



Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics

**Results of a Second Survey of the
UK Population**

Third Report of the Democracy
in the UK after Brexit Project

Alan Renwick, Ben Lauderdale,
Meg Russell, and James Cleaver



DEMOCRACY IN THE
UK AFTER BREXIT

The Constitution Unit

March 2023

ISBN: 978-1-7393161-0-5

Published by:
The Constitution Unit
School of Public Policy
University College London
29–31 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9QU

Tel: 020 7679 4977
Email: constitution@ucl.ac.uk
Web: www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit

© The Constitution Unit, UCL, 2023

This report is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

First published March 2023

Introduction

Public confidence in our democratic process is at a low ebb. Years of contestation over Brexit raised fundamental questions about how democracy in the UK should work. Concerns have been heightened further over the past 18 months by the Owen Paterson affair, the ‘Partygate’ scandal, and a premiership that crashed and burned in under 50 days. Many voters were alarmed by how Boris Johnson sought to cling to power, while others were equally perturbed that a democratically elected leader was felled without recourse to the electorate. Many commentators now view political reform as essential for restoring equilibrium and confidence, while others think rebuilding trust requires not tinkering with process, but delivering policy outcomes.

In this context, clear understanding of public preferences and priorities is essential. This report sets out the findings of a major survey of public attitudes to the operation of our democratic system fielded by YouGov in late August and early September 2022. This was during the final stages of the Conservative leadership contest that followed Boris Johnson’s resignation, but before Liz Truss’s victory was announced. The sample of just over 4,000 respondents, representative of the UK voting-age population, was large enough to allow us to probe deep into the subtleties of how different groups were thinking.

The survey was the second wave in a two-wave study: we conducted an earlier survey in the summer of 2021, and all respondents to the 2022 survey had already taken part a year before. This design delivers added insights, as we can track how the views of individual respondents changed over time.

The research presented here is part of a wider project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Governance after Brexit research programme. Besides the two surveys, the project also included the Citizens’ Assembly on Democracy in the UK, which ran between September and December 2021. We have already published two reports: one on the results of the first survey, the other on the conclusions of the Citizens’ Assembly (referred to respectively as *Report 1* and *Report 2* in the following pages).¹ We will publish a final report later in 2023, which will draw together the findings from these three studies and reflect on the overall lessons that they carry.

Key Findings

- Respondents indicated low trust in politicians – even lower than in summer 2021.
- There was overwhelming public appetite for stronger mechanisms to uphold integrity among politicians, including more powerful independent regulators.
- The vast majority of respondents wanted leaders to be held accountable through a system of checks and balances. Most wanted checks and balances to be tighter than they are today.
- Most wanted a stronger parliament and thought ministers should not be able to change the law without full parliamentary scrutiny.
- Views on voting systems were mixed, but somewhat favoured a more proportional system.
- Views on reform of the House of Lords were also mixed. There was near-consensus on some moderate reforms, but not on creating an elected chamber.
- There was strong support for the role of judges in adjudicating disputes about the role of government and in protecting human rights. These views were robust to numerous ways of putting the questions.
- Few people wanted to get much more involved in politics than they are. Most felt they knew too little to get more involved, didn’t like how politics works, or didn’t think they would make a difference.
- Views on referendums were mixed. Most respondents supported citizens’ assemblies, but knowing a proposal came from such an assembly barely increased support for it.
- The most popular democratic reform would be if ‘politicians spoke more honestly’.
- While the cost of living and the NHS were people’s top priorities, they cared about the health of democracy in the UK as much as about, for example, crime or immigration.

¹ Alan Renwick, Ben Lauderdale, Meg Russell, and James Cleaver, *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* (London: UCL Constitution Unit, January 2022); *Report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Democracy in the UK: Second Report of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit Project* (London: UCL Constitution Unit, April 2022).

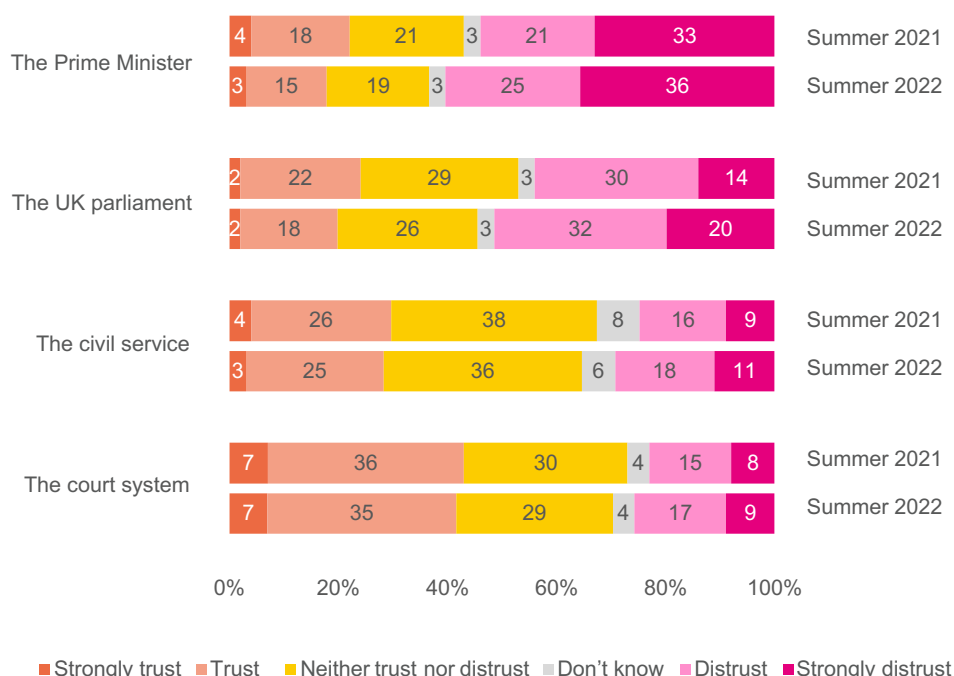


Trust and integrity

Many people see a disconnect between citizens and their representatives as one of the central weaknesses in UK democracy today. That disconnect can be seen in low levels of trust in key democratic actors. Our 2021 survey – conducted before the Owen Paterson affair and ‘Partygate’ – showed that trust was particularly low in the Prime Minister and parliament, but somewhat higher in the civil service, and significantly higher in the courts. The 2022 survey – conducted after Boris Johnson had announced his resignation, but before Liz Truss came to power – repeated the same question. Trust had fallen still further across the board – but most clearly in the institutions that had been closest to the year’s scandals.

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

Note: Here and elsewhere, to aid direct comparisons, results reported for the 2021 survey include only those respondents who also completed the 2022 survey. Results may therefore sometimes differ slightly from those set out in Report 1.



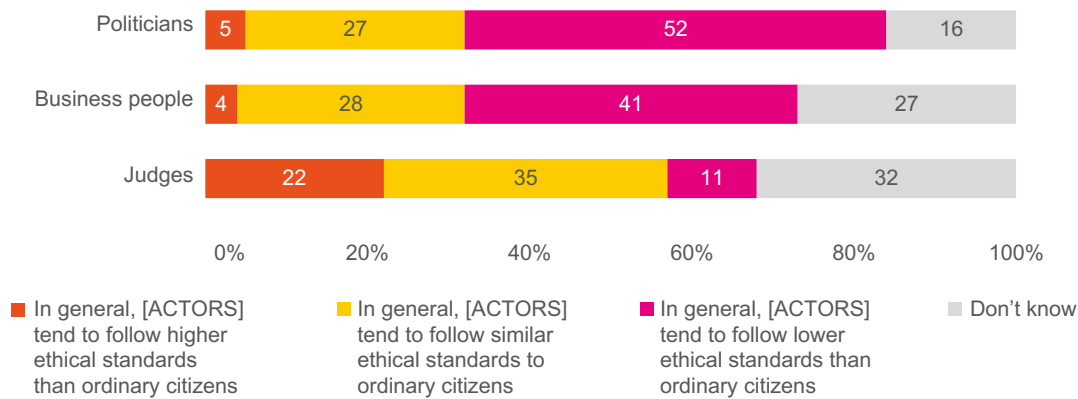
There were also some stable differences between groups. In both surveys, trust in the Prime Minister and in parliament was highest among those who voted Leave in the 2016 referendum and those who voted Conservative in the 2019 general election. Meanwhile, trust in the civil service was highest among Remainers and non-Conservatives and trust in the courts was highest among Remainers and Liberal Democrats.

The 2022 survey dug deeper into these views by asking how respondents thought the ethical standards of politicians, business people, and judges compared with those of ordinary citizens. Politicians and business people were viewed unfavourably, but judges positively. These views barely varied across different voting groups.



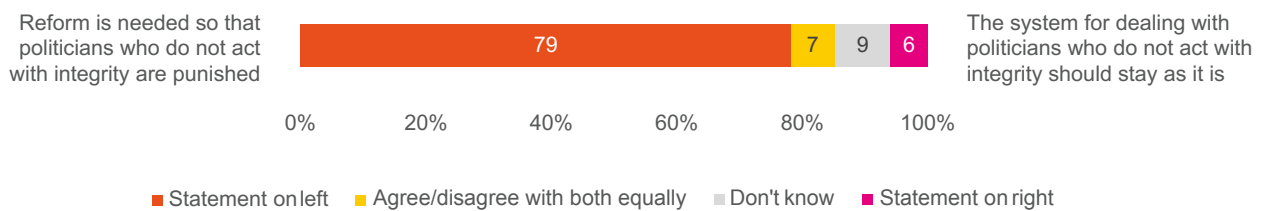
Question: Which comes closest to your view?

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



An overwhelming majority said reform was needed so that politicians who failed to act with integrity were punished; just 6% supported the existing system. Supporters of change included 78% of 2016 Leave voters, 87% of Remain voters, 80% of 2019 Conservative voters, and 83% of Labour voters.

