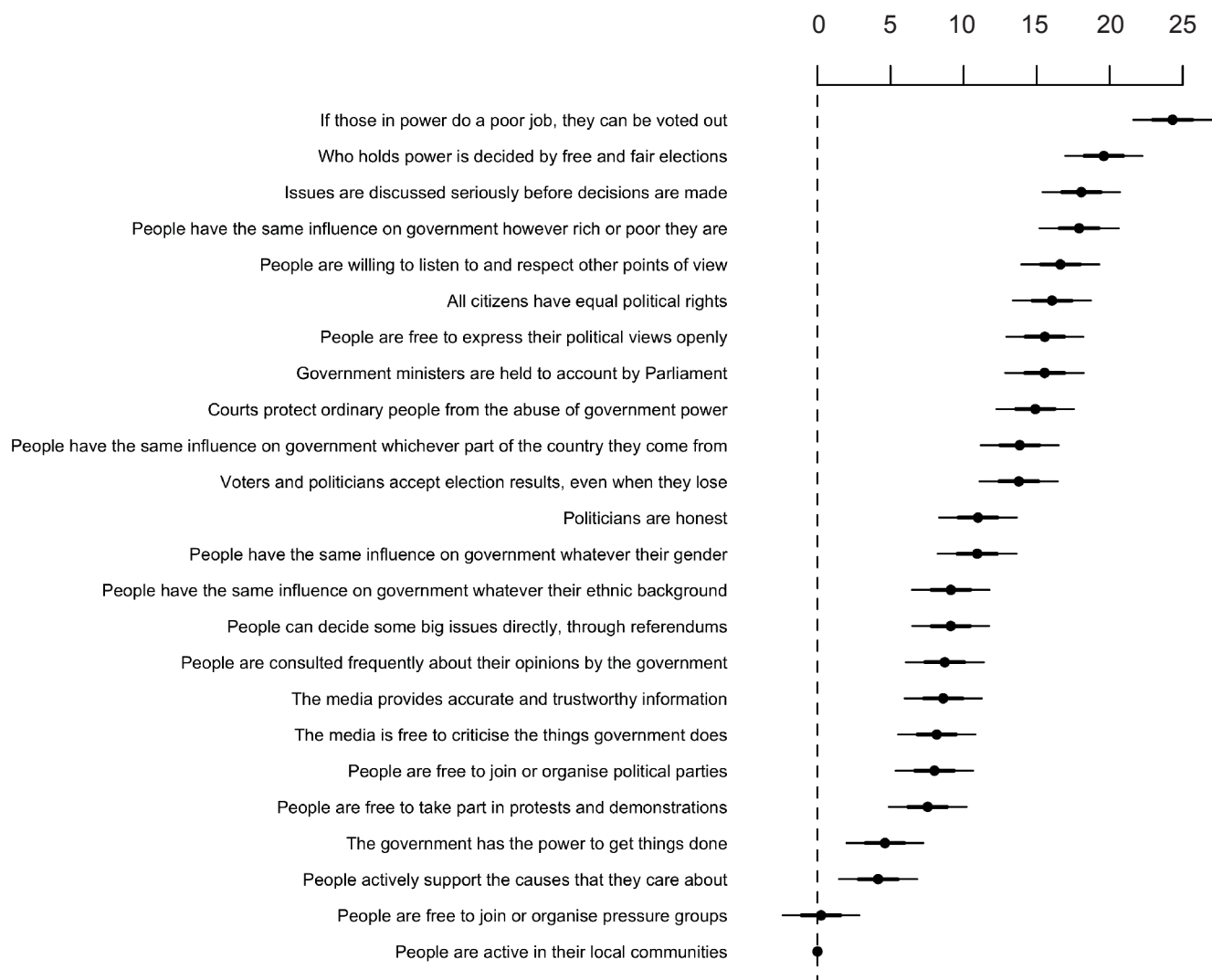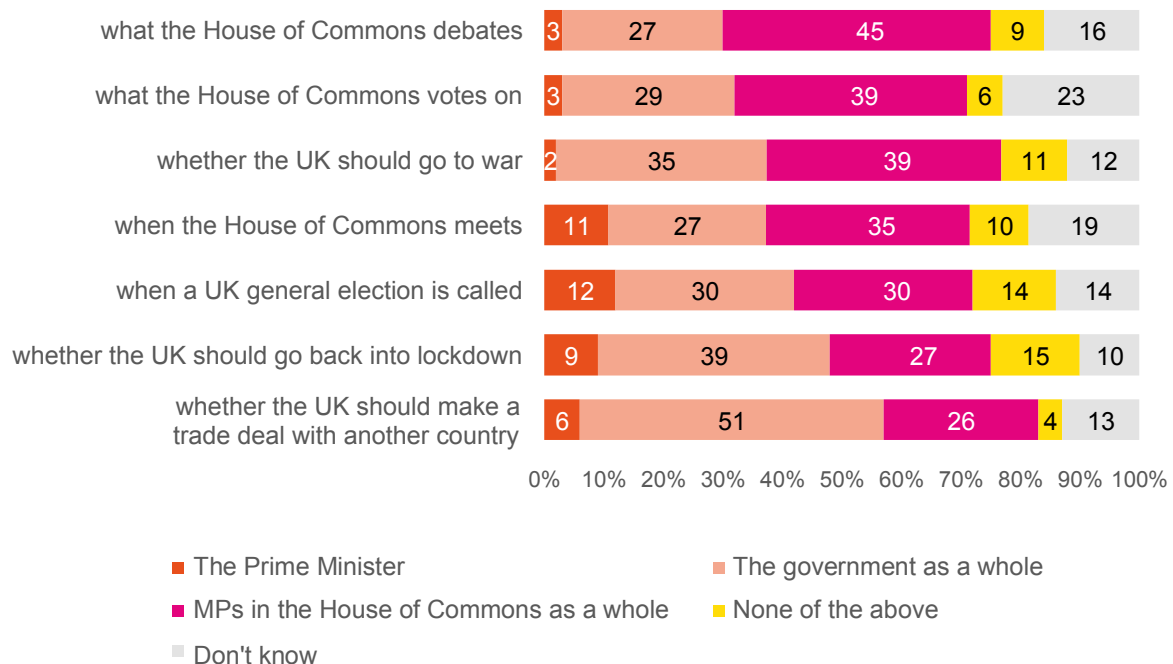
Parliament and Government

