

Democratic Repair

What Britons
want from their
democracy



**More in
Common**

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ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

More in Common is an international initiative set up in 2017 to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarisation and social division. Our teams in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government to connect people across lines of division.

More in Common

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This report is a follow-up to the study *[‘It’s Complicated. People and Their Democracy in Germany, France, Britain, Poland, and the United States’](#)* that More in Common and the Robert Bosch foundation published in 2021 and builds on insights and data collected for that study. We are grateful for the Robert Bosch Foundation’s support for More in Common’s democracy work.

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Contents

Foreword	4
Executive Summary	7
The context and challenge of repair	10
Conclusions and Recommendations	47
Appendix 1	
The British Seven segments and their democratic attitudes	52
Appendix 2	
Comparative insights from More in Common's five-country democracy study	66

Foreword

For several years now, Parliament's Elizabeth Tower and Big Ben have been boxed in scaffolding – as part of a major project of repair and restoration. The silencing of Big Ben's gongs contrasts starkly with one of the noisiest and most fractious periods in the history of British democracy. Big Ben has gonged continuously through six monarchies and forty-one prime ministerships. Its resilience is remarkable, yet years of neglect left it (much like the Palace of Westminster) in need of urgent repair.

The past decade has been a turbulent time for British democracy: four general elections, three referenda, a rising tide of populism, protracted deadlock over Brexit, unparalleled restrictions on personal freedoms during the Covid-19 pandemic, and increased anger and vitriol in our political discourse. Our ability to handle these turbulent events has been weakened by deep frustration and pervasive distrust in how our democracy works. Increased disengagement, indifference, and resentment has made democracy more vulnerable to the forces of extremism and division. Nor is Britain alone – as a major global study of public attitudes found in 2020, democracy is under threat around the world, with the highest level of democratic discontent on record.¹

Notwithstanding these challenges, British democracy has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Most Britons remain proud of their democracy and committed to the ideas that underpin it. Even among many of those who feel dissatisfied, their frustration is more about the outcomes of the democratic system than its underlying principles. They have not abandoned our democracy's ideals; they simply feel let down by a politics which falls short of them.

Since 2017, More in Common has surveyed and spoken to tens of thousands of people in the United Kingdom, as well as in the United States, France, and Germany. Our reports have provided fresh insights into what is driving societies apart and what can bring them back together. We have dived deep into people's values, identity, and social psychology, and into how those elements interact with the experiences, issues, and debates that have been widening fault lines in our societies.

The *Britain's Choice* project has found that while one in two Britons feels the country is more divided than at any point in their lifetimes, the country is not riven into two camps. In fact, Britons share a surprising amount of common ground. However, the forces of polarisation and fracture continue to grow. From the United States and across the world, recent events have highlighted the threats to democracy in deeply divided societies. Tackling division means we need to build greater resilience against the forces of polarisation. This requires us to do a better job of managing our differences and strengthening our common ground. We need to rebuild trust in the process of making and shaping policies and laws. A strong democratic system is a necessary, if by no means sufficient, condition for tackling division and building common ground.

The cause of democratic repair and renewal is pressing, and this paper aims to advance debate on this work. It builds on our analysis in *Britain's Choice* and sets the scene for the work of democratic repair, drawing on insights from the seven population segments identified in that analysis. Each has a distinctive take on democracy that is not captured by thinking about them only in terms of the party they support or just whether they vote.

This paper puts a spotlight onto the perspectives of the three population segments who are most disengaged from democratic participation, as well as exploring the characteristic of a fourth group that is highly engaged but deeply distrustful. A key finding is that **disengagement is not always a bad thing**:

people are disengaged from democracy for different reasons. Some would like right-minded and competent politicians to solve problems, so that ordinary people like them can think less about politics. For others the demands of daily life mean that they simply do not have the time to pay attention. In short, reasons for disengagement range from the benign to the burden of competing pressures to apathy through to disaffection and outright hostility.

What matters most is not that everyone should be highly engaged in participating in democracy, but instead regardless of their viewpoints, people should feel that they have a stake in the system. It is important, of course, to remove barriers to participation, to find new ways to bring people into the decision-making process and to creatively deploy technology that makes democracy accessible. But the problem of deepening distrust and dissatisfaction emerges as the key challenge from this report. We should not see greater participation as the best proxy for satisfaction. A healthy democracy does not require large numbers of people to be intensely engaged, and nor do most people want that level of engagement. But it does require people to feel that they have a stake in the system and believe that the system benefits from a mix of viewpoints.

When people feel that the system is rigged, that their voices are ignored, or that democracy doesn't work for them, they are more likely to embrace alternatives to democracy advanced by authoritarians and populists. At its worst, frustration with the system evolves into rejecting democratic principles, embracing extremism and at the worst, violence leading to tragic consequences. But even without these more extreme outcomes, when disenchantment with democracy reaches a critical mass it becomes much harder to address Britain's complex long-term challenges – the conversion to a net zero carbon economy, the future constitutional settlement, the rise of China, or funding the National Health Service and caring for our elderly.

A deeper understanding of democratic disengagement can make efforts towards democratic repair more effective and lasting. This paper offers insights into the drivers of distrust and disengagement, and identifies practical steps that leaders in our public institutions, policy makers, civil society, and other actors can take to strengthen confidence in our democracy.

These issues are currently matters of debate in connection with the Elections Bill, and the need to ensure that efforts to improve election security don't negatively affect participation. This paper does not focus on the technical debates around electoral system reforms, referenda, or other aspects of constitutional change. There is a rich and lively debate on the process of how we elect our representatives, which can undoubtedly play a part in a wider programme of democratic renewal. However, there is no clear consensus on which reforms will be most successful. In the meantime, in the UK as is true across the democratic world, we are confronted by growing disengagement, increased extremism, the threat of 'us-versus-them' populism and increased anti-democratic interference from foreign powers.

The ladders and lifts of Big Ben's scaffolding will be dismantled, and bolts loosened in 2022, to reveal the repaired Big Ben and Elizabeth Tower in all its glory. This work demonstrates that we can, with sustained effort and investment, renew the mechanisms and restore what had been diminished by the forces of time. Two even greater repair challenges lie ahead in the 2020s and beyond: first, on the symbolic home of democracy in the United Kingdom, the long-neglected Palace of Westminster; and on the restoration and repair of our democracy itself.

Note: This report draws on quantitative and qualitative data collected between January 2020 and August 2021, with the main blocks of research undertaken in the first quarter of 2021. Where the specific context of conversations were relevant (such as during lockdowns) this is noted in the analysis.



Big Ben under scaffolding for major restoration, September 2021
Tim Dixon

Executive Summary

An overwhelming majority of Britons feel a sturdy, deeply held commitment to democracy. We are proud of our democratic history and heritage, and we are committed to the principles that underpin it.

- Nine in ten choose democracy as the best way to govern Britain when presented with alternatives and the same number believe democracies lead to fairer societies
- Two thirds of people believe Britain is a ‘genuine democracy’
- More than half (54 per cent) rate the importance of living in a democracy as ten out of ten.

However, in practice, we are deeply frustrated with how democracy is working.

- 84 per cent believe that politicians don’t care what people like them think
- 62 per cent believe British democracy is rigged to serve the rich and influential
- The most widely-held concerns about democracy are “bad political leadership”, politicians not being “accountable for keeping their promises”, and the system being “run by elites who just look after themselves”.
- There is a prevailing sense that institutional elites – in Parliament, the judiciary, and the media – look down on normal people.

Seven in ten Britons expect their government to follow the rules even if that constrains decisions and makes processes take longer. But most feel that political elites do not do that – instead, they make up the rules for themselves. Among the public there is a deeply-felt frustration that there is no accountability.

This frustration, dissatisfaction, and distrust of the elite is turning people away from democracy, particularly in the three low-trust groups identified in the Britain’s Choice mapping of people’s values and social identity. While these groups are also more likely than others to believe that elites look down on them, the attitudes towards democracy of Disengaged Battlers, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Loyal Nationals are shaped by distinctive factors:

- For **Disengaged Battlers**, their disengagement stems from a view that society is unfair, the system is rigged, and they cannot make a difference.
- For **Disengaged Traditionalists**, it stems more from a distrust of fellow citizens.
- For **Loyal Nationals**, it is driven by the feeling of being left behind by elites who prioritise other groups.

The consequences of increasing distrust and disengagement are that people in these three groups are more open to non-democratic alternatives and rule-breaking authoritarian leadership, more ambivalent about the importance of elections and safeguarding minority rights, and more sceptical about the enforcement of standards in public office. Disengaged groups are also more open to disinformation – and as the pandemic has shown, far less likely to follow public health advice such as on vaccination.