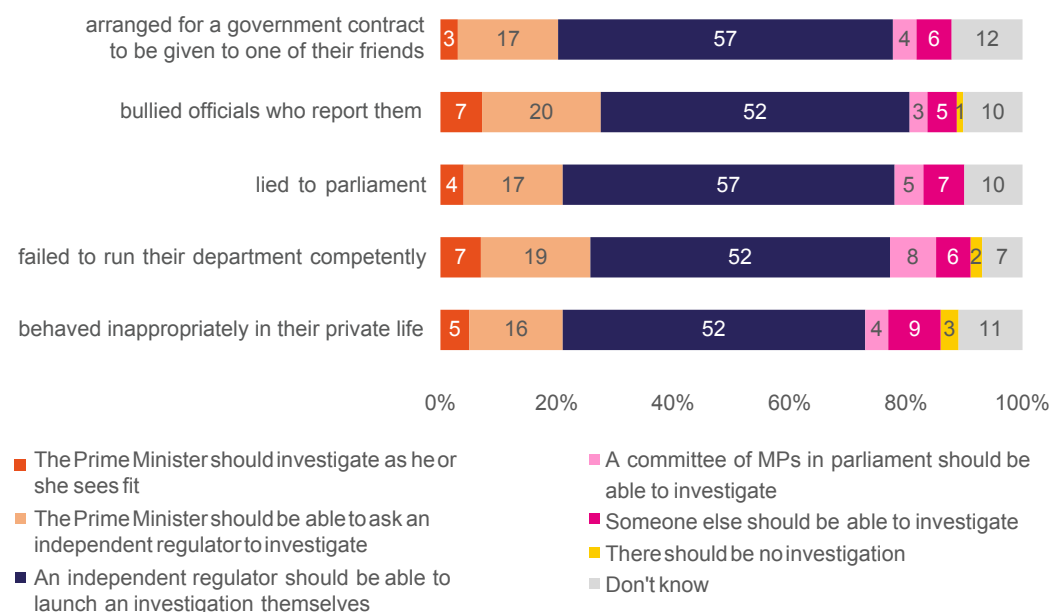
Question: Which comes closer to your view?



We 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, a clear majority thought that, whatever the nature of the alleged wrongdoing, an independent regulator should be able to launch an investigation themselves. Around twice as many took this view as held that such matters should be left to the Prime Minister or to parliament, and it was the most favoured option even among Conservatives.

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

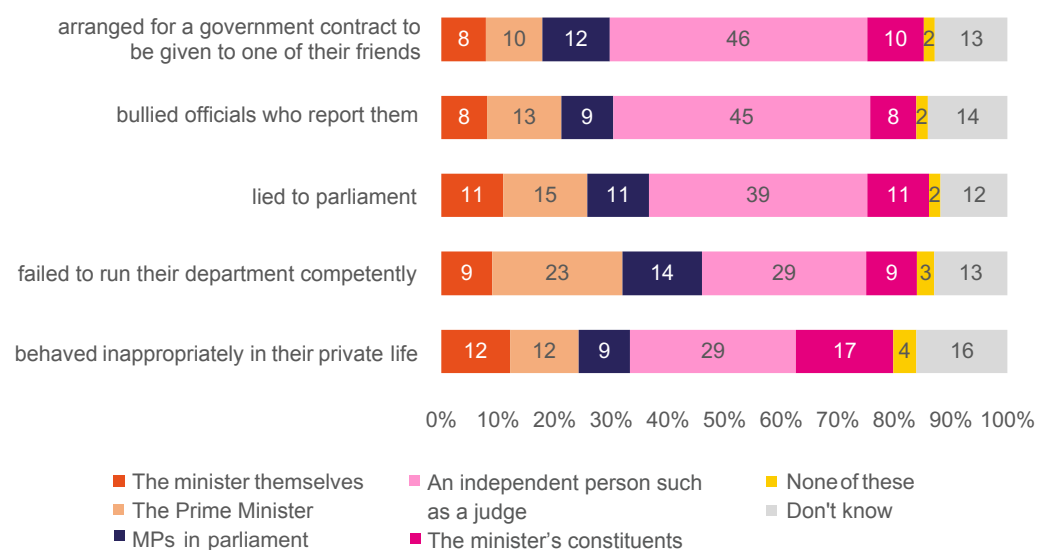
In place of '[FAILURE]', each respondent saw one of the statements below.



The nature of the wrongdoing had more impact on answers to the second question, looking at who people thought should decide whether a minister who had fallen short in some way ought to resign. Even so, the greatest number in each case wanted an independent person such as a judge to decide.

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.

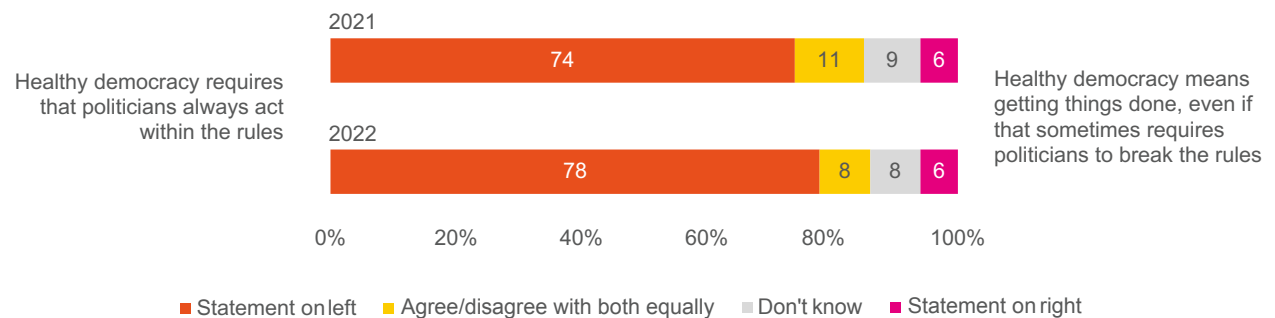


Do people want a strong leader?

There has been concern in recent years that growing numbers of people – especially young people – in the UK and other democracies appear to question the value of democracy and support strong, unchecked leaders. In 2019, for example, the Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement 16* found that more than twice as many people agreed with the statement 'Britain needs a strong leader willing to break the rules' as disagreed.²

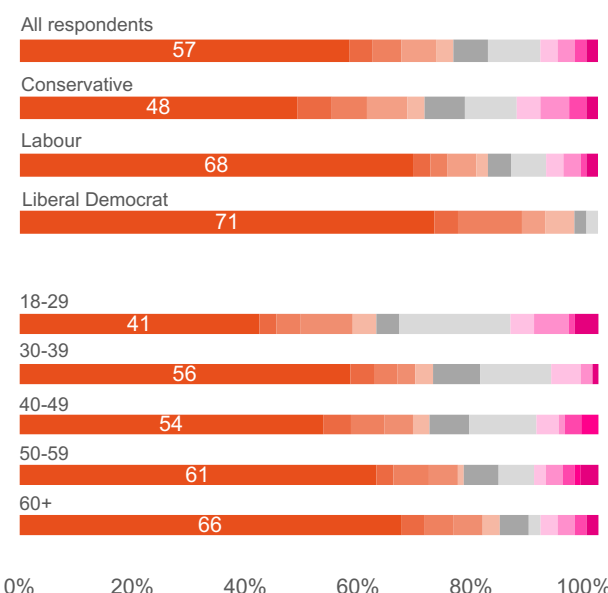
Our 2021 survey cast doubt on such patterns: it found overwhelming support for the view that 'healthy democracy requires that politicians always act within the rules' and minimal support for the idea that 'healthy democracy means getting things done, even if that sometimes requires politicians to break the rules'. This question was repeated in the 2022 survey, and the pattern was, if anything, even stronger.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

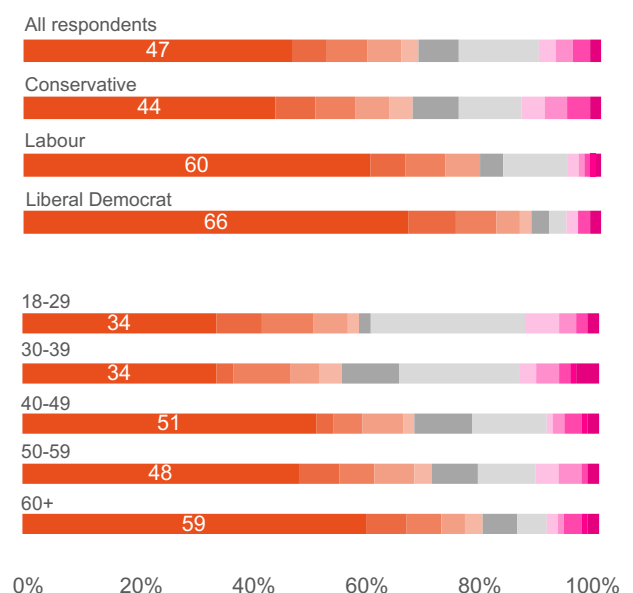


In order to explore further, the 2022 survey included two questions based on past surveys, relating to a strong leader who was either above the law or did not have to bother with parliament and elections. In both cases, by far the largest group chose zero on an 11-point scale, seeing such arrangements as 'not at all acceptable'. Only 10–11% of respondents chose an option in the upper half of the scale, towards more acceptable. It is true that young people were less likely to view such arrangements as unacceptable than were older people. But this was primarily because younger people were more likely to say that they didn't know – in line with more 'don't know' responses from younger people across all questions in the survey. It suggests that a significant factor may be that many young people simply do not feel confident in their understanding of how politics works.

Question: How acceptable would it be to you if the UK had a strong leader who was above the law?



Question: How acceptable would it be to you if the UK had a strong leader who did not have to bother with parliament and elections?



² Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 16: The 2019 Report*, p. 51. For cross-national evidence, see Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 106–12.

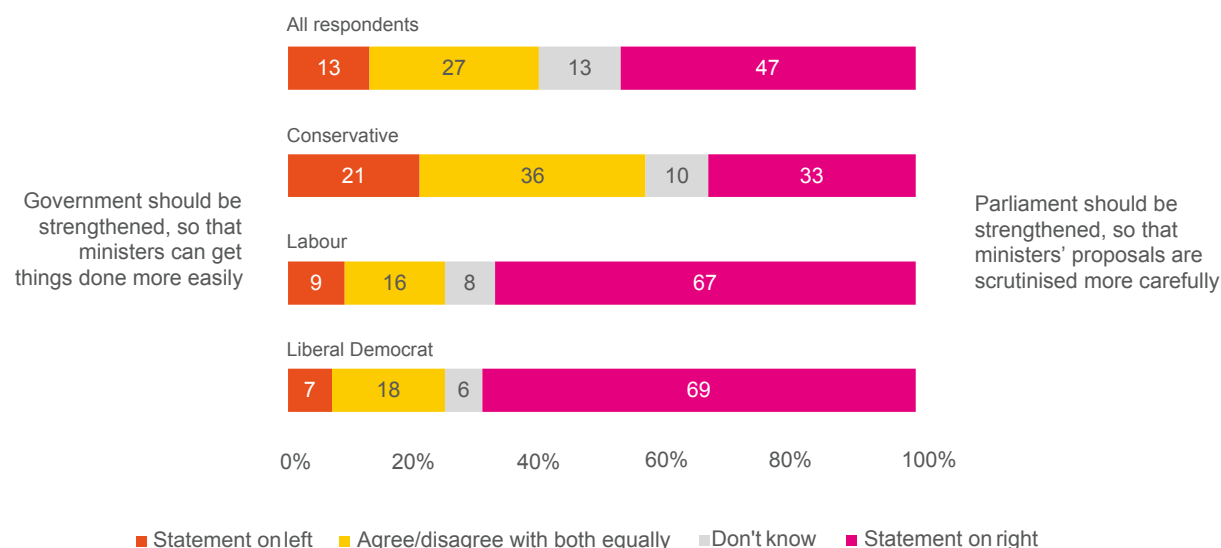


Relations between government and parliament

Our previous (2021) survey included one question on the powers of the House of Commons and of government ministers. The responses suggested that, at least on some matters – such as setting the parliamentary agenda – many people thought the Commons should have more power. The recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK strongly supported the same conclusion (see *Report 2*, pp. 36–43).