The survey also examined what roles people think should be played by different parts of the democratic system, beginning with parliament and government.

We asked which of the Prime Minister, the government, or MPs in the House of Commons should have certain powers. Respondents opposed concentrating power in the hands of the Prime Minister. They were split over whether government ministers or MPs as a whole should have certain powers. Of the decisions that we asked about, respondents were most likely to favour ministerial power in relation to making trade deals, and most likely to support parliamentary power on deciding what the House of Commons debates and votes upon. This suggests that the public would intuitively support greater control over the parliamentary agenda by MPs themselves than exists at present. A slightly higher proportion also believed that parliament rather than government should have the power over deciding to go to war.

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

	The Prime Minister	The government as a whole	MPs in the House of Commons as a whole	None of the above	Don't know
what the House of Commons debates	3	27	45	9	16
what the House of Commons votes on	3	29	39	6	23
whether the UK should go to war	2	35	39	11	12
when the House of Commons meets	11	27	35	10	19
when a UK general election is called	12	30	30	14	14
whether the UK should go back into lockdown	9	39	27	15	10
whether the UK should make a trade deal with another country	6	51	26	4	13

Views on the relationship between government and parliament varied with past vote. Among those who voted Conservative in 2019, 54% said that the Prime Minister or the government should decide (averaging across all of the question variants), while 30% said that MPs in the House of Commons should decide. Among Labour voters, those proportions were 30% and 46%. Among Liberal Democrats, they were 34% and 52%. What we cannot discern from this alone is the direction of causation: did Conservative voters back government action simply because they support the current government, or because they support more concentrated power in general?

Further evidence on p. 12 again indicates that most respondents generally favoured a central role for parliament in important decisions.