But levels of engagement cannot be taken as a simple proxy for satisfaction with democracy. The most highly engaged of the British Seven segments, Progressive Activists, is also the most dissatisfied with how democracy operates in the UK today:

- 9 in 10 Progressive Activists believe that democracy is rigged to serve the rich and powerful, and does not work for ordinary people – this compares to a population-wide average of 62 per cent.
- 7 in 10 Progressive Activists are dissatisfied with the way democracy works today (71 per cent, compared to an average across all groups of 47 per cent).

Making British democracy stronger and better prepared for future threats then needs to go beyond encouraging engagement, we need to actively re-build some of the lost confidence and trust in our democratic system. We need to close the gap between the system's promise and its reality. To achieve that, we need to understand democracy from the perspective of those who are increasingly disenchanted and disengaged – and focus on efforts that reach those people.

Local and place-based efforts provide a potential avenue to re-build trust and provide a pathway towards meaningful engagement among the least engaged.

- Britons want more of a say in decisions at their local community level (63 per cent) and at a national level (65 per cent), but the public is evenly divided over whether citizens actually can change anything in society.
- In many conversations, people in less-engaged groups are more interested in local and place-based initiatives. But with devolution becoming more contentious, there is no consensus around strengthening local government over central government. Beyond constitutional debates in the nations, few are interested in the technicalities of local devolution and there is scepticism towards adding additional layers of bureaucracy.

While most people trust their own personal preferred media sources, Britons in the lower trust groups feel strongly that the media is biased, divisive and disconnected from the realities of their lives.

- Disengaged Traditionalists are the segment least likely to believe information from a range of popular news sources from broadsheets to broadcasters.
- Two thirds of Disengaged Battlers believe that a secret group controls what happens in society and in the media (66 per cent, compared to an overall average of 53 per cent)

Members of Britain's Gen Z feel committed to democracy, but they are less tolerant of others' views:

- Gen Z believe that the government should follow the rules and they are more confident than others that people can make a difference and change society.
- However, they are more concerned about others holding different views and beliefs, and one third of Gen Z believe that those with opposing political views are wrong about basic facts.

To tackle the challenges of repair and renewal of British democracy, this report makes nine recommendations:

- Efforts to strengthen democracy should focus more strongly on increasing satisfaction and trust in democracy, alongside lowering barriers to participation.
- For people to have faith that politicians are accountable, they need to see that codes of conduct are enforced, and that there are real consequences when rules are broken.
- The case for democratic safeguards needs to be communicated in a way that aligns with the values and interests of low-trust groups.
- Methods to increase participation such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting will be more effective if they are better designed to take account of lower trust groups. That means even more innovation is needed to engage them on their terms, in their own space, at their own time and on issues that matter most in their lives.
- Place-based initiatives and efforts to broaden community involvement can help reduce the gap between Britons and the leaders of key democratic institutions.
- Schools can play a more positive role not only in helping young Britons understand democracy, but also in practising democratic behaviours – including robust discussion and debate and demonstrating respect for others' views.
- For decentralisation to achieve its potential to strengthen confidence in democracy (whether through elected mayors, councils, or devolved administrations) it needs to connect to people's sense of belonging and place, give them a real say – and must be able to deliver results.
- A more strategic, evidence-based approach is needed in how all forms of media present facts and tackle disinformation.
- Politicians and media commentators will continue to endure public contempt for as long as they display contempt for their own opponents. The common practice of trashing the political class – often seen by politicians as the best short-term way to get ahead – has penetrated the public consciousness, to the detriment of them all, and to democracy itself. To close the door to anti-democratic forces, those who shape the political discourse must demonstrate that healthy disagreement can occur without impugning others' motives or character.

The context and challenge of repair

Democracy and the British Seven

The events of the past decade have brought to an end the wide-eyed optimism of the post-Cold War era about the inevitable triumph of western democracy. Across the world, authoritarians are on the rise and democracy in retreat. In the United States, the beacon of democracy to the world, the democratic system is in crisis. A rising China is becoming increasingly aggressive in its anti-democratic posture, and populist authoritarians in many places are claiming the mantle of true democracy. Stormy weather lies ahead – yet the democratic world entered the 2020s with public confidence in democracy profoundly weakened. This was especially true in the United Kingdom, with a large part of the past decade taken up in the fractious debate about Brexit.

If democracy is to be resilient against these looming storms, it needs to enjoy public confidence – not just in principle, but in reality. How we rebuild confidence in democracies is a difficult question. The digital age has skewed the incentives for democratic actors against democracy's long-term health. Few of them know how to recover public trust, and the efforts of democracy activists can often feel disconnected from most peoples' lives.

In pursuit of a more evidence-based understanding of how we find common ground and counter the threats to democracy and cohesion, More in Common launched the Britain's Choice project in 2020. This project centres its analysis of issues on the values, identity, and worldview of Britons, captured in seven population segments through a methodology designed in partnership with data scientists, social psychologists, and other experts. It integrates insights from five dimensions of social psychology that shape the way that people see the world and orient themselves towards society. This mapping has been carried out using multiple waves of quantitative and qualitative research, building on the approach used by More in Common in other major western democracies.

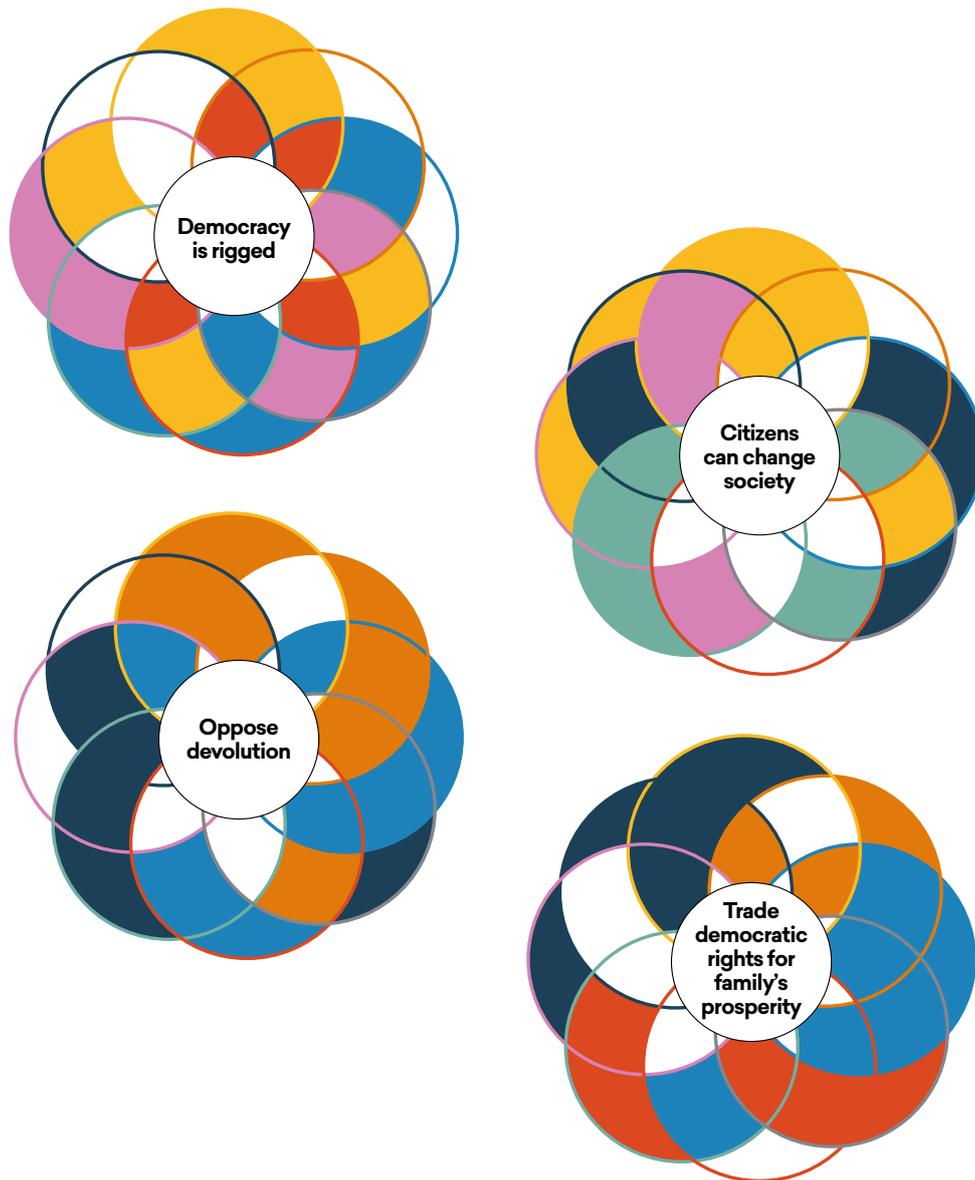
The 'British Seven' segments are often more predictive of people's views across a wide range of issues than standard ways of categorising people, such as their voting history, partisan identity, or demographic characteristics such as age, income, social grade, race or gender. This report shows that the British Seven also provides fresh insights on public attitudes towards democracy. Clear patterns emerge across Britain's seven population segments, reflecting the ways that people's values and worldview shape the way they think about democracy. Efforts to strengthen democracy in the UK will be made more effective if they harness these insights.