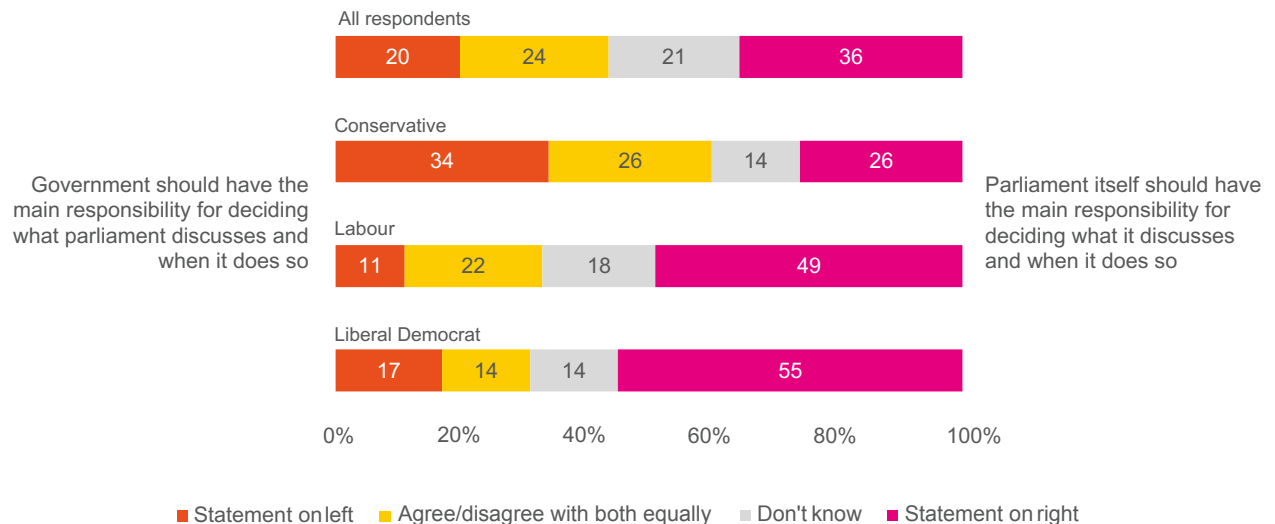
The 2022 survey asked respondents to make several specific binary choices about the powers of parliament and government. On the first of these, the largest number of people thought that parliament should be strengthened to allow for greater scrutiny, while few thought that government should be strengthened to get things done more easily. That preference was overwhelming among opposition party supporters. 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 they agreed or disagreed with both statements equally, and 10% said they agreed or disagreed with both statements equally.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



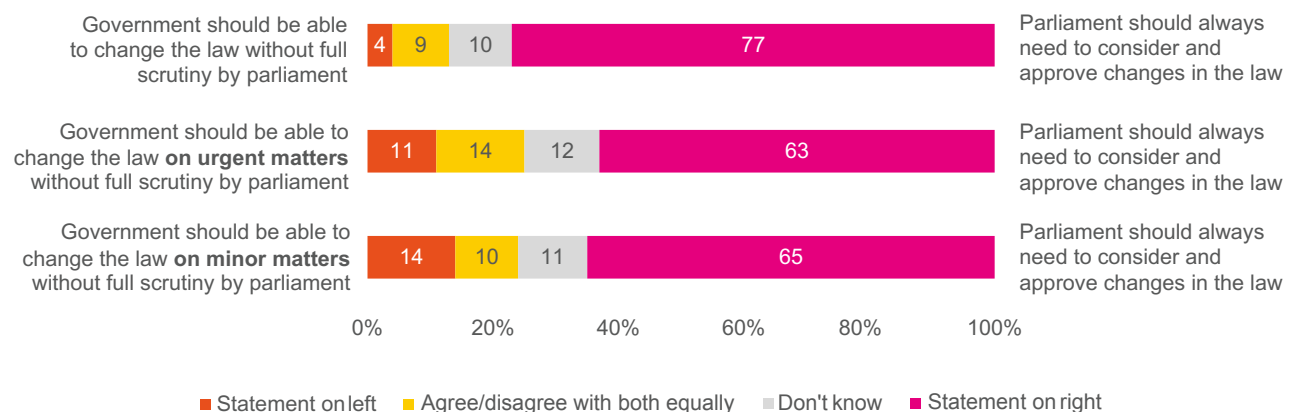
There were similar, if less dramatic, patterns in terms of who should decide what is discussed when in parliament. Since the government at present largely controls what gets debated in the House of Commons, this suggests that many would instinctively support a move away from the status quo.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



Respondents overwhelmingly thought that parliament's approval should be needed before changing any law. We put three different variants of this question to different respondents: the first asked about the law in general, the second about the law 'on urgent matters', and the third about the law 'on minor matters'. The two latter variants generated only fairly small shifts in responses. The patterns were broadly the same across all groups, but Conservative voters were more willing to allow law-making by government than were 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.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

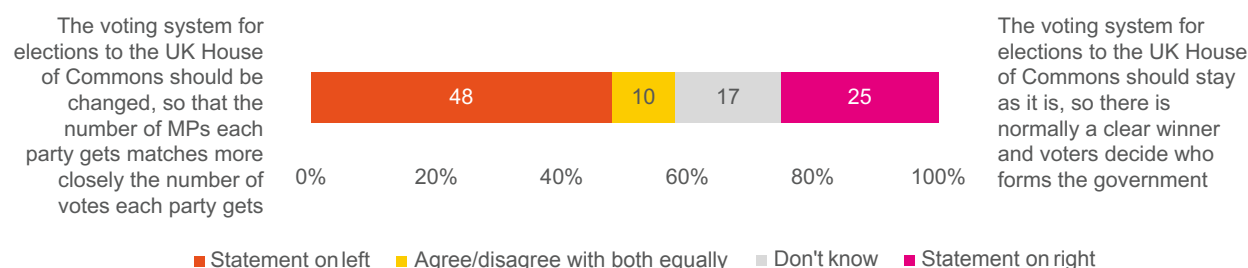


The voting system

Research into attitudes towards voting reform is longstanding. Since the 1980s, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has intermittently asked two questions on the issue. One of these has tended to identify higher support for reform, the other higher support for the status quo, suggesting that many people in fact do not have a settled view on the issue.³ There is some evidence of a recent shift in views, however: for the first time, the 2021 BSA survey found majority support for reform even on the second question.⁴

Our 2022 survey gave respondents a simple choice between voting systems, in each case deploying one of the key arguments used in favour of the 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’. Support for reform was overwhelming among 2019 Labour voters (66%, against 12% who backed the status quo) and 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.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



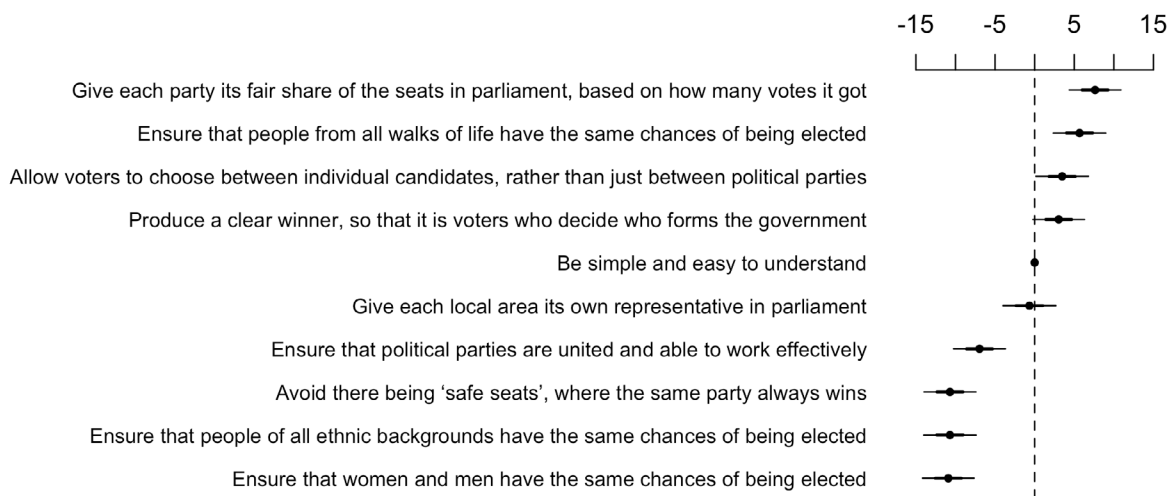
We also explored the principles that respondents thought the voting system should advance. Our 2021 survey asked what respondents thought were the most important features of a democracy, and the highest-ranked feature was that ‘if those in power do a poor job, they can be voted out’. This emphasis on accountability might suggest that the case for adopting a proportional voting system could be hard to make. The 2022 survey followed up on this by asking specifically what it is ‘more important for the voting system used in general elections to do’. This time, 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 is at 3 on the scale in the chart on the following page while the ‘fair share’ option is at 8, which 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.

³ John Curtice, Stephen Fisher, and Laurence Lessard-Phillips, ‘Proportional Representation and the Disappearing Voter’, in Alison Park, John Curtice, Katarina Thomson, Miranda Phillips, and Mark Johnson (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: The 23rd Report* (London: Sage, 2007), pp. 119–42.

⁴ ‘Constitutional Reform’, in S. Butt, E. Clery, and J. Curtice (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: The 39th Report* (London: National Centre for Social Research, 2022).

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

Each respondent saw two of the options below. The graph shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these. See the main text for an explanation of the scale.