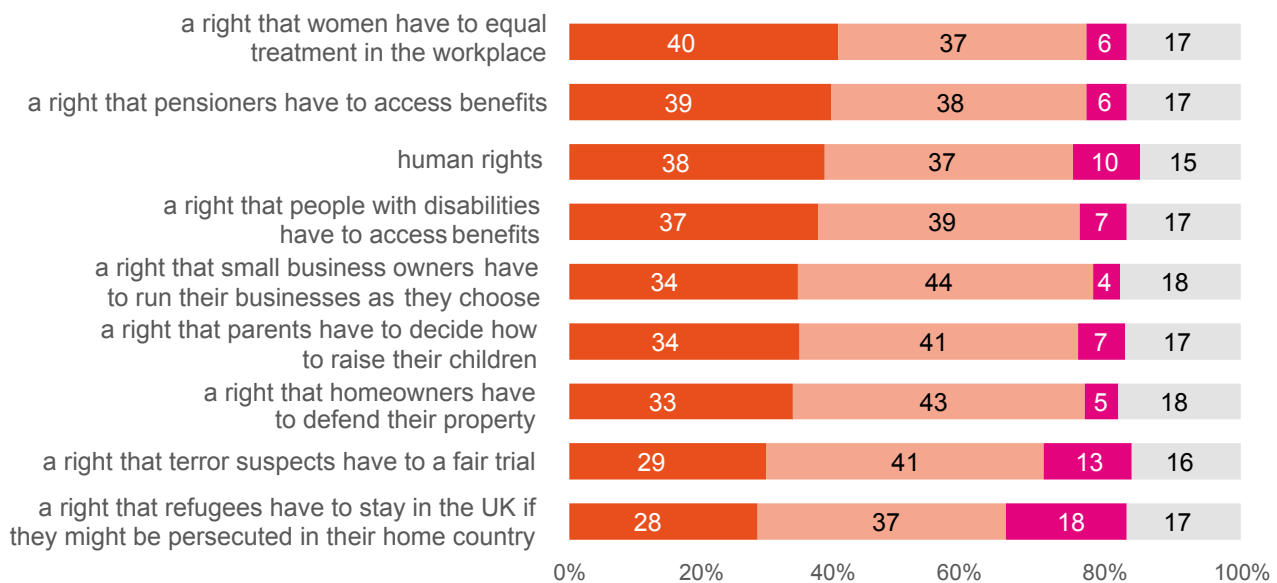DEMOCRACY IN THE UK AFTER BREXIT

Judges and Other Regulators

Previous questions have shown that respondents' trust in judges and other non-politician actors was much higher than that in politicians (p. 3). There were also mixed views in response to a general question on the role that judges should play (p. 6). The proper role of the courts in democracy has been a matter of considerable debate in recent years, and we therefore asked a series of further questions about it.

One of these presented respondents with a scenario in which claims were being made that a law recently passed by parliament breached a specific right. We asked whether courts should have the power to declare this law null and void (as is possible, for example, in the United States), or ask parliament to look at the matter again (as at present in the UK under the Human Rights Act), or whether parliament and government should resolve the matter themselves. Whatever right we asked about, there was very strong support for the role of the courts – indeed many backed a stronger role than at present.

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?

In place of '[RIGHT]', each respondent saw one of the statements below.

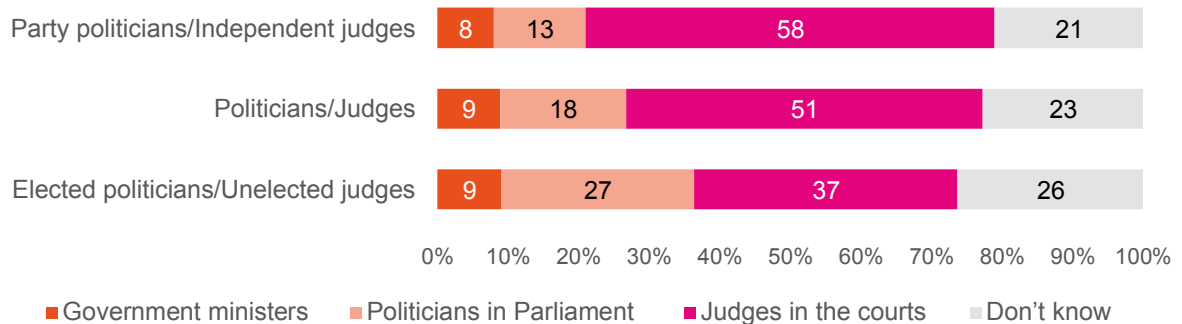|	Null and void	Look again	No role	Don't know
a right that women have to equal treatment in the workplace	40	37	6	17
a right that pensioners have to access benefits	39	38	6	17
human rights	38	37	10	15
a right that people with disabilities have to access benefits	37	39	7	17
a right that small business owners have to run their businesses as they choose	34	44	4	18
a right that parents have to decide how to raise their children	34	41	7	17
a right that homeowners have to defend their property	33	43	5	18
a right that terror suspects have to a fair trial	29	41	13	16
a right that refugees have to stay in the UK if they might be persecuted in their home country	28	37	18	17

- The courts should be able to decide whether people's legal rights have been violated, and if so, declare the new law null and void

- The courts should be able to decide whether people's legal rights have been violated, and if so, require parliament to look at the issue again and then decide whether the new law will stand

- The courts should not have a role in deciding whether people's legal rights have been violated – this is a matter for ministers and parliament to resolve between themselves

- Don't know

We also asked respondents to imagine a dispute between government and parliament over where legal authority to decide an unnamed matter lay, and to say whether the dispute should be resolved by government ministers, politicians in parliament, or judges. To gauge whether responses were affected by the language used, we varied the descriptions of politicians and judges: for example, politicians were described as either 'elected politicians' (expected to have positive connotations), 'party politicians' (expected to be perceived negatively), or simply 'politicians'.