A key finding from the Britain's Choice study is that the United Kingdom is not divided into two groups likeminded in their own beliefs but opposed to each other. Instead, public attitudes can be more accurately characterised by the image of a kaleidoscope, where the seven main groups in society cluster in different formations of agreement and disagreement across different issues - such as protecting the environment, fighting inequality, or regulating immigration.

The Britain's Choice report explains the segments in detail, but following is a synopsis of the distinguishing characteristics of the British Seven:

- **Progressive Activists:** A passionate and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and other forms of privilege. They are politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan, and environmentally conscious.
- **Civic Pragmatists:** A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, exhausted, community-minded, open to compromise, and socially liberal.
- **Disengaged Battlers:** A group that feels that they are just keeping their heads above water, and who blame the system for its unfairness. They are tolerant, insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked, and socially liberal.
- **Established Liberals:** A group that has done well and means well towards others, but also sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.
- **Loyal Nationals:** A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and facing themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved, and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots.
- **Disengaged Traditionalists:** A group that values a well-ordered society, takes pride in hard work, and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected.
- **Backbone Conservatives:** A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain's future outside of Europe, and who keenly follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, stalwart, proud, secure, confident, and relatively engaged with politics.

That pattern of overlapping and diverging beliefs found on other issues is also found in the British Seven's attitudes to democracy. The UK does not have two camps divided between pro and anti-democratic forces. Indeed, the key tenets of democracy are supported almost universally, and are widely seen as central to the British way of life. But how the system works is another matter – there, we find deep frustration and widespread disengagement. Understanding this landscape can make work towards democratic renewal more effective and less prone to nugatory efforts or mistakes.



This chapter examines public attitudes to democracy in Britain, with a view towards the practical measures that can be taken to strengthen democracy and, in particular, to avoid the dissatisfaction with our current democratic system that leads to further division and polarisation. It harnesses insights from national polling research and from a series of conversations with people from across the British Seven segments, drawing together distinctive threads from the attitudes and experiences of the seven groups.

Appendix 1 provides more complete profiles of each of the seven segments and an in-depth explanation of their attitudes towards democracy in Britain.



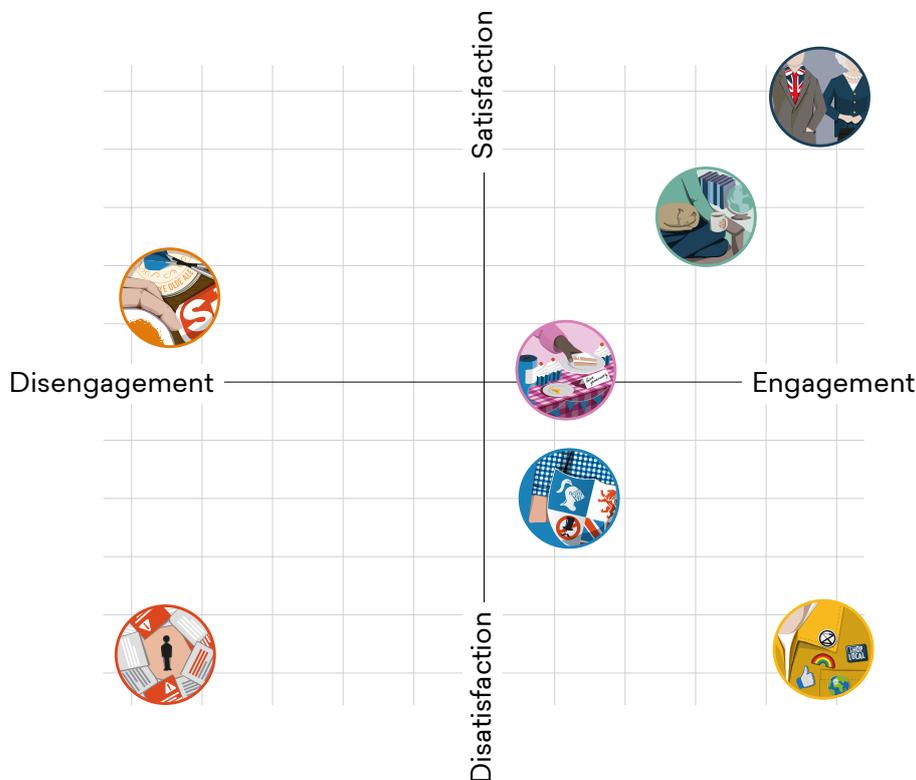
Traffic cone with photo of Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is placed on the Duke of Wellington statue at the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, September 2020
Liza Poor, Unsplash

From engagement to satisfaction and trust

This section explores the dynamics of disengagement towards democracy in the UK. In response to the deep public frustration with how the system is working, the efforts of many of democracy’s champions – campaigners, politicians, policy makers, journalists, schools, and others – are often focused on increasing participation and engagement as the key metric of the strength of UK democracy. This has clear merit, and democracy is better for hearing from a diverse range of voices. Nevertheless, the conversations with Britons conducted for this report suggest that high levels of participation are neither a pre-requisite, proxy or panacea for trust or satisfaction.

Figure 1 maps each of the seven segments in terms of both their on-going democratic engagement and their satisfaction with how Britain’s democracy is working. As the chart shows, there is no direct relationship between a segment’s level of engagement and their satisfaction. To take the starkest example, Progressive Activists, by far the most politically engaged of our British Seven, are in 2021 more dissatisfied with British democracy than any other group. It seems implausible that it will be possible to substantially change this dissatisfaction among Progressive Activists while they feel they are on the ‘losing’ side of the political debate – no matter their level of participation. Conversely, for those who do not have strong political identities, disengagement does not always indicate dissatisfaction – for some, it reflects a general contentment with the status quo and a desire to focus on other things in life.

Figure 1 The democratic engagement and satisfaction of the British Seven



Given this clear distinction between satisfaction and engagement, what matters more than individual participation is that people have faith in the system and that despite it sometimes producing outcomes that they do not like, they still feel that democracy is the best system.

1. The threat to British democracy is not a different system, but disillusionment

Many forms of Government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

– Winston Churchill, November 1947

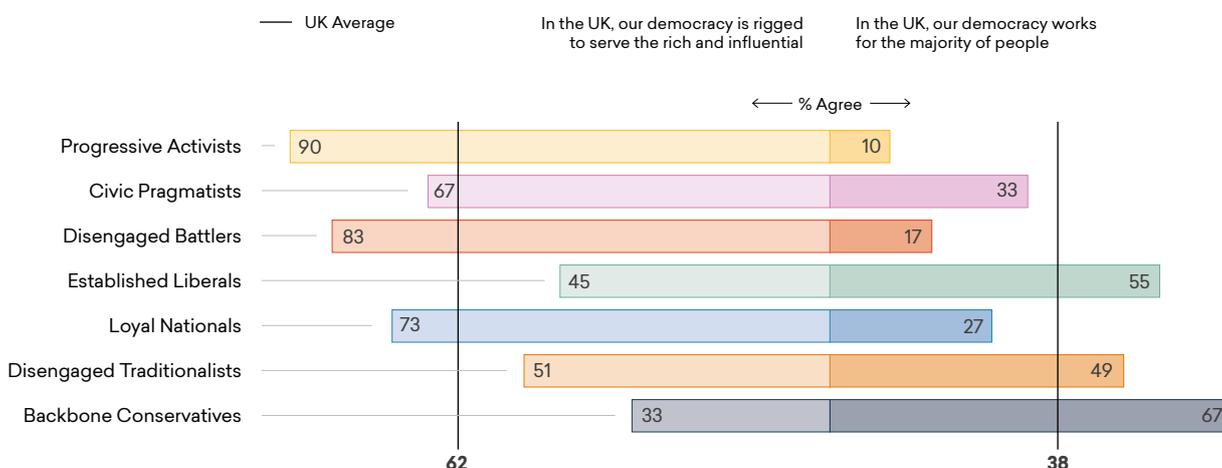
Britons are strongly committed to democracy, but frustrated with its reality. They have little doubt that democracies are fairer, more orderly, and more peaceful societies. Given a choice of alternatives, almost all would choose democracy. Two thirds agree that the United Kingdom is a ‘genuine democracy’. Yet only half are satisfied with the way democracy is working. In only two of the seven British segments - Backbone Conservatives and Established Liberals - do more than half believe that democracy in the UK works for the majority.