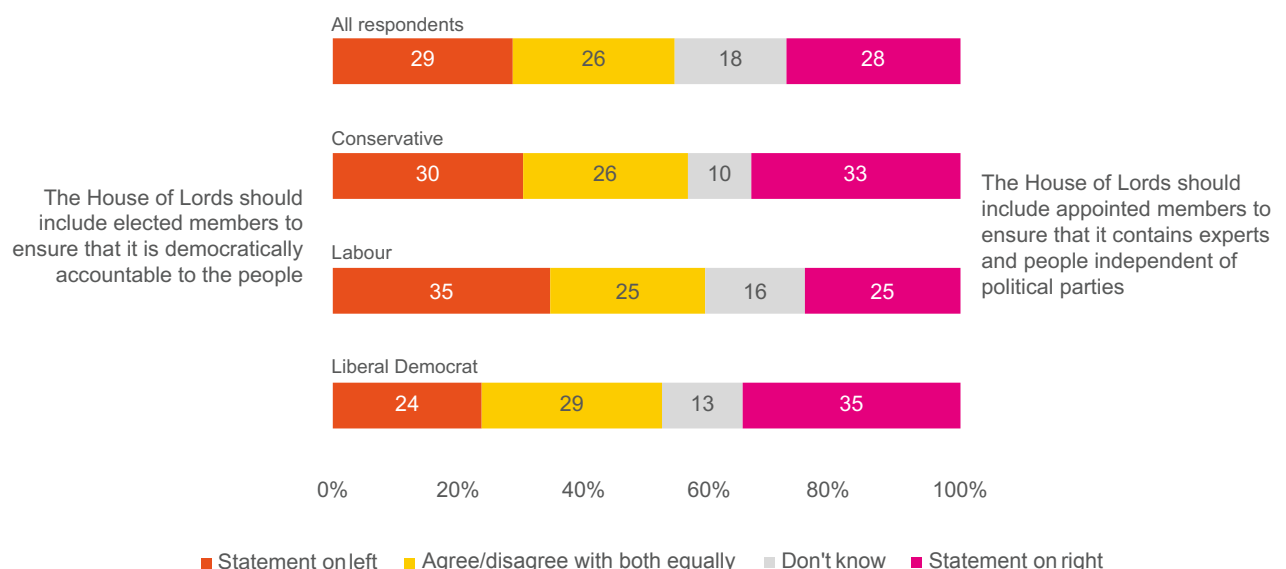


Reform of the House of Lords

Reform of the House of Lords has been on the political agenda from time to time for well over a century. The recent commission chaired for Labour by the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown suggested that the chamber should be abolished in its current form and replaced with an elected assembly of the nations and regions. Others advocate more gradual reforms – regulating appointments more tightly while retaining strengths in the existing system – at least as a first step. Our survey asked about both the composition and the role of the second chamber.

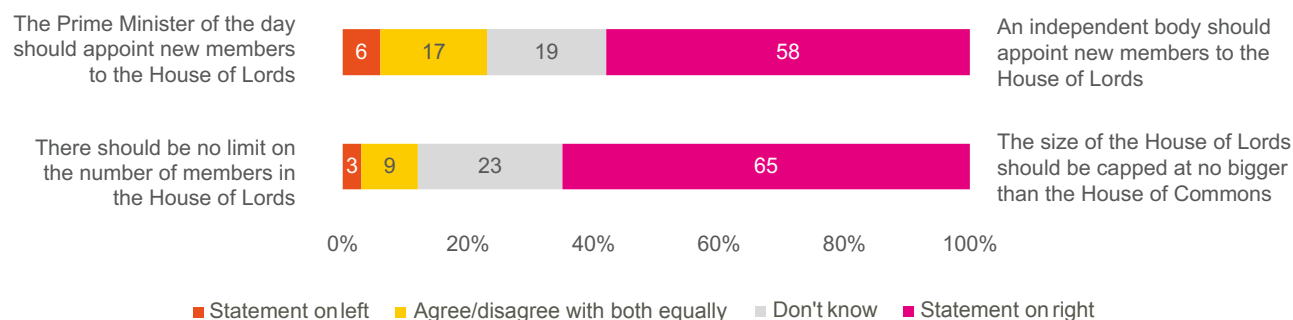
On the basic principles of composition, respondents were almost evenly split into three groups: those favouring inclusion of elected members; those favouring inclusion of appointed members; and those saying 'I agree/disagree with both equally'. There were some differences between supporters of different parties, but these were small.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?



Overwhelming majorities did, however, support certain reforms: that appointments should be made by an independent body, 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 supported a cap on the size of the chamber more than did any other group.

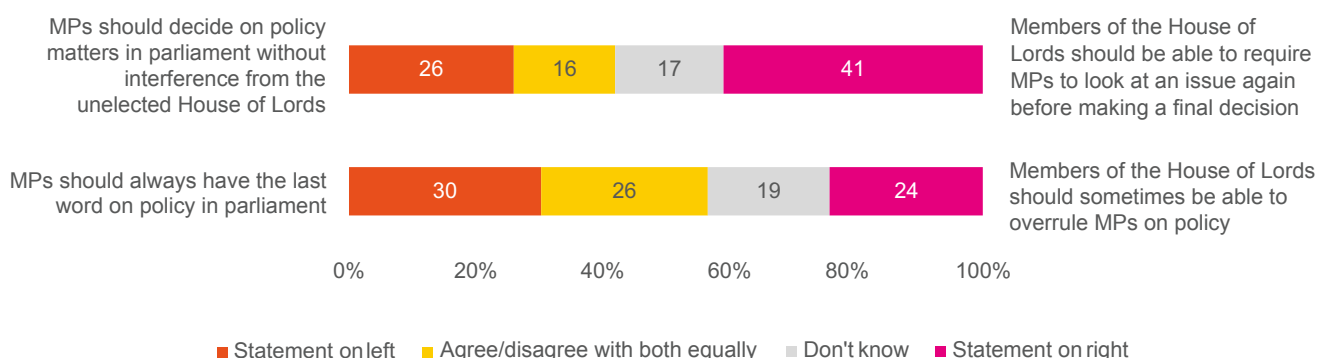
Question: Which comes closer to your view?



On the role of the House of Lords, we asked different respondents slightly different questions in order to explore whether views on the chamber depended on whether it was presented as having the power to overrule the House of Commons or merely ask it to look at a decision again. 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’.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

Each respondent saw one of the choices below. There were also variations in how MPs and peers were described, which are not shown here.

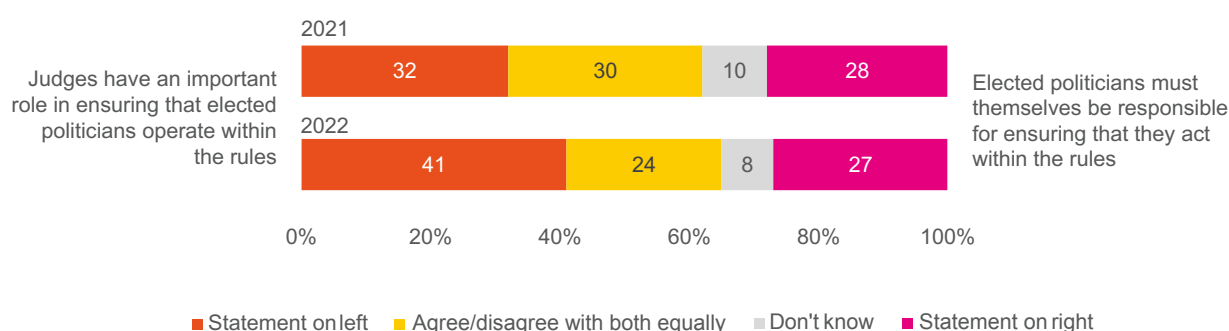


The role of judges

One area where our 2021 survey results prompted particular discussion was on the role of judges. It has commonly been assumed that the public – in line with some tabloid headlines – are hostile to judges having a role in decision-making on politically controversial matters. In fact, we found that not to be the case: trust was much higher in the court system than in politicians; and most people wanted strong roles for the courts in protecting human rights and adjudicating on the limits of government powers (see *Report 1*, pp. 2–3 and 10–11). Given that these findings were widely viewed as surprising, we wanted to explore the issues further. Were such preferences stable? Were they robust to changes in question wording? Were they contingent on factors that we had not asked about?

The question on trust, which was included in both surveys, indicated that the 2021 findings were not one-offs: the 2022 survey found that trust in the courts remained almost unchanged over the period (p. 2). Another repeated question, on the role of judges in ensuring that elected politicians operate within the rules, found that support for that role had strengthened.

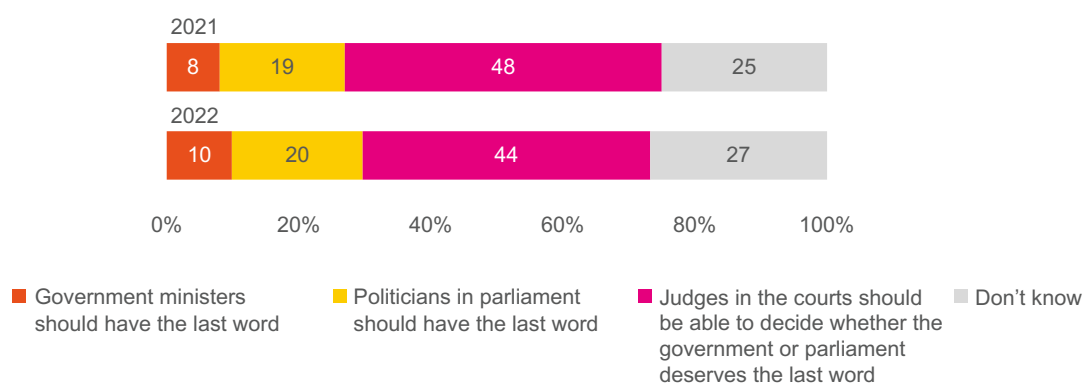
Question: Which comes closer to your view?



The 2021 survey included a question about how a dispute over government powers should be resolved. Half of the respondents saw exactly the same question in 2022. Views remained substantially the same: faced with three options, by far the largest group of respondents thought the matter should be settled by judges.

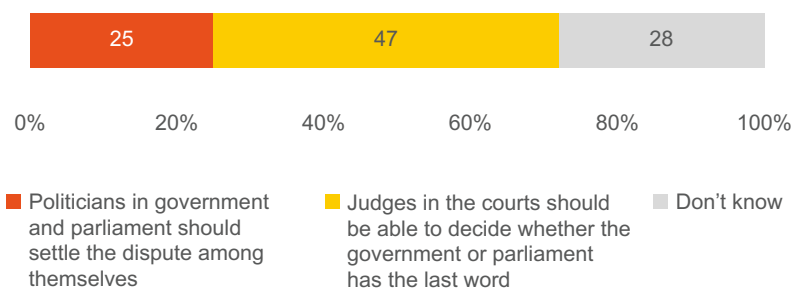
Question: Please imagine there is a dispute over whether the government has the legal authority to decide a particular matter on its own or whether it needs parliament's approval. How should this dispute be settled?

Different respondents saw slightly different wordings, which were reported in our previous report (Report 1, pp. 10–11). The patterns remained very similar in 2022.



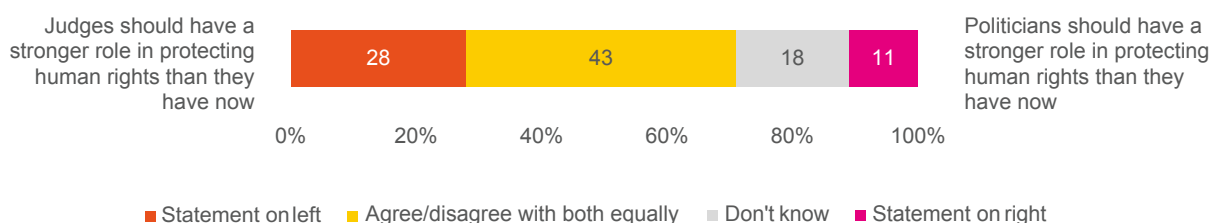
We were concerned that the wording of this question might have created an inadvertent bias in favour of judges: the question presented a choice about the powers of government and parliament; respondents who were unsure might have selected the third option in order to leave someone else – judges – to decide. The remaining half of the respondents therefore saw a different version of the question in 2022. In fact, support for the judges' role remained the same, adding to confidence that this was a real preference.