Whatever the wording, more people thought that judges should determine where authority lay than the combined total saying this decision should lie with ministers or with politicians in parliament. The gap between these was narrowest (at 1 percentage point) when the question referred to 'elected politicians' and 'unelected judges'. It grew to an enormous 37 points when the terms 'party politicians' and 'independent judges' were used. With the neutral wording of 'politicians' and 'judges', it was 24 percentage points.

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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?
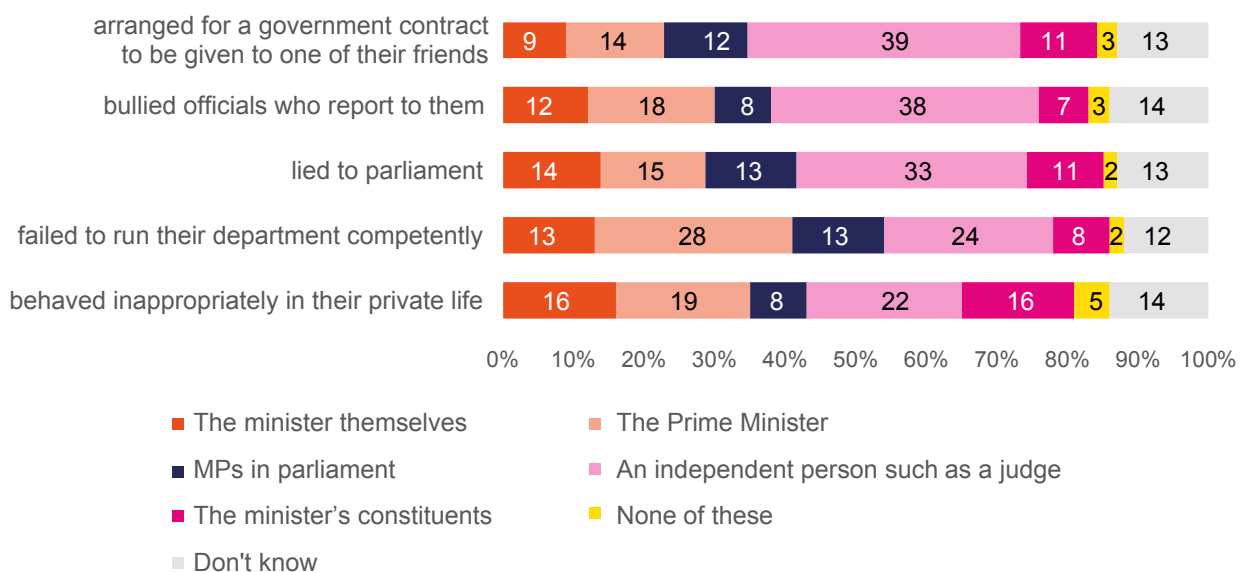
	Government ministers	Politicians in Parliament	Judges in the courts	Don't know
Party politicians/Independent judges	8	13	58	21
Politicians/Judges	9	18	51	23
Elected politicians/Unelected judges	9	27	37	26

The share of respondents favouring decision by judges exceeded the combined total favouring decision by ministers or by MPs among most key groups, including both 2016 Leave and Remain voters. Only among 2019 Conservative voters did this preference for judges disappear: but they were still chosen by 40%, while 40% chose ministers/MPs.

These findings suggest two conclusions. First, people want judges to play a central role in upholding basic rules. This likely reflects the low trust that many people feel in politicians: most believe that external checks on politicians are needed. Second, the variation according to the wording of the question suggests that many people do not have stable views (see also p.15). Yet the fact that support for the courts outweighs support for politicians under even the most unfavourable wording is striking.

A third survey question asked who should decide whether a government minister should resign if they had failed in some way. We offered a range of possible answers, and the option 'An independent person such as a judge' was the most common response in four of the five failure scenarios.

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?
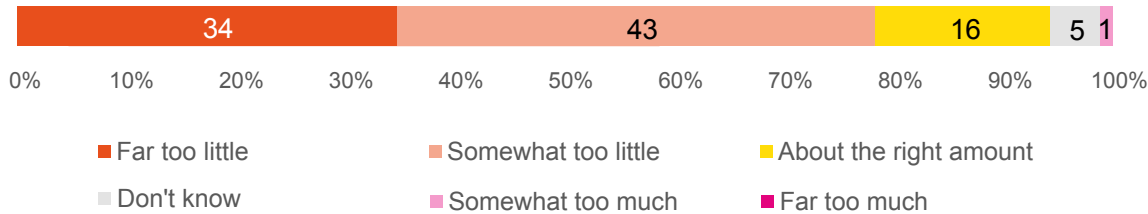
In place of '[FAILURE]', each respondent saw one of the statements below.