In a healthy democracy, there will always be a gap between the democratic ideal and its messy realities. A healthy scepticism of the political class is embedded in British political traditions, and criticism of the shortcomings of governments is what keeps the soil of representative democracy turning over, with frequent changes of government. So too, we should expect that when their side is out of power, committed partisans will be unhappy with the system that has given power to the other side. In short, for a democracy to be strong does not require satisfaction with the status quo – indeed, a restless energy for reform and improvement characterises the most vibrant democracies.

Figure 2

Who does our democracy serve?

Progressive Activists, Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals strongly believe Britain's democracy is rigged



Question: Which do you agree with more? Source: More in Common February 2021

But the dissatisfaction that is felt among Britons today far exceeds that of a healthy democracy. Ordinary people feel distant from those who hold power. Across lines of partisanship and regardless of their level of engagement, there is a widely-held sentiment that the system works for the rich and influential and not the majority – a view that is overall shared by 62 per cent of Britons.

This dissatisfaction creates a vicious cycle that weakens democratic safeguards. If the public feels that politicians as a group are dishonest and self-interested, they are unlikely to think it is worthwhile holding individuals to account for lies or misconduct, leading to lower standards in public life, and in turn further dissatisfaction. This makes it easy for democracy to be undermined by those who seek to foment division, exploit its vulnerabilities for their own ends, and portray themselves as the true voice of the people – undermining democracy from within.

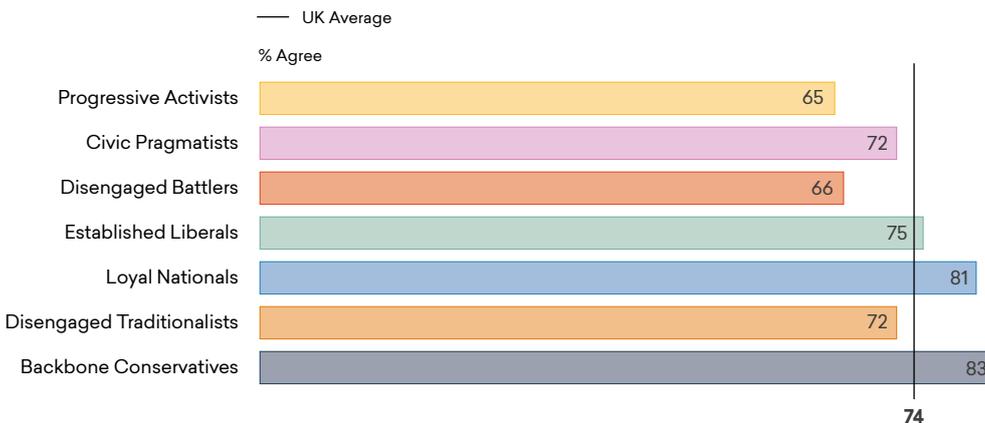
2. The way that politics is reported drives disillusionment and disengagement

Figure 3

Media and division

In all segments, a majority believes that the media exacerbates divisions

The media makes our country feel more divided than it really is



Question: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about politics in the UK today?
I think the media often makes our country feel more divided than it really is. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Britons hold the media responsible for making the country feel more divided than it actually is. There are also strongly held feelings, particularly among low-trust groups, that the news gets distorted to create the most negative slant on issues, and that political reporting is disconnected from what matters in the lives of most Britons. Disengaged Battlers tend to see the media as unreflective of their views (72 per cent, above the average of 65 per cent) and are more likely to believe that a secret group controls what happens in society and in the media (66 per cent, compared to an average of 53 per cent). Disengaged Traditionalists are less likely than average to believe information they learn from key media outlets from broadsheets to broadcasters.

The perception that the media often distorts information also emerged as a real source of frustration in conversations with Britons, as was the premium that the public placed on impartial and well-regulated broadcasting:

Q People just tend to jump on the bandwagon nowadays and protest or anything and I'm not even sure what they were protesting about. It seems like it's all perpetuated by the media and spreading negative news about things, all the time.

- Malcolm, Backbone Conservative, Workington

Q The media is reactionary. It always has been and it will always react or act on fear. It is sellable. It's been proven. Years ago. There was, it actually took place in Monaco, there was a local newspaper that only printed positive stories. It went broke. It went bust. So fear sells and that's how, unfortunately, the media operate. It's not going to change anytime soon.

- Arj, Disengaged Battler, Bristol

Q I think when you look at outlets like Fox News, I think we're really super-lucky in this country to have the BBC. Because I think the fact that on any story you'll get people from both sides say that they're biased, to me proves that they're doing something right. So when they talk about what's happening in Palestine, for example, you'll get pro-Israelis and Palestinians both saying the BBC are biased. So, to me, that proves that they're doing something quite right really. And I know people that have worked for the BBC, and I know that they take their responsibility very seriously to be as neutral as possible and to place the facts.

- Emily, Disengaged Battler, Leeds

Q And I avoid the news if possible, because it's just depressing now.

- Kirsty, Disengaged Traditionalist, Manchester

Q I don't really read the newspapers. I've got the apps on my phone, but you find the newspapers, they're, just like someone said before, they're just trying to always stir things up and make people feel anger and hatred towards one another. And that's why I try and stay away from it. There's rarely any nice, good stories. It's always negativity.

- Nigel, Loyal National, Manchester

Q I feel like it just gives all these newspapers something to talk about again. I think the only people benefiting from that is those newspapers. Just because they've got more articles to write, more headlines to write, so more money for them. But, other than that, I don't think it changes the public all that much.

- Weronika, Loyal National, Stoke

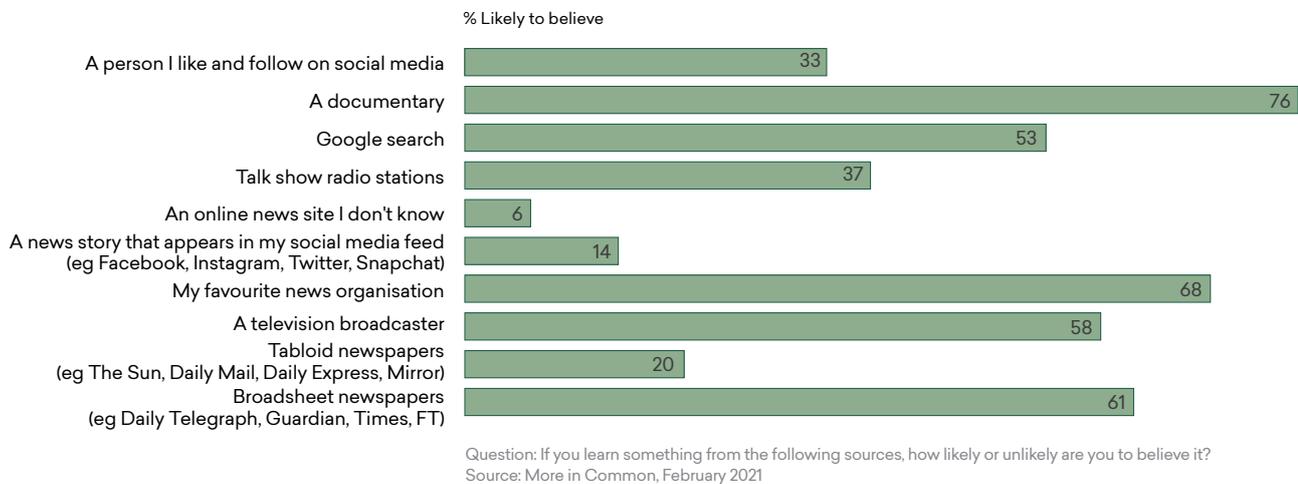


Evening Standard news stand, December 2020
Alex Motoc, Unsplash

Figure 4

Shared sources of information

Documentaries, broadcasters, go-to news organisations and broadsheets are the sources Britons are most likely to believe



These reflections suggest that the more people feel that different media outlets are trying to advance an agenda, or exaggerate divisions, the more likely that trust in media institutions will decline. This creates a vicious cycle as people seek out their own, less accountable sources of information on social media and elsewhere – exposing them to conspiracy theories, fake news, and disengagement. This is unlikely to be reversed unless people see media organisations making a greater effort to present a balanced view of current issues and events.

However, Britons still largely share information and media sources. These shared sources of information prevent different segments from adopting their own versions of the 'facts' and inoculate Britain against disinformation and the provocations of media conflict entrepreneurs – something much more prevalent in the United States where media is more partisan and audiences are more sorted into separate media echo chambers.