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?



The 2022 survey included a new question that sought to sum up views on the role of judges in protecting human rights. Though some prominent voices have argued that powers in this area should return to politicians, few respondents agreed; well over twice as many thought that the judges' role should in fact be strengthened. The largest group said they agreed or disagreed with both statements equally, indicating either that they did not support a stronger focus on human rights or that they wanted responsibilities to be shared across different actors – as is the case at present.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

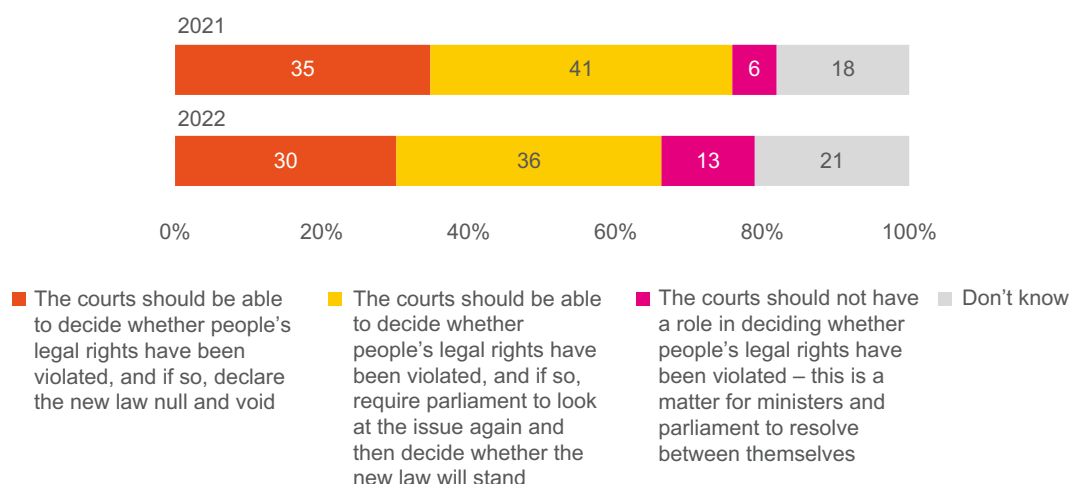


We also revisited a question from the 2021 survey that examined attitudes towards courts and human rights in more detail. The 2021 version of the question focused on whether people's attitudes to judicial involvement were affected by which rights were under discussion. It found that there was some variation across rights: people were more comfortable with the courts adjudicating on, for example, women's rights to equal treatment in the workplace and pensioners' rights to benefits than they were in relation to the rights of terror suspects to a fair trial or of refugees to stay in the UK. But the differences across these rights were small: in all cases, a substantial majority thought the courts should play a role; and around a third thought courts should be able to strike down laws that violated such rights – going beyond the courts' current powers (see *Report 1*, pp. 10–11).

Some respondents in 2022 saw exactly the same question again. The overall patterns remained very similar, though support for the view that courts should have no role had on average grown somewhat.

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?

Each respondent saw one specific proposed right in place of '[RIGHT]'. The chart shows average responses across all of these.

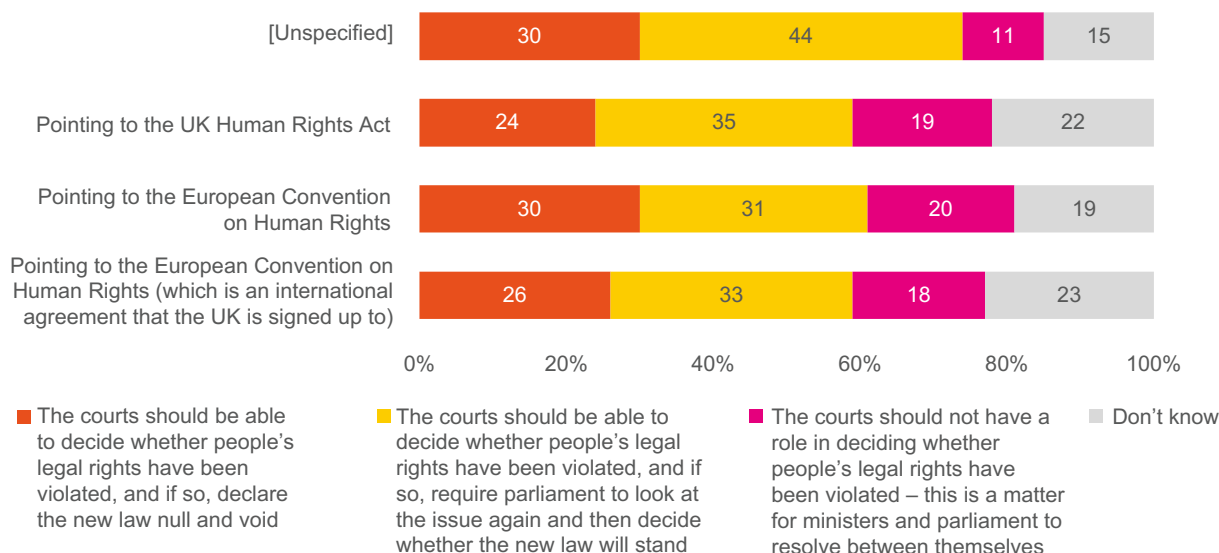


Most respondents to this question answered slightly altered versions of the question, designed to gauge two further possible influences upon people's responses. First, we wanted to see whether specifying a particular legal origin of claimed rights – the UK Human Rights Act or the European Convention on Human Rights – made a difference. Second, we wanted to see whether specifying 'the courts in the UK' or 'the European Court of Human Rights' changed the responses. Given the tenor of public debate on the matter, we expected that support for a judicial role would be lower when the European Convention or European Court was mentioned.

On the first point, 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 following chart diminished. Perhaps surprisingly, it did not matter whether the question specified the UK Human Rights Act or the European Convention on Human Rights: this 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, 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: substantial majorities thought the courts should retain an important role.

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?

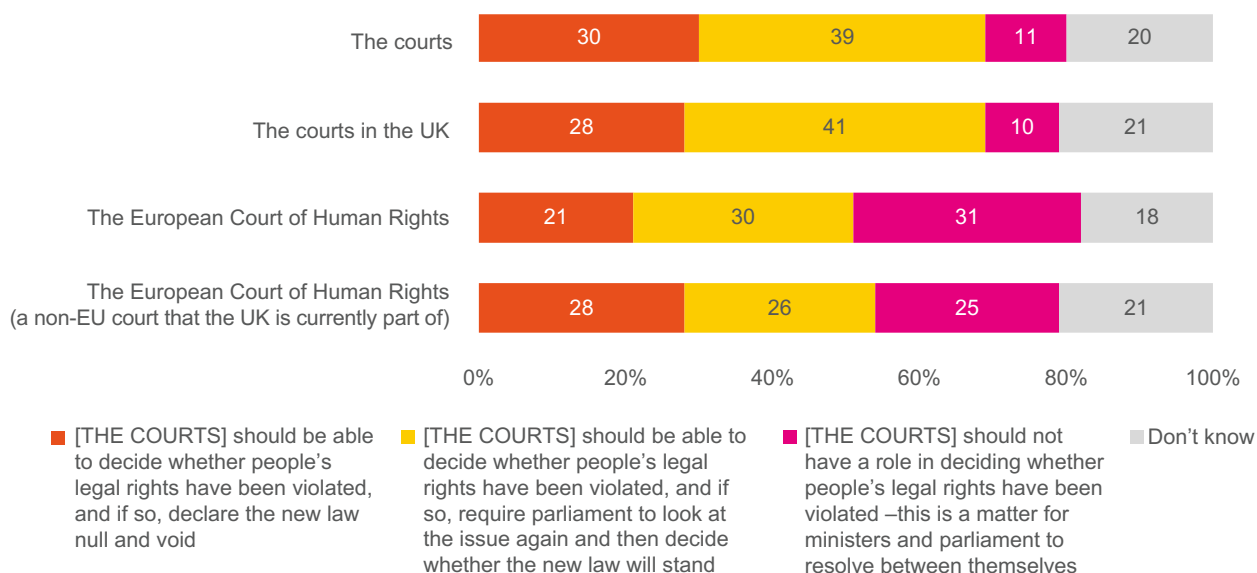
Each respondent saw one specific proposed right in place of '[RIGHT]'. The chart shows average responses across all of these. In place of '[ORIGIN]', respondents saw either no text – the 'unspecified' option below – or one of the phrases on the left of the chart.



Meanwhile, specifying the European Court of Human Rights significantly reduced support for court action – though this effect was reduced when the question explained 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.

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?

Each respondent saw one specific proposed right in place of '[RIGHT]'. 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 below – or one of the phrases on the left of the chart.



Participation in politics

Most respondents to our 2021 survey thought that people like themselves had too little influence on how the UK is governed. But the results also showed ambivalence towards some forms of popular participation in politics, such as referendums (see *Report 1*, pp 12–13). The 2022 survey sought to examine further the extent of public appetite for taking part in politics, and what forms people might want such participation to take.

As a baseline, we asked about actual participation in recent years. Two thirds said that they had voted in an election, and more than half that they had signed a petition. Those who voted Labour in 2019 reported markedly higher participation in all activities beyond voting than did Conservative voters – though whether that was because Labour voters are naturally more activist or just because Labour is in opposition we cannot tell. Similarly, 2016 Remain voters were more likely than Leave voters to have participated in a range of activities.

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

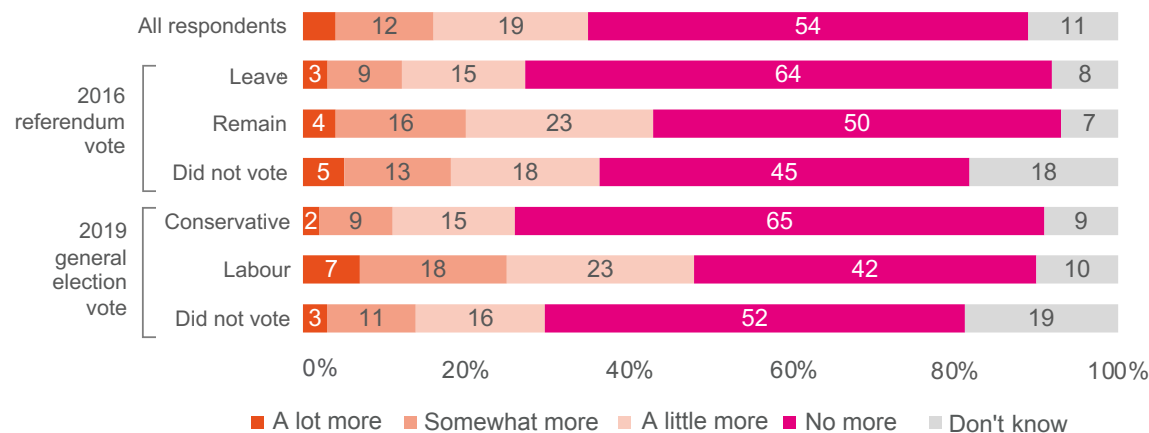
All numbers are percentages.