	The minister themselves	The Prime Minister	MPs in parliament	An independent person such as a judge	The minister's constituents	None of these	Don't know
arranged for a government contract to be given to one of their friends	9	14	12	39	11	3	13
bullied officials who report to them	12	18	8	38	7	3	14
lied to parliament	14	15	13	33	11	2	13
failed to run their department competently	13	28	13	24	8	2	12
behaved inappropriately in their private life	16	19	8	22	16	5	14

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Roles of the Public

We asked respondents whether they felt that people like them had too little influence on how the UK is governed, about the right amount, or too much. Vanishingly few respondents thought people like them had too much influence, and only 16% thought their influence was about right. Over three quarters thought people like them had too little influence – often 'far too little'. Similar views were shared across all demographic groups and past voting patterns.
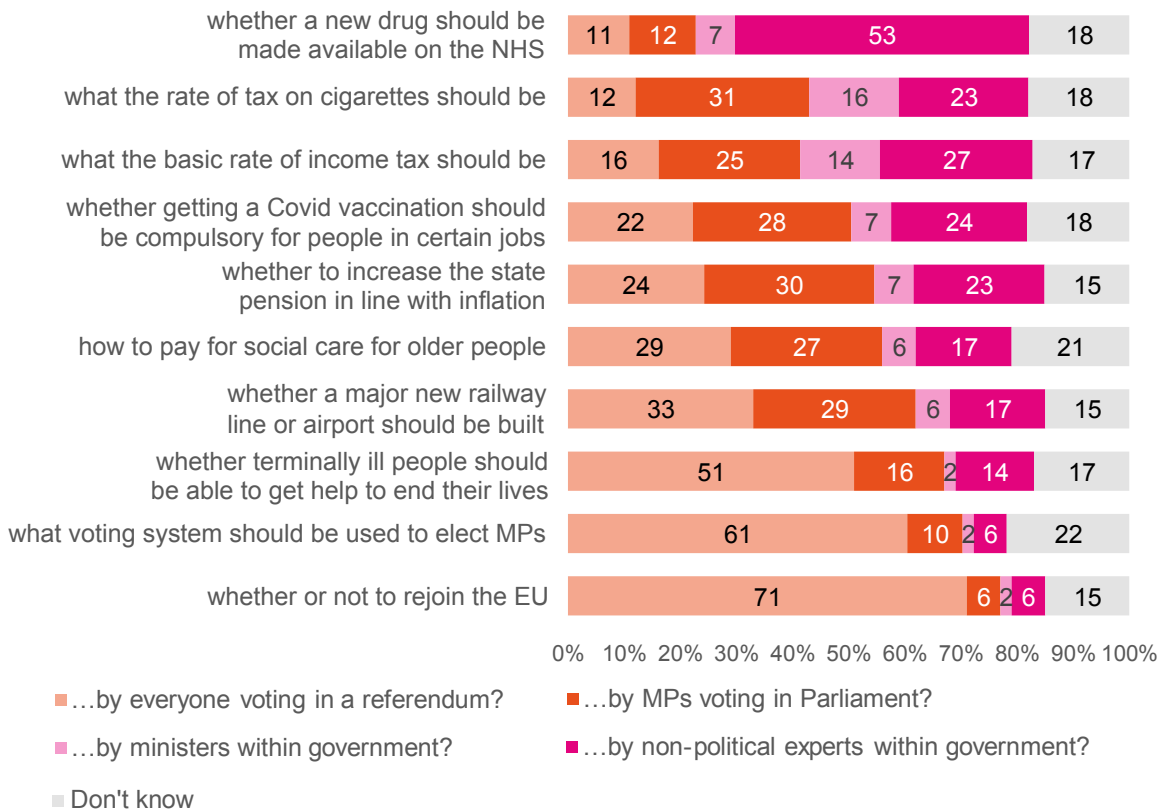
Question: How much influence do you think people like you have on how the UK is governed?