3. Low social trust is connected to dissatisfaction with democracy

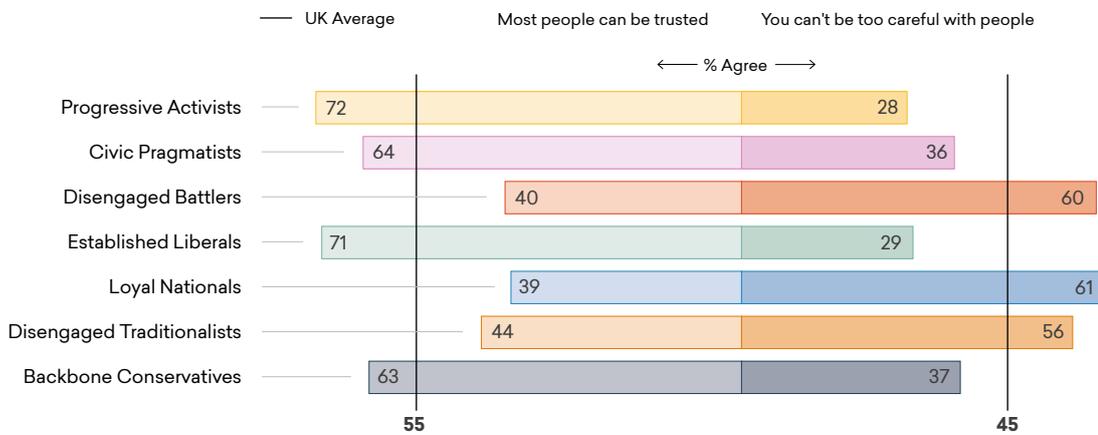
The feeling that democracy only works for the rich and powerful leads to distrust in both democratic institutions and elites in politics and the media. Distrust of the system has some overlaps with distrust of other people:

- Overall, opinion about whether people can be trusted is evenly divided, but with much higher levels of distrust among Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Battlers (who also distrust the system), and Disengaged Traditionalists (who trust the system more, and people less).
- In contrast, Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists have low levels of trust in the system, but relatively high levels of social trust.
- Established Liberals and Backbone Conservatives are trusting of both the system and wider society.

Figure 5

Trust in others

A slight majority thinks you cannot be too careful with others, with substantial variation among the segments



Question: Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? June 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

The low trust among Disengaged Traditionalists, Disengaged Battlers, and Loyal Nationals fuels disengagement among the first two, and disenchantment among the latter two. Tackling the root causes of distrust will take more than better 'get out the vote' campaigns to overcome.

By understanding these low-trust groups, it is possible to better understand the wider dynamics of disengagement in Britain. For these groups, the disengagement is shaped by different and unique factors.

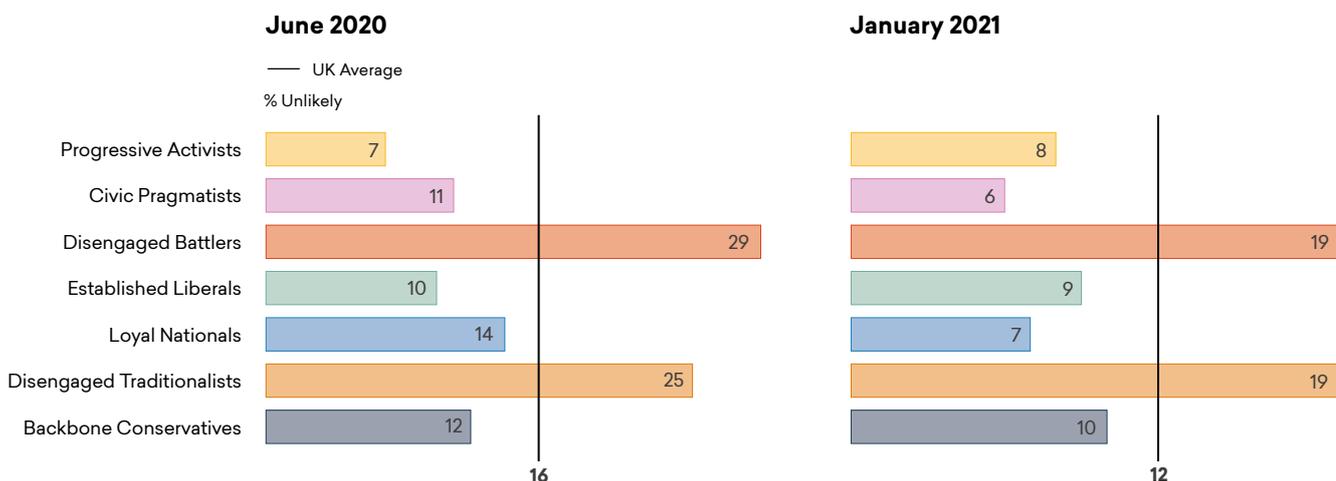
- **Disengaged Battlers** think about democracy from a society-wide perspective rather than an individualistic perspective. They value equal rights for everyone as the most important part of democracy, more than any other group. Their democratic disengagement is shaped by their feelings of frustration with an unfair system and the perception that they are ignored, unacknowledged and disrespected both by elites and their fellow citizens. A feeling that corrupt elites are running a system rigged in their favour drives both their distrust of and disengagement with the way democracy works today.
- **Disengaged Traditionalists** on the other hand view the world through a more individualistic lens. Their democratic disengagement stems more directly from higher level of distrust of other people across the board, rather than a frustration with elites. They are more likely than others to see the rule of law as the most important aspect of democracy. They place a premium on rules being followed by individuals and enforced by authorities, rather than the pros and cons of those rules. This is why they can be particularly aggrieved by the sense there is one rule for them and another for politicians in power. Their disengagement manifests itself as ambivalence towards democracy rather than anger or frustration.
- **Loyal Nationals** think the world is becoming a more dangerous place and think leaders need to be prepared to break the rules to defeat the threats confronting society. Loyal Nationals see other people through their attachment and loyalty to groups, and this contributes to their feeling of being under threat from outsiders. They are deeply frustrated and feel their views and values are excluded by decision-makers in London. Loyal Nationals are slightly more likely than average to participate in elections, but also find it hard to follow politics.

The consequence of these high levels of distrust manifests themselves in a number of ways:

- Lower trust in UK election results
- More openness to non-democratic alternative forms of government and norm-breaking authoritarian leadership
- More ambivalence about the removal of democratic safeguards and protecting the rights of the minority
- Weaker levels of concern about accountability and conduct in public office

Beyond these direct implications for democracy, distrust also weakens our ability to manage new challenges and threats. It makes people less likely to follow official advice, more likely to trust unreliable sources of information, and more vulnerable to disinformation efforts. It is no surprise that the two disengaged groups have also been the most resistant to taking the Covid-19 vaccine (asked in January 2021 during the early stages of the national vaccination programme, they were more than twice as likely as the rest of the population to say that they would be unlikely to get vaccinated).

Figure 6 Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy (by segment)



Question: If a safe and effective vaccine against Covid-19 is developed, how likely would you be to get vaccinated? June 2020. A vaccine is now being administered in the UK and it is regarded as safe and effective by UK medical safeguards bodies. When it becomes available for you how likely, if at all, will you be to get vaccinated? January 2021
Source: More in Common 2020.

4. A key driver of disengagement is the belief that elites are not accountable

When asked to rank the top challenges facing British democracy, three of the top four responses are politicians not being “accountable for keeping their promises”, “bad political leadership”, and “a system run by elites who just look after themselves”. Some 84 per cent of Britons believe that politicians do not care about people like them, and in only two groups – Backbone Conservatives and Established Liberals – do less than 80 per cent share this view.

This antipathy towards the people who are the public face of democracy is a real threat to the UK system. It not only undermines trust, but also weakens the ability of the system to defend itself from anti-democratic actors. If leaders are universally perceived as corrupt and self-interested, an anti-democratic ‘strong man’ leadership style becomes a more plausible answer. Their willingness to throw off democratic constraints becomes part of their appeal. They assert to be more representative and in touch with the people by their willingness to break rules and change the system.