	All respondents	2016 referendum vote		2019 general election vote	
		Leave	Remain	Conservative	Labour
Voted in an election	67	70	82	77	78
Signed a petition	54	51	63	52	67
Written to your MP	26	25	33	25	37
Discussed political issues on social media	17	13	25	12	29
Taken part in a public consultation about an issue	14	9	21	10	21
Donated money to a campaign group	8	5	14	4	14
Taken part in a street protest	6	2	9	2	12
Contacted the media	5	5	7	5	7
Been involved in a political party	5	3	7	3	9
Organised within your local community	4	4	6	3	5
Attended political meetings	4	2	5	2	6
Taken part in a process that brought people with different views together to discuss an issue and come up with recommendations	3	2	4	2	4
Taken part in a strike	2	2	3	1	4
Run for election	1	0	1	0	1



We then asked whether people would ideally like to get more involved in politics. Most said they would not.

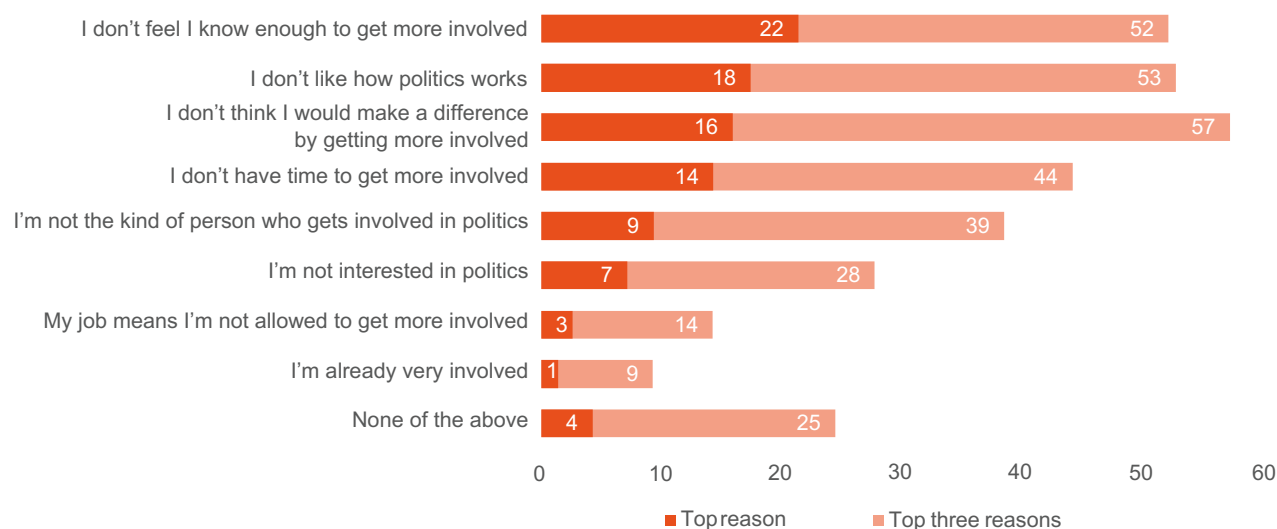
Question: To what extent, if at all, would you ideally like to get involved in politics more than you are?



When asked about why they did not get more involved, the greatest number of respondents said they felt they did not know enough to do so. Many also said they did not like how politics works, or did not 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.

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

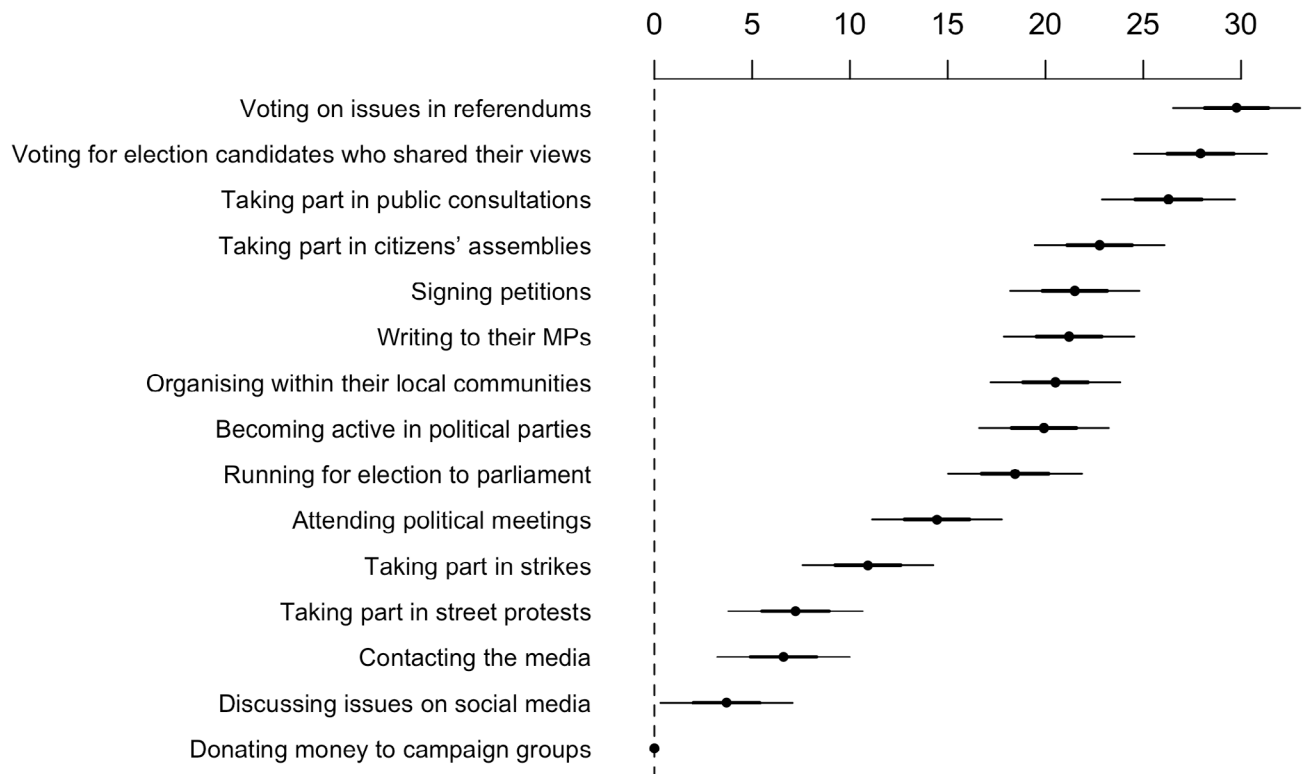
Respondents could rank up to three options from a fixed list. The chart shows the proportion of respondents choosing each option as their top-ranked reason (dark orange) and as one of their top three (light orange).



As for what form people would want participation to take, we asked respondents which forms they thought should have more impact in an ideal democracy. 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.

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

[A] and [B] were replaced for each respondent by two of the options below. The graph shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these. 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), 30% more people would choose the former.



Direct and deliberative democracy

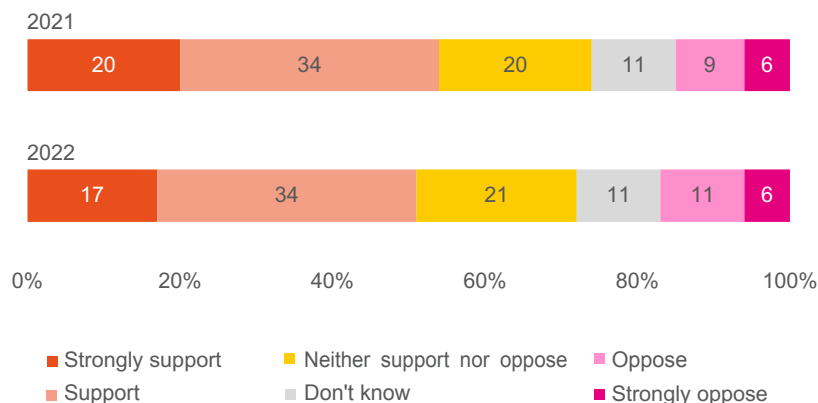
Our 2021 survey found rather ambiguous views on the value of referendums. On the one hand, 48% of respondents said that ‘decisions on the most important issues should be made by everyone, voting in referendums’, against 23% who thought such decisions ‘should be made by MPs, voting in parliament’ (*Report 1*, p. 6). On the other hand, when we asked about how decisions on particular issues should be made, support for referendums was low on most issues (*Report 1*, p. 12).

This ambivalence was repeated in the 2022 survey. Responses to the general question, which we repeated from 2021, were largely unchanged, indicating wide support for referendums. But, when we asked whether greater use of referendums would make democracy in the UK better or worse, the proportions of respondents expecting an improvement and a decline were almost equal. This question is included in the results presented in the next section.

There was also some uncertainty in views on citizens’ assemblies. As in the 2021 survey, we gave respondents a description of what a citizens’ assembly is and then asked for their views. The results were broadly similar: many more respondents supported than opposed the use of citizens’ assemblies; but around a third were unsure. Many had presumably not come across the concept before.

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?

The question was preceded by a description of what a citizens’ assembly is. See Report 1, p. 13.

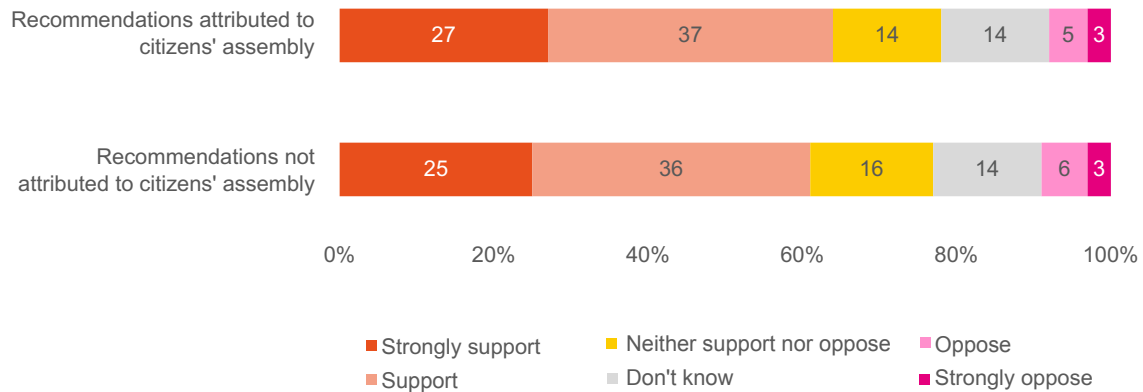


To examine people’s instincts on citizens’ assemblies further, the 2022 survey presented respondents with some of the recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly on Democracy in the UK (see *Report 2*) and asked how far they agreed or disagreed with them. Some respondents were told that the recommendations came from a citizens’ assembly, while others were not, allowing us to gauge whether information that a proposal was produced by such a body affected support for it.