34	43	16	5	1

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

- ■ Far too little
- ■ Somewhat too little
- ■ About the right amount
- ■ Don't know
- ■ Somewhat too much
- ■ Far too much

This general perception translated into clear support for the use of referendums to decide some issues. We asked how a range of policy questions should be decided. Comfortable majorities agreed that a referendum should be used on the kinds of issues where referendums have been used in the past: deciding whether or not to rejoin the EU (71%) and what voting system should be used to elect MPs (61%). In addition, 51% supported this on deciding whether terminally ill people should be able to get help to end their lives. On other matters, where decisions would usually be taken by parliament, opinion was more evenly balanced between those supporting referendums and those preferring MPs to decide. There was very little support for ministers rather than parliament taking decisions on any matter, and on many matters there was substantial support for experts to play a role.

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

In place of '[ISSUE]', each respondent saw one of the statements below.

Issue	...referendum	...MPs	...ministers	...experts	Don't know
whether a new drug should be made available on the NHS	11	12	7	53	18
what the rate of tax on cigarettes should be	12	31	16	23	18
what the basic rate of income tax should be	16	25	14	27	17
whether getting a Covid vaccination should be compulsory for people in certain jobs	22	28	7	24	18
whether to increase the state pension in line with inflation	24	30	7	23	15
how to pay for social care for older people	29	27	6	17	21
whether a major new railway line or airport should be built	33	29	6	17	15
whether terminally ill people should be able to get help to end their lives	51	16	2	14	17
what voting system should be used to elect MPs	61	10	2	6	22
whether or not to rejoin the EU	71	6	2	6	15

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

- ■ …by everyone voting in a referendum?
- ■ …by MPs voting in Parliament?
- ■ …by ministers within government?
- ■ …by non-political experts within government?
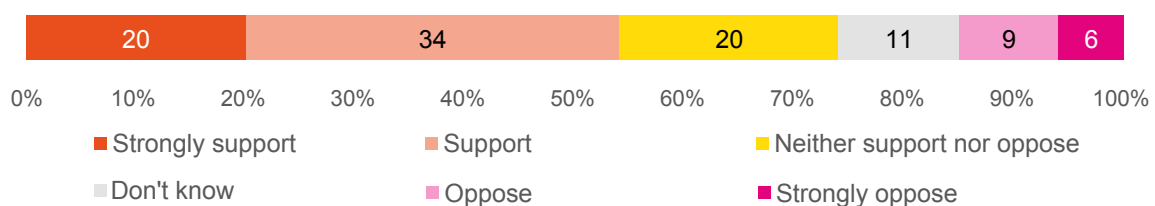- ■ Don't know

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Increasing attention has focused in recent years on citizens' assemblies as a more deliberative way of enabling public participation in policymaking. We gave respondents the following explanation of what a citizens' assembly is:

> In this approach, a group of people are selected at random, 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.

A majority of respondents, across most demographic groups and past vote choices, supported the use of such assemblies. Only a small number were opposed, while a significant proportion remained uncertain. Conservative voters were most sceptical, but even among them, fewer than a quarter opposed the idea.

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

Strongly support	Support	Neither support nor oppose	Don't know	Oppose	Strongly oppose
20	34	20	11	9	6

In a further question, we described a specific citizens' assembly, varying the features that different respondents saw. Some features – including the number of assembly members and the issue the assembly discussed – had little effect on responses. But one feature – the assembly's role in the decision-making process – did. Support was highest for an assembly whose recommendations would go to parliament for decision, and lowest for an assembly whose proposals would automatically become law. Respondents did not want to cut out elected representatives from decision-making.

Question: To what extent would you support or oppose holding a Citizens' Assembly in this way?

An assembly whose proposal would …

	Strongly support	Support	Neither support nor oppose	Don't know	Oppose	Strongly oppose
be sent to parliament to help MPs make a decision	18	34	12	21	7	7
be put to all voters in a referendum	16	33	11	21	9	9
automatically become law	9	24	13	22	18	14

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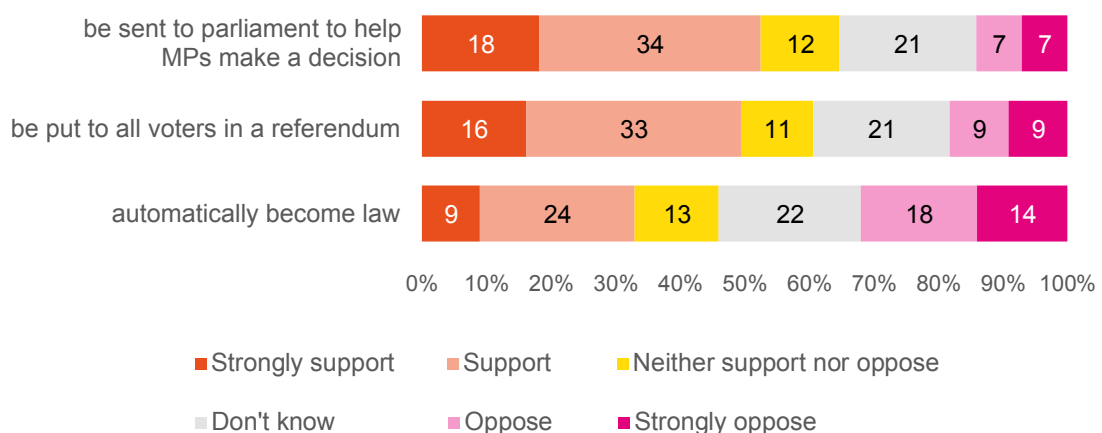
Civil Servants