City of Westminster

Westminster Station
Public Subway Toilets

WE
DONT
TRUST
THEM

DONT
PISS
ME
OFF

BLACK
LIVES
MATTER

Controlled
ZONE
Mon - Sat
8.30 am - 6.30 pm

Bus
Taxi
Bicycle

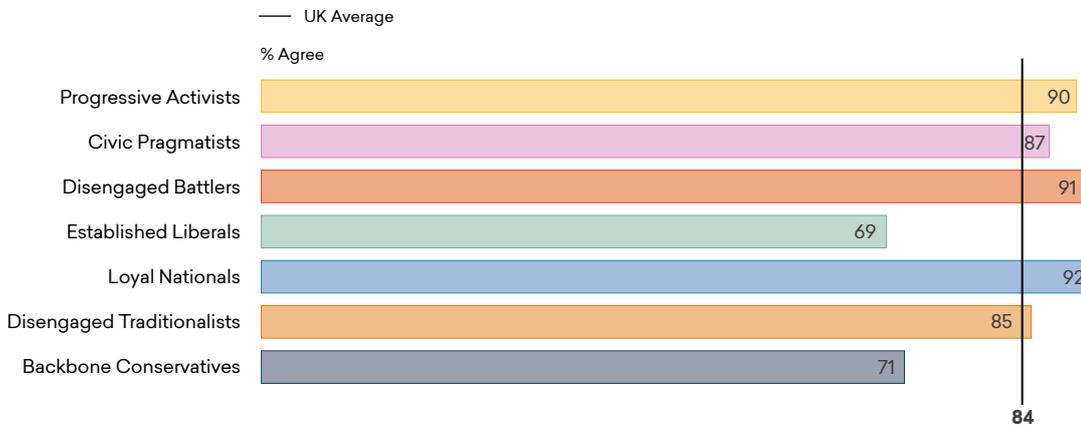
Black Lives Matter protest, Westminster, June 2020
James Eades, Unsplash

Figure 7

Politicians' care

A majority in all segments feel unrepresented in today's politics

Most politicians don't care what people like me think



Question: Which do you agree with more? Most politicians are interested in what people like me think, Most politicians don't care what people like me think. Source: More in Common, February 2021

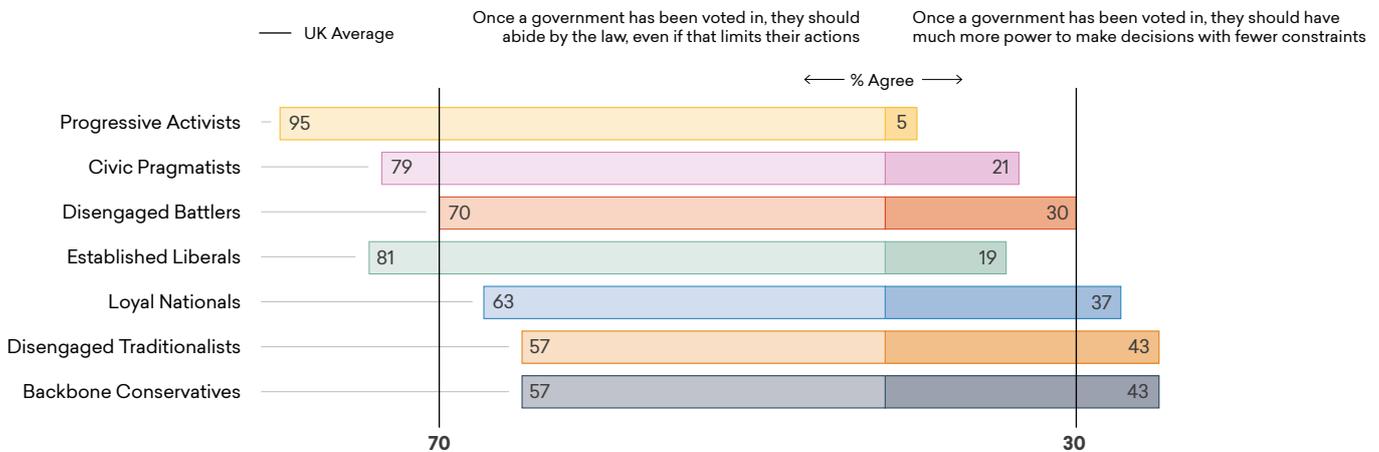
Conversations about politicians among Britons frequently turn to concerns that they see themselves as above the rules – such as on Covid-19 lockdown, expenses, fundraising, government contracts or breaches of HR codes. Even when caught out, sanctions are seen as superficial at best. Few Britons disagree with the notion that there is ‘one rule for them, and another for the rest of us’.

When following the rules is weighed against having more power to get things done – in other words, applied to government decision-making rather than personal conduct – the importance of following the rules is an even higher priority. Seven in ten want politicians to follow the rules and abide by the law, even if that makes decision-making processes slower and limits the actions available to them – and this expectation holds across every group. Nevertheless, a larger minority of Disengaged Traditionalists, Backbone Conservatives and Loyal Nationals prefer fewer constraints on government decision-making. This reflects their core beliefs – these three groups are more likely to believe in the strong exercise of power (in academic research, measures of authoritarian values) and are most likely to value the moral foundation of authority. They are also the three groups most likely to have voted for the current government, which perhaps also explains their preference for looser constraints on its ability to deliver on the agenda for which they voted.

Figure 8

Should the government follow the rules?

Majorities across all segments expect the government to follow the rules, even if this limits what they can do



Question: Which do you agree with more? Source: More in Common February 2021

Demands for more accountability and transparency are also what first comes to mind for many, when they are asked what one thing they would change about democracy if they had a magic wand:

More accountability of how money is spent and why they have chosen this contract or that...and the reasoning behind why the contracts have been rewarded little bit more to the forefront.

– Phil, Backbone Conservative, Surrey

I think I need like more transparency and decision making, so whatever decision, they are making, basically, I want to see what actually made them take the decision.

– Jamie, Disengaged Battler, Yorkshire

I guess sort of political nepotism, I'd like that to go, so that they weren't giving their jobs to their friends and contracts to their friends and sucking up to people of influence at the expense of, you know, the wider public.

– Maggy, Disengaged Traditionalist, Dronfield

The widely-held expectation that rules should be followed applies to fellow citizens as well as leaders, something that has been clear in our conversations about following Covid-19 regulations since the beginning of the pandemic.

I don't have the trust or faith in politicians that I used to. I think the way they approach their role, the way they take on the responsibility that they're given - they feel as if it's almost with impunity, they can get away with anything. Politicians used to resign. Now they just are bare faced and say, well, no I've done this, and they justify why they won't resign.

– Aled, Loyal National, Scotland

Q I think this wishy-washy approach of, yeah, you can follow the rules if you want to follow the rules, you don't have to follow the rules. It's up to you. It should be precise. You have to follow this rule. These are the rules.

– Kunal, Disengaged Traditionalist, London

Q I don't think they did themselves any favours by what I consider to be their weak dealing of the Dominic Cummings affair, when they allowed him to do what he did without any sanction. For me, that was just a massive no-no, and that should have been dealt with and dealt with properly, because that was just... one rule for us, and one rule for them and it really got my back up, that did, personally speaking.

– Andrew, Disengaged Traditionalist, West Midlands

There is a longstanding British custom of disparaging politicians, but the level of anger towards unaccountable politicians today goes deeper than that tradition. It is especially a concern among Britons who are more vulnerable to anti-democratic influences. It is strongly felt, and not easily turned around: confidence will only be rebuilt if people can see that leaders face the same consequences that ordinary people experience when they break the rules.

5. Those least engaged and most distrustful also feel that people in authority look down on them

Another key dimension of public attitudes towards democracy is a widely-held perception that elites – those with cultural, political, and financial power – look down on people like them. These perceptions are strongest among the lowest trust segments, who often view what they are told through the lens of elite condescension. Three-quarters of people feel either looked down on 'a lot' or 'a little' by the government of the United Kingdom (76 per cent). Large majorities feel looked down on by political parties (Conservative Party 74 per cent, Labour Party 63 per cent), and more than 60 per cent of people report similar feelings about local authorities, judges, civil servants, academics, and the media. Feelings of being overlooked, ignored, or judged play a significant role in the erosion of trust in democratic institutions – many examples across the world show that left unchecked these feelings can also lead to growth in support for populist parties or authoritarian alternatives to democracy.

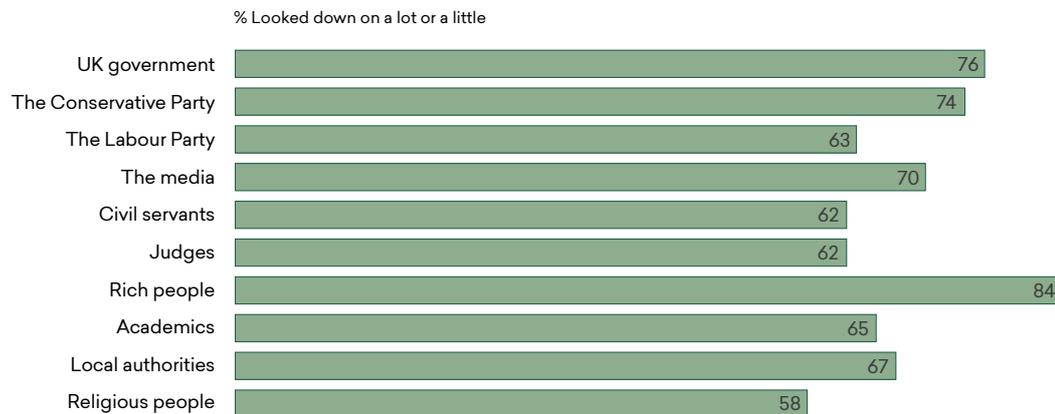


Members of the Citizen's Assembly on Climate Change on their first weekend discussion, Birmingham, January 2020
Fabio de Paolo

Figure 9

Perceptions of being looked down upon by elites

Britons feel 'looked down on' by almost every actor in British democracy



Question: In general, to what extent do you feel that people from the following groups look down upon people like you? Source: More in Common, February 2021

Those with stronger political identities are more likely to feel looked down on by groups they do not like or support on the other side of politics:

- Backbone Conservatives are less likely to feel looked down on by those in positions of power, but they feel that those in the Labour Party look down on them.
- Progressive Activists do not feel looked down on by those in academia – where progressive values are more prevalent – but feel that those in the Conservative Party and the government look down on them.