In fact, being told that the recommendations came from a citizens’ assembly had no more than a very marginal effect: support for the recommendations was about the same either way.

Question: You will now see several recommendations that have been made about how democracy in the UK should work. For each one, please say how far you agree or disagree with it.

Each respondent saw four of the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, randomly selected from a list of 20 of the Assembly's proposals. The results shown here average across these.



For those respondents who were told the recommendations came from a citizens' assembly, we also varied the information they saw about the assembly. Some received no specific information and were simply told 'PLEASE NOTE: These recommendations were made by a citizens' assembly.' At the other extreme, some received information on multiple aspects:

PLEASE NOTE: These recommendations were made by a citizens' assembly. The assembly had 67 members, who were selected from the public by lottery. The assembly's organisers made sure that its members were representative of the population of the UK in their different ages, genders, ethnicities, levels of education and political views. The members met online over six weekends. They were given information about the issues and heard different arguments. They got to ask questions, think about the evidence, and discuss different views among themselves. Then they voted on what they thought.

Between these extremes, other respondents saw descriptions that included some but not all of the elements in the full text.

None of these variations had any effect. While we expected that understanding more about an assembly might increase trust in its conclusions, that did not appear to be the case. Only one factor did make some difference: if respondents were told what proportion of citizens' assembly members had backed a recommendation – a proportion that in many cases exceeded 90% – their own support for the recommendation did rise slightly.



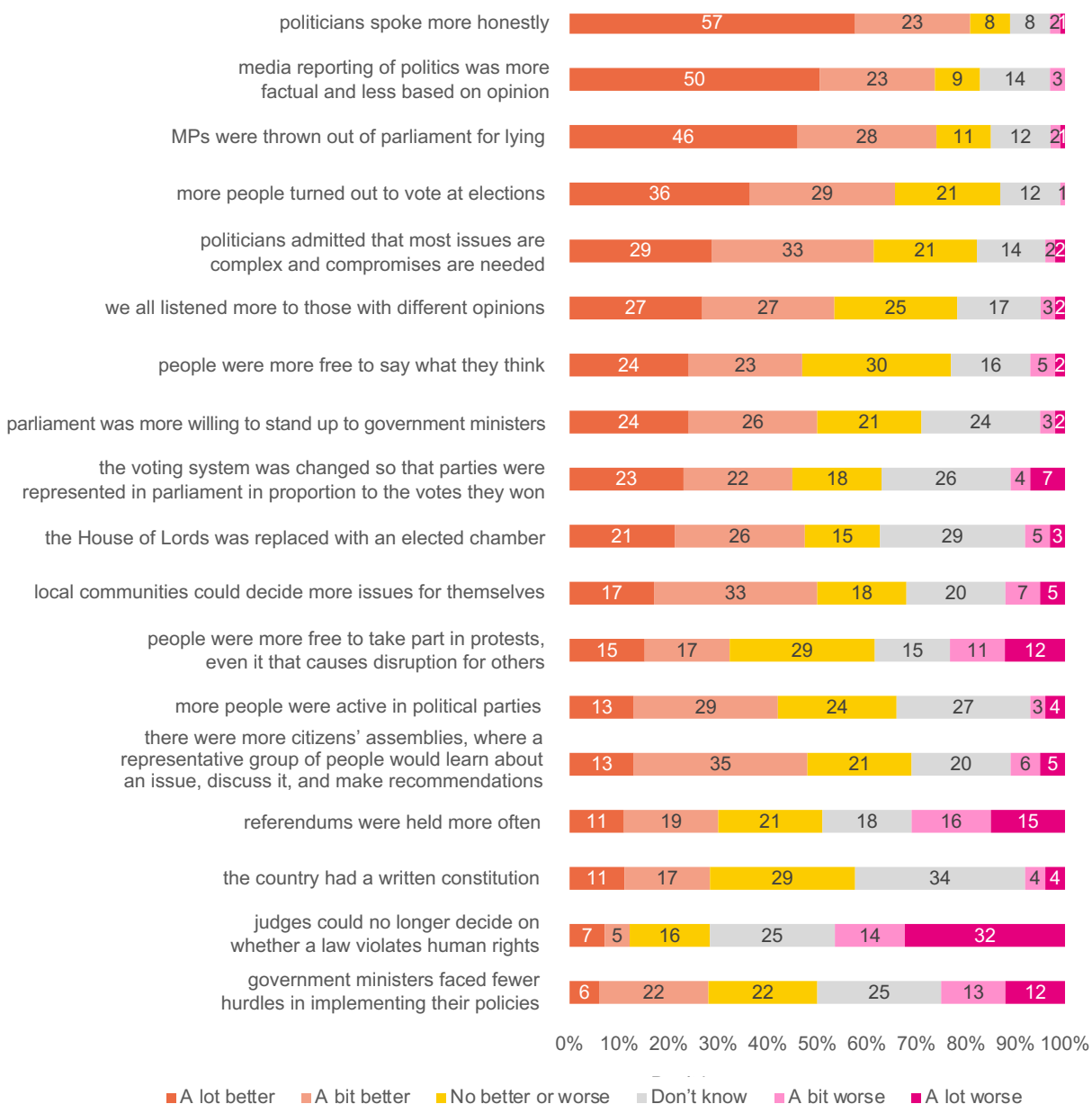
Options for reform

The final question in the survey asked respondents whether they thought various possible changes to the political system or how politics works would make democracy better or worse. Each respondent saw two possible changes, randomly selected from the list below. Unlike many of the earlier questions in the survey, this one asked respondents not to choose between two options, but to evaluate specific proposals in isolation.

People were on the whole most supportive of changes to political behaviour: how politicians speak; how the media report; how members of the public engage. They were generally less sure on specific institutional changes – except that most wanted MPs to be thrown out of parliament for lying. This pattern is unsurprising: people get frustrated by how politics works; the underlying mechanics are on the whole more distant from their thinking.

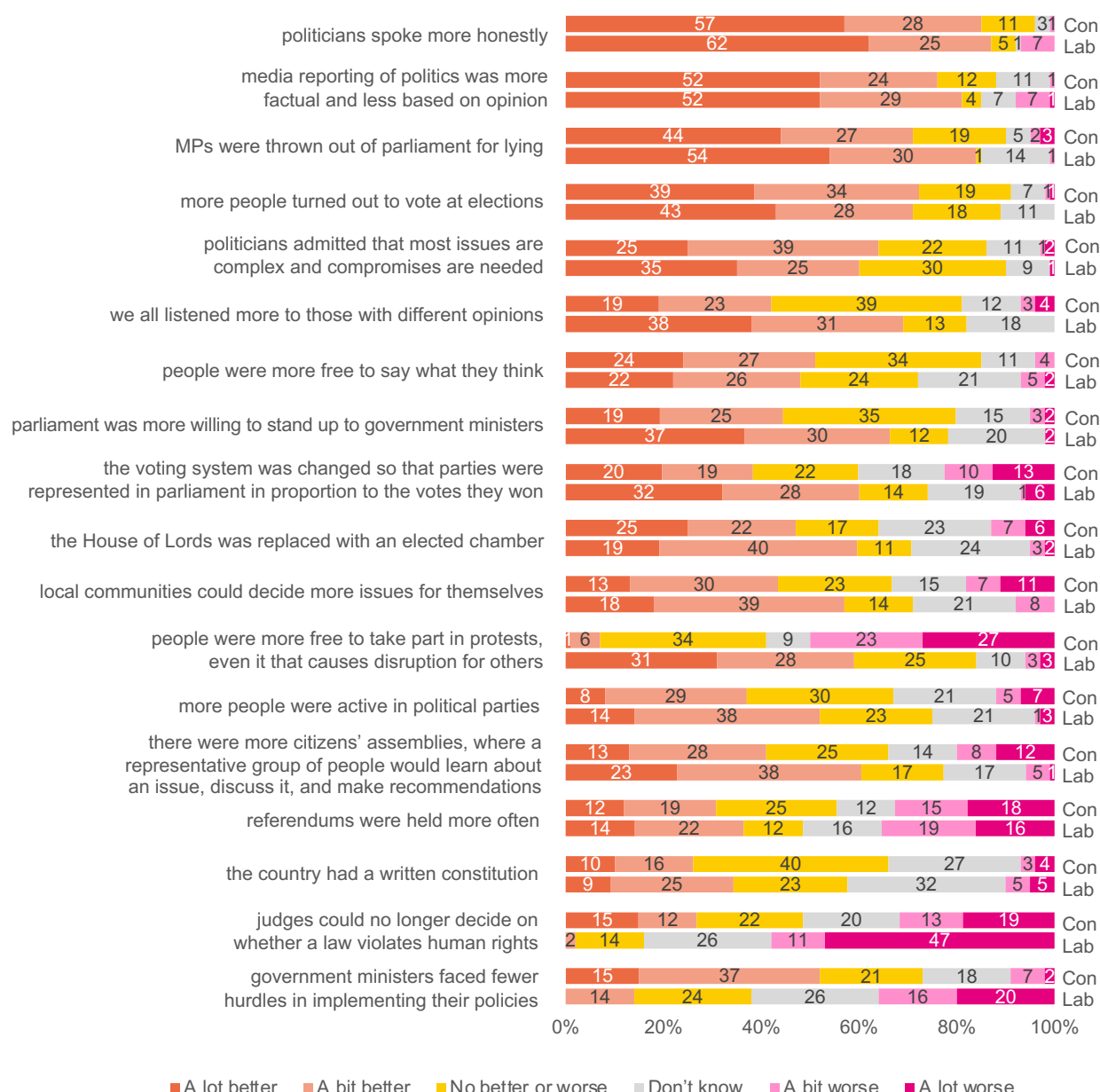
Asking respondents to evaluate proposals on their own rather than choose between two options could bias responses towards expressing agreement. Even so, almost four times as many respondents opposed stripping judges of their powers on human rights as supported such a move. Significant numbers of respondents also opposed greater use of referendums, more powers for ministers, and more freedom of protest.

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



For the most part, views were similar across voters for the two main political parties. But there were some differences. One issue – whether people should be more free to take part in protests, even if that causes disruption for others – elicited a dramatic divergence of perspectives: among 2019 Conservative voters, there was almost no support for the proposition; among 2019 Labour voters, there was almost no opposition. There was also a marked divergence of views regarding the powers of government ministers. On all other matters, notwithstanding some differences in the numbers, the weight of opinion pointed in the same direction irrespective of past vote.