We have seen that people want a role for independent, expert actors (p. 3). This includes civil servants. We asked whether civil servants should be 'neutral and permanent government employees' or 'people who are appointed by the government of the day'. Overall, 60% of respondents chose the former option and only 13% the latter. Majorities of Leave (58%) and Remain (70%) voters, and of Conservative (58%) and Labour (69%) voters all shared this view. Support for a neutral civil service is thus strong and widespread.

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?

60	13	9	18
Neutral and permanent government employees	Appointed by the government of the day	Neither of these	Don't know
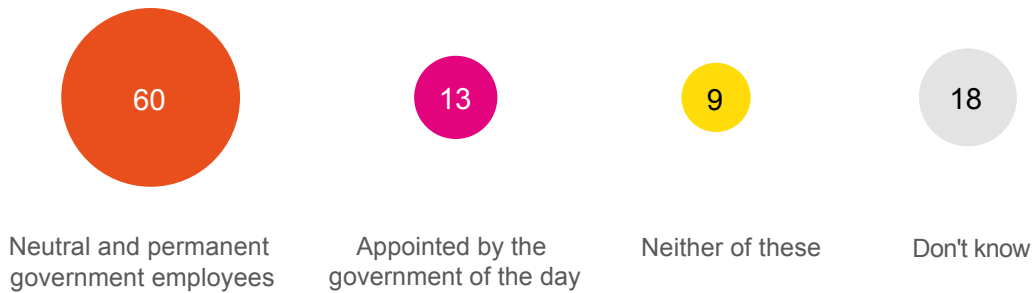
The BBC

Support for neutral institutions was also found in relation to the BBC. We asked about the suitability of a hypothetical candidate for the BBC's Chair. Respondents received varying information about the candidate's prior experience and previous remarks about the BBC, and about the government that had nominated them. Support was highest for a candidate who had said that 'the BBC should be neutral in its political reporting' and very low for a candidate who had said it should be less critical of the government. Indicating in the question the partisan composition of the government (Conservative or Labour), by contrast, made no effect.

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?

Policy	Definitely	Probably	Don't know	Probably not	Definitely not
the BBC should be neutral in its political reporting	26	31	20	14	9
the BBC should be more critical of the government	15	28	24	21	13
the BBC should be less critical of the government	3	12	20	34	31

■ Definitely ■ Probably ■ Don't know ■ Probably not ■ Definitely not

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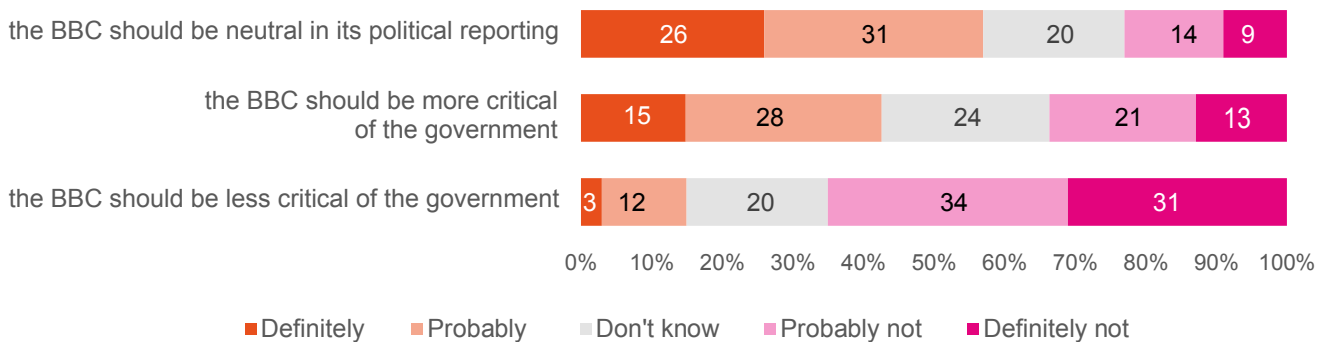
Do People Have Views on Democratic Processes?