For groups whose politics is less central to their identity, other factors affect whether they feel respected or disrespected by society:

- Established Liberals feel more respected than almost every other group, reflecting their feelings of comfort and security in their communities.
- Civic Pragmatists feel most looked down on by rich people, reflecting their strong beliefs that as a society we are too focused on money and status.

For low-trust groups feelings of frustration are more pervasive, and reflect their social identity – specifically, their sense of security and personal circumstances – rather than their political identity:

- Loyal Nationals feel disrespected across the board. They feel that they have been excluded, badly treated, neglected, and ignored for some time. They see the world through the lens of competing groups, some of whom are privileged and others who are victimised, and they perceive that other groups in society are afforded more respect than them.
- Disengaged Traditionalists feel less looked down on than Loyal Nationals. They tend to see society through an individual rather than group lens and are more concerned about the behaviour of their fellow citizens than condescending political elites.
- Disengaged Battlers feel most looked down on by the parts of the system where they experience the most interactions, such as local authorities. In this respect they differ from other groups who more strongly perceive condescension from elites such as politicians and the media at a national level.

These feelings of condescension and being disrespected by those with power and influence are widely shared:

 **We were approached by the Council to ask can this MP come along and talk to you, because we were a small business. He came along, and all he did was listen without any enthusiasm, and he didn't even ask a question. He was very keen to be photographed and videoed in front of our poster and speak to the camera to say he's supporting small businesses...and said yes we'll get back to you. Never heard a thing from him since!**
- Aled, Loyal National, Scotland

 **When you've got politicians going around breaking the rules, especially codes of conduct and things, they really don't think care about anybody but themselves.**
- Damon, Backbone Conservative, West Sussex

 **I don't think [my MP] is interested beyond the elections, I know that he is in league with certain groups that a lot of us wouldn't agree with, like the local fox hunt and stuff because the local hunt master is a former police chief superintendent, her husband is a former judge, so you know, they are in the pockets of them and not reflecting the will of the wider community which is to try and shut down the local hunts.**
- Maggy, Disengaged Traditionalist, Dronfield

 **It feels like it's their divine right to be in that position, like some of them are there because their fathers and stuff, just like the conveyor belt of it... If I did what they've done in their jobs, I'd have just been sacked and that'd be it, but they get payoffs.**
- Molly, Civic Pragmatist, Cheshire

 **I think you can imagine it's because you have to be so involved in the job that you're doing, your focus is so granular in that particular area, that you actually don't really understand that what people might be facing on the ground as such**
- Pearce, Disengaged Traditionalist, London

 **We've been like this for years yet you've never given a toss about us, the government's never given a toss about us.**
- Lucy, Progressive Activist, Scotland

 **Spend a day in our lives... I think decisions are made in government by people who don't understand what it's like at the sharp end.**
- Miles, Loyal National, Norwich

Feelings of disrespect and shame are deeply embedded in people's psyche, and not easily overcome. More Britons need to feel represented by people like them in places of power and influence, and the perceived distance between those elites and ordinary people needs to be narrowed if confidence in the system is to recover.

6. These factors drive ‘No time’ and ‘No point’ disengagement

Discussions of the health of democracy often assume implicitly that participation and satisfaction move in the same direction, and therefore that higher levels of engagement are the central goal of efforts to strengthen democracy. An analysis of why some Britons are disengaged questions this assumption.

Disengagement is not necessarily a sign of weakness in British society or democracy. Our research finds many reasons why people chose not to engage in politics and current affairs. Some do not engage because they are, for the moment, comfortable and content and ‘happy to leave politics to others’. Some others are apathetic, others disengaged, at the extreme end, some are actively hostile.

In the case of two groups whose orientation to democracy is defined by low engagement – the Disengaged Battlers and Disengaged Traditionalists – we find two types of disengagement at different ends of that spectrum:

- **No time disengagement** – where people feel they have better things to be doing and prioritise this in their day-to-day life, rather than participating in democratic activities or following current affairs. This is more common among Disengaged Traditionalists.
- **No point disengagement** – where people opt-out due to a frustration or anger with a broken system. This is more common among Disengaged Battlers.

‘No time disengagement’



There’s things I’m not happy with but I’m not unhappy enough to give up time

– *Pearce, Disengaged Traditionalist, London*

Many Britons have opinions about national debates but give priority to caring about their own day-to-day lives rather than societal challenges at the local or national level. This is often a more benign type of disengagement. Some think they might be more engaged in the future – indeed, people who told us they do not feel they have time to participate now, also shared stories of stepping up in the past to campaign to save their local school, or secure alley-gates for the back of the terrace house.

‘No time disengagement’ is especially common among Disengaged Traditionalists. They are not an anti-democratic group, but they are more ambivalent than other segments about the importance of democratic principles, from doing away with elections to safeguarding minority rights. This ambivalence is shaped by their core beliefs and the premium they place on an ordered society. To some extent, they want right-minded, competent people to make the rules and they are happy to live within them, rather than being involved in making them. Many do not spend much time thinking about politics or society. Bethany from Liverpool who is in her late 30s, is a striking example of this disengagement: she only noticed the Brexit debate after the 2016 Referendum, and some months after the terms of the UK’s departure from the European Union in 2021 thought there could still be another referendum:

I've never voted... no-one's ever really spoken to me about voting. When the whole EU thing happened, I missed that whole voting situation. It just kind of bypassed me completely. But suddenly there's this conversation about Remain and Leave and Brexit and all this, and it seemed like the people have made a change... I'm like, 'Well, I don't like that change' and actually I could have done something about it... well actually if I get a second chance, I'm going to the polling station.

It is natural that some people should feel that there are better things to do than engage with politics or democracy. Their feelings about democracy are better measured by levels of trust and satisfaction, rather than unrealistically expecting high levels of engagement. At the same time, we should be wary of a democratic paternalism that makes assumptions that certain groups of people are not interested in having a greater say in the affairs governing their lives, when their disengagement stems from obstacles such as economic insecurity or marginalisation. For some, no time disengagement stems from the fact that they are just getting by, juggling low-paid jobs and zero hours contracts, or focusing all their time and energy on caring responsibilities.

Many people in these circumstances may want to be more involved, but see the ability to spend time following current affairs and participating as a luxury they cannot afford. Time-consuming exercises in democratic engagement are unlikely to appeal to these groups, who instead need lower barriers to entry to be able to participate. In addition, interacting with those who show 'no time disengagement' needs to be done on their terms. It may require one-on-one engagement (given their low level of participation in community activities generally) and the deployment of nudges and low-barrier forms of participation that decrease their ambivalence or increase their commitment, without expecting them to devote time and attention that is simply not available.

'No point disengagement'



I question: what am I voting for? Democracy feels like Britain's Got Talent, lots of people voting for something that I don't care about. In my area, it is things like dog litter bins, that I'm not interested...certainly the kids aren't interested in whether there's going to be a new dog bin or if there's going to be, you know, an increase in car parking charges or any of these things kids just aren't interested in them and I'm not interested in them.

– Mason, Disengaged Battler, Cardiff

Among Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals in particular, many see no point in taking part in democracy as it currently works. There is a more disturbing type of disengagement. They see the system as broken and politicians as unaccountable. This perception is not driven by partisanship (as it is for the Progressive Activists) but rather by a feeling that the system is not fair and does not represent them.