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



Do people care about political process?

A vital question for interpreting the findings of this report concerns how much people really care about the kinds of issues covered. A sceptical view would hold that most people are interested only in the outputs of politics, not in internal political processes – so, while survey respondents might come up with answers to questions on political institutions, these are mostly ‘top of the head’ responses that are not deeply felt. When it comes to the crunch – and the ballot box – other things are presumed to matter more.

Our 2021 survey contained two questions giving insights on this issue. One explored whether people saw democracy as intrinsically or merely instrumentally valuable. 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’ (another 3% said ‘democracy is not the best form of government’; see *Report 1*, p. 15). This might imply that most people are not particularly interested in political process in itself. But we also asked what a Prime Minister should do if faced with a choice between acting with integrity (for example, acting honestly, or within the law) and delivering 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 (*Report 1*, pp. 4–5).

We can now dig further into this issue, in three ways. The first is to look at the stability of responses to questions that were included in both the 2021 and 2022 surveys. Substantial changes, particularly changes going in different directions, would suggest that expressed preferences were only lightly held; continuity would suggest they were more deeply rooted. The responses reported to multiple questions over the preceding pages indicate that aggregate stability was generally high and that, where changes did occur – such as the further strengthening of the already widespread belief that healthy democracy requires politicians always to act within the rules – these were readily understandable given the events of the intervening year.

Our second approach is to ask respondents directly which issues are more or less important to them. We did this by asking them to consider pairs of issues randomly selected from the list in the first figure on the following page. The figure indicates that the cost of living was, unsurprisingly, the issue that people identified as most important, 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. Politicians’ moral standards mattered as much as climate change and – perhaps most surprisingly – the balance of power between government and parliament mattered as much as the UK’s relationship with the European Union. All of this suggests that economic issues predominate on most people’s agendas, but constitutional issues and questions about the state of politics are important too.

Finally, we sought to examine the degree to which constitutional issues might affect people’s voting decisions. To do this, respondents were first asked for their views on a range of constitutional and non-constitutional issues. Then they were presented with a choice between two hypothetical political parties, specifying only the parties’ positions on those same issues. The second figure on the following page shows, for each issue, the average increase in the probability of voting for the party that agreed with the respondent’s position over the party that did not agree.

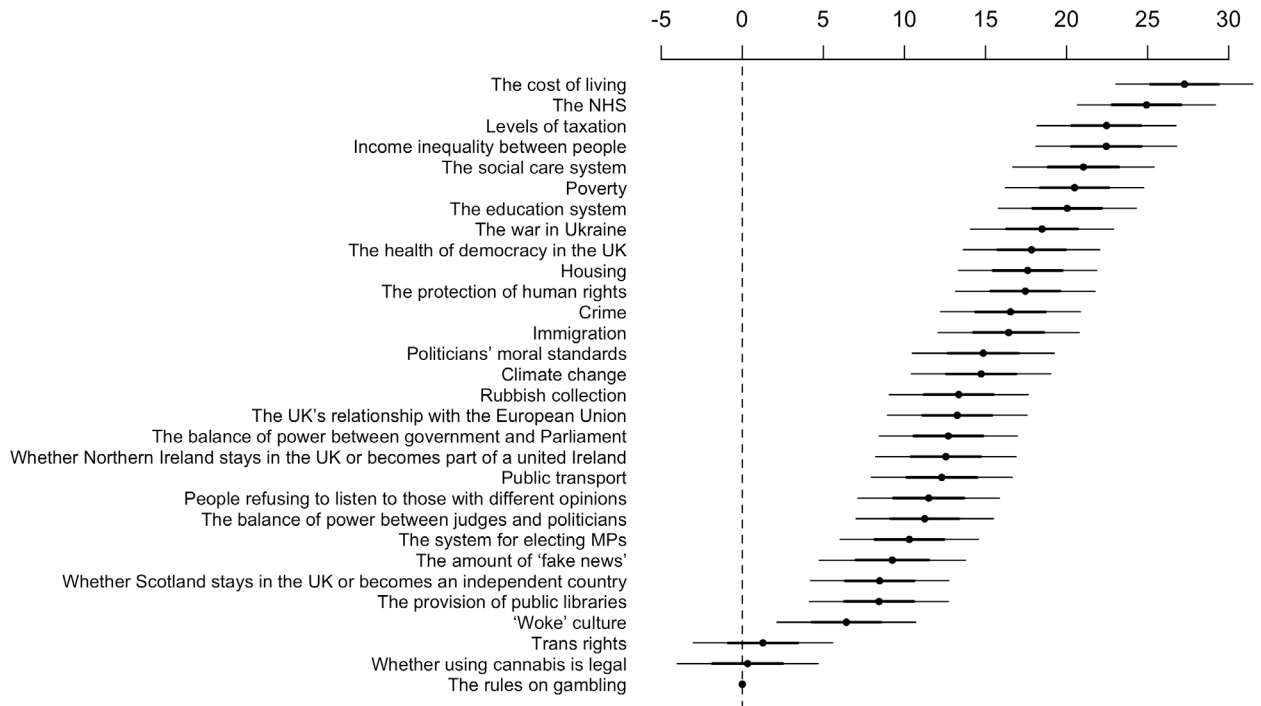
Of the issues included, climate change, the UK’s relationship with the EU, and immigration came out as those with the greatest impact. The constitutional issues generally scored somewhat lower. But some – the future of the monarchy, electoral reform, and Scottish independence – still had a marked impact.

Differences in issue rankings across this question and the previous one indicate that what matters most to people is not straightforward, and responses may depend on the details of the questions asked. But the findings 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.



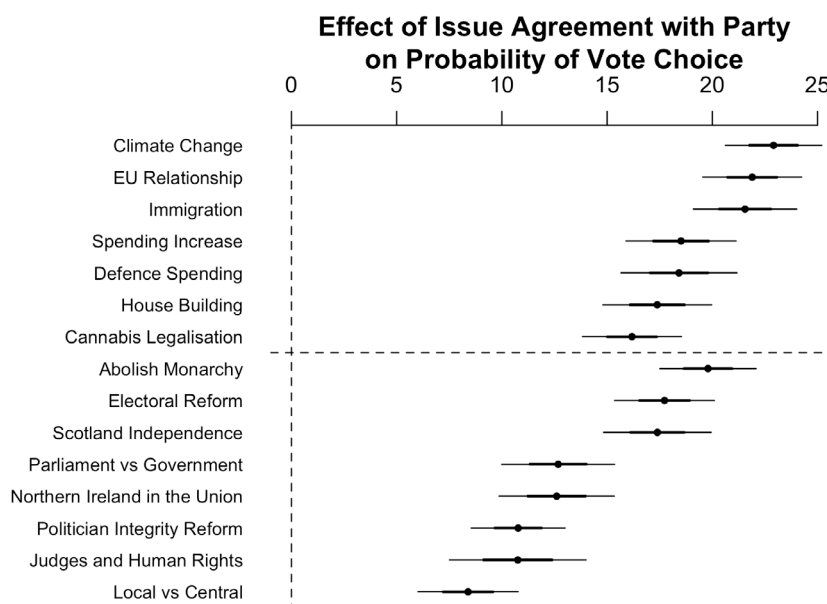
Question: When thinking about politics today, would you say that issues around [A] or around [B] are more important to you?

In place of '[A]' and '[B]', each respondent saw two of the options below. The graph shows point estimates and the range of uncertainty around these. The numbers correspond to the differences in the percentage of respondents selecting different options. For example, when cost of living (27) is compared to immigration (16), we estimate that about 11% more of the population (27 – 16) would select the former than the latter.



The impact of issues on vote choice

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.



Appendix: Survey Details

The survey was conducted online by YouGov between 26 August and 5 September 2022. It was the second wave of a two-wave panel survey, meaning that all respondents had also completed the first wave. The first wave was conducted in summer 2021, and the results were set out in our report *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* (London: UCL Constitution Unit, January 2021).

Sample: 4105 respondents, representative of the UK voting age population.

Questionnaire: Full details of all questions are available on the project website:

www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/deliberative-democracy/democracy-uk-after-brexit.

Responses: The responses dataset will be archived with the UK Data Service after the completion of the project.

Funding: This survey has been completed as part of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit research project, which is examining public attitudes to democracy in the UK today through surveys and a citizens' assembly. Full details of the project are available through the link above. The 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).

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the ESRC for providing the funding that has made this research possible, and to Professor Dan Wincott at Governance after Brexit for his thoughtful shepherding of the programme.

We have benefited greatly from detailed and insightful feedback from the members of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit Advisory Board on drafts of our survey questions.

We would also like to thank Sophie Andrews-McCarroll, Tom Fieldhouse, Alice Hart, Billy Hohnen-Ford, Peter Mumford, and Will Noble for their assistance in the preparation and promotion of this report, and Janine Clayton for her expert design work.



Political instability in recent years has placed significant strains on the UK's constitutional arrangements, including the relationships between government, parliament, the courts, and the wider public. Standards in public life have been questioned, and trust in politicians has been stretched. Understanding how voters view these matters is vitally important.

The Constitution Unit at University College London is therefore conducting a major research project examining public attitudes to democracy in the UK today. Two reports have already been published. The first set out the findings of a survey of the UK population conducted in the summer of 2021. The second provided the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK – a representative sample of the UK's population, whose members deliberated over six weekends before reaching conclusions.

This third report presents the findings from a second survey of the UK population. Conducted in August and September 2022 – just before Boris Johnson left the office of Prime Minister – the survey probes deeper into many of the issues that the earlier reports highlighted. It reveals three overarching patterns. First, public trust in politicians and confidence in their ethical standards is low. Most people think that the system for protecting standards needs to be strengthened. Second, most people want those in power to be held accountable through a system of strong checks and balances, provided through parliament, the courts, and other institutions. Third, while the cost of living and the NHS are most people's top priorities, people care about the health of democracy in the UK as well. Above all, they want the discourse of politics to be more honest.

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.

About the authors

Professor Alan Renwick is Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit and Principal Investigator for the Democracy in the UK after Brexit project. He is Professor of Democratic Politics at the UCL Department of Political Science.

Professor Ben Lauderdale is Professor of Political Science and Head of Department at the UCL Department of Political Science and Co-Investigator for the Democracy in the UK after Brexit project.

Professor Meg Russell FBA is Director of the Constitution Unit and Co-Investigator for the Democracy in the UK after Brexit project. She is Professor of British and Comparative Politics at the UCL Department of Political Science.

James Cleaver was Research Assistant for the Democracy in the UK after Brexit project.

The Constitution Unit
School of Public Policy
University College London
29-31 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9QU

020 7679 4977
constitution@ucl.ac.uk
www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit

The Constitution Unit



www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit



www.constitution-unit.com



[@ConUnit_UCL](https://twitter.com/ConUnit_UCL)