A persistent theme in commentary about politics is that voters do not have views on *process*: they want government to do its job, but they do not want to be bothered too much with how that is achieved.

Some of the evidence in the preceding pages has backed that view. One recurring feature is a high proportion of 'Don't know' responses. While only 3% of respondents said they did not know whether they trusted the Prime Minister or the UK parliament, that proportion rose to 18% when we asked about civil service appointments, 22% on how the voting system for electing MPs should be decided, and as high as 26% on how disputes over the government's authority to take certain actions should be resolved. Younger respondents were often particularly disinclined to offer a view.

We also asked directly for respondents' view of democracy in itself. Only 3% said 'Democracy is not the best form of government'. But respondents were markedly more likely to value democracy contingently – 'so long as it delivers effective government' – than to think it 'always the best form of government'.

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

32	54	3	12
Democracy is always the best form of government	Democracy is good so long as it delivers effective government	Democracy is not the best form of government	Don't know
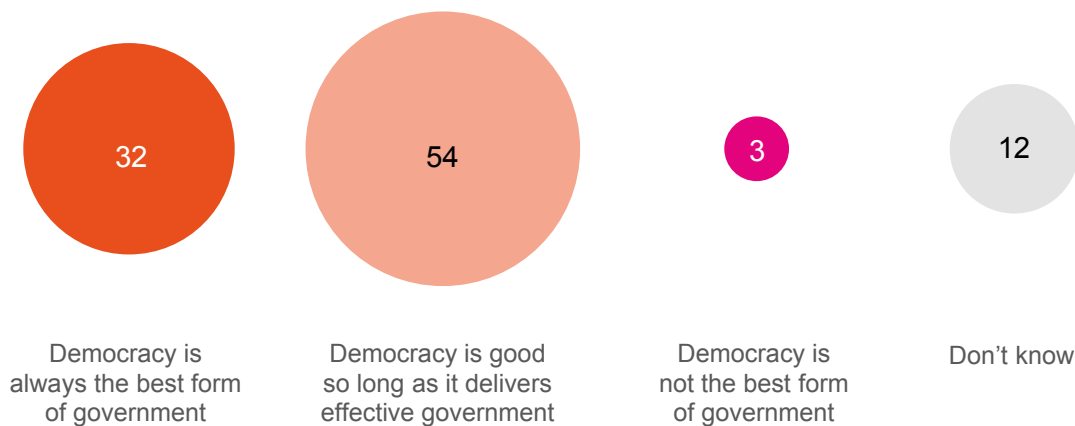
Yet the results also reveal a deeper point. While many respondents may not have had strong views on the specifics of particular institutions, most did have clear and consistent preferences on many matters of basic principle. They wanted more influence for people like themselves, even if they were less certain how that should be achieved. They showed a consistent unwillingness to concentrate power in the hands of small groups of politicians, preferring to spread it out to parliament, voters, and independent figures such as judges. Indeed, consistently high support for independent and neutral actors was a defining feature of the findings. Perhaps above all, respondents valued high standards of behaviour, including the principles that politicians should follow the rules and be honest.

Thus, though most voters may not attend too closely to institutional details, they do have expectations for how democracy will work. And they think democracy in the UK could work better than it is doing at present.

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Appendix: Survey Details

The survey was conducted online by YouGov on 23–29 July 2021. It was the first wave of a two-wave panel survey. The second wave will be conducted in spring 2022.

Sample: 6,432 respondents, representative of the UK voting age population.

Questionnaire: Full details of all questions are available on our project website: www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/deliberative-democracy/democracy-uk-after-brexit

Responses: We will archive the responses dataset with the UK Data Service after the completion of the project.

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Acknowledgements

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Debates about the kind of democracy we want to live in are at the heart of politics in the UK today. What role should be played by referendums? Where should the balance of power lie between government and parliament? How far should the courts be involved in adjudicating disputes or upholding basic rules? What standards of behaviour do we expect from our politicians, and how should these be maintained?

To shed new light on these questions, the Constitution Unit at University College London is leading a major research project examining public attitudes to democracy in the UK today, through surveys and a citizens' assembly.

This report sets out the key findings from our first survey of the UK population. Conducted in July 2021 with a sample of almost 6,500 people, the survey provides unique insight into the kind of democracy that people in the UK want. It reveals that, while many people may not have strong views on specific institutional details, most do have clear and consistent preferences on basic principles. They wanted more influence for people like themselves, opposed concentrating power in the hands of small groups of politicians, and favoured strong roles for independent and neutral actors such as judges. Perhaps above all, they wanted politicians who are honest and follow the rules.

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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