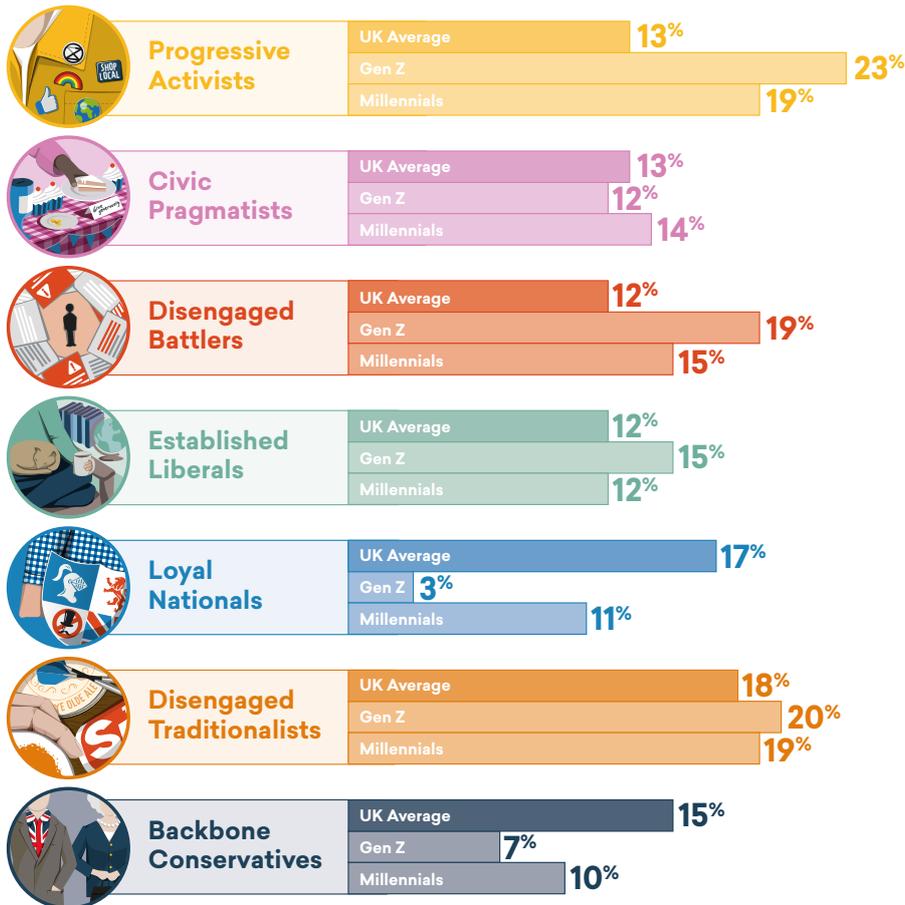
'No point disengagement' is associated with feelings of frustration, neglect, and a settled consensus that politicians do not care what ordinary people think. It is exacerbated by the feeling that elites look down on them, and both politicians and the media do not listen to people like them. At its extremes, it involves doubt about whether democracies provide the best way to deliver a fair, orderly and peaceful society. For some, especially Loyal Nationals, there is an appeal in populist and authoritarian alternatives, because they cannot imagine things being worse.

However legitimate the reasons for ‘no point disengagement’, it is a symptom of malaise. It is a danger to democracy, because people who see no point in democratic engagement are more vulnerable to ‘us-versus-them’ political narratives that target groups within their society as enemies, such as immigrants, refugees, Muslims, or the ‘other side’ of political divides. A central challenge for democracy champions is to develop evidence-based insights into how people come to embrace this perspective, and how they shift towards more constructive attitudes towards democracy. Conversations with both Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals suggest that many are more likely to be convinced by seeing examples of democracy delivering benefits to society, than by participating in democratic processes. But participation can provide positive interactions with others who hold differing views, strengthening resilience against ‘us-versus-them’ narratives and re-building trust. Two priorities that emerge from understanding this ‘no point’ disengagement are initiatives that build trust in others (especially among Loyal Nationals), and satisfaction in the system (especially among Disengaged Battlers).

Generation Z, Millennials and Democracy

Younger Britons are committed to democracy but less comfortable with diverse views

Spread of segments across Gen Z and Millennials



Generational differences on social and political attitudes are larger in the United Kingdom than most similar countries, as Professor Bobby Duffy recently noted in his book *Generations*². Significant generational differences exist on attitudes towards democracy, as with many other issues. The differences between young, middle-aged and older Britons reflect a combination of age effects, reflecting people's life stage, and enduring shifts, reflecting the changing values of different generational cohorts. An important factor at play in those differences is that the two generations who came of age in the post-Cold War era, Millennials and Generation Z³, have a different experience of democracy than previous generations, who identified strongly with democracy because it was what demonstrated the moral superiority of the western alliance over the Soviet bloc, and was the cause for which people were willing to sacrifice their lives.

² Bobby Duffy (2021), *Generations: Does When You're Born Shape Who You Are?*, Atlantic Books

³ Based on following the convention of identifying Generation Z as persons born after 1997, i.e. the 18-24 year old age group. For the purpose of a simple comparison, we describe 25-34 year olds as Millennials, while noting that as the millennial generation is generally defined as those born from 1981 to 1996, there are some older Millennials in the 35-44 year cohort not included in these numbers.



Young woman takes part in climate protest in Leeds, February 2019
Josh Barwick, Unsplash

The Britain's Choice analysis finds higher levels of disengagement and activism among the two younger generations of Britons:

- Gen Z are more likely than any other age group to belong to one of the two Disengaged groups, with 39 per cent either Disengaged Battlers or Disengaged Traditionalists, compared to 30 per cent of the national population. Millennials are also over-represented among the Disengaged groups, although not as much as Gen Z.
- There are also significantly more Progressive Activists among Gen Z and Millennials. While 13 per cent of the overall population, they comprise 23 per cent of Gen Z and 19 per cent of Millennials.⁴
- There are significantly fewer Loyal Nationals, with just 3 per cent of Gen Z and 11 per cent of Millennials, compared to 17 per cent of the population generally. Likewise, there are fewer Backbone Conservatives in the younger groups – just 7 and 10 per cent respectively, compared to 19 and 31 per cent in the 55-74 and 75+ age group.

There is little evidence that significant numbers of younger Britons are alienated from the principles of democracy:

- 7 in 10 in Gen Z believe that Britain is a genuine democracy, while slightly fewer 6 in 10 Millennials hold the same belief.
- Gen Z are more satisfied with the way UK democracy works today (63 per cent satisfaction), while Millennials have the lowest levels of satisfaction (44 per cent), compared to 54 per cent satisfaction among those aged over-40.
- Large majorities among Gen Z and Millennials embrace the key tenets of democracy, such as equal rights, free and fair elections, and the protection of minorities.
- Gen Z and Millennials are less concerned than older age groups that British democracy faces serious threats today (45 per cent of Gen Z and 53 per cent of Millennials are concerned, compared to 61 per cent of over-40s).

Younger generations also display more optimism about the power of individuals to make a difference within our democracy:

- Some 64 per cent of Gen Z say that they strongly believe that citizens can make a difference and change UK society (compared to a population average of 51 per cent).
- While only one in fifty have participated in a protest in the past year, Gen Z are still more likely to be involved in protesting than any other age group (8 per cent versus an overall average of just 2 per cent).
- This greater spirit of activism is reflected in how many Gen Z have signed a petition in the last year (58 per cent v 43 per cent average). They are most likely to say that they follow current affairs because they believe it is their duty as citizens, and half of them believe engagement with politics can help solve important problems.

Criticisms of the failings of the system in the UK are shared by Millennials and Gen Z, with larger than average proportions – around 10 percentage points more – posing questions about the system more fundamentally.

- A large majority perceive the system in the UK as rigged to serve the rich and influential rather than working for the majority of people, a view shared by around seven in ten Millennials and Gen Z.

⁴ Gen Z findings are for the 18-24 year old age group (born from 1997), while Millennial findings are based on responses from the 25-34 year old age group (i.e. born 1987 to 1996). With an overall panel of 10,300 in the Britain's Choice project, more than 2,500 people belong to one of those two age cohorts.

- A higher proportion than average do not trust UK election results (around three in ten Gen Z and Millennials, compared to half that among over 40s).
- There is more ambivalence about the prospect of doing away with elections if it meant their preferred party could stay in power (36 per cent of Gen Z and 25 per cent of Millennials compared to 21 per cent of over 40s).
- A few are open to consider alternative less democratic forms of government (19 per cent for Millennials and 15 per cent for Gen Z, compared to only 7 per cent among over 40s).
- There is slightly more scepticism towards the government's right to restrict freedoms to ensure public safety (almost four in ten Gen Z and Millennials believe government should not have the right, compared to one in four among over 40s).

One dimension of generational difference that has attracted debate in recent years is the shift in attitudes towards inclusion and diversity among Millennials and Gen Z, and whether this leads to a weaker commitment to the values of a pluralist society.

- Overall, levels of trust in others are significantly lower among Gen Z and Millennials than in the general population, with 67 per cent of Gen Z and 60 per cent of Millennials feeling that you cannot be too careful with other people, compared to 47 per cent among those aged 40 and over.
- Gen Z and Millennials appear more concerned about those who hold different or extreme views, perhaps reflecting the greater sensitivity among younger generations to issues of inclusion and diversity that can manifest themselves in incidents such as those on university campuses around 'cancel culture'. Strikingly, 45 per cent of Gen Z and 38 per cent of Millennials report feeling scared that there are others who have different values and beliefs from them, compared to 28 per cent among over 40s.
- Millennials are the least likely of any age group to express support for the rights of people with extreme views to express those views.
- This concern translates into a greater sense of unease with people who hold different views. One third of Gen Z believe that people who disagree with them politically are wrong on basic facts (compared to 18 per cent of Millennials and 15 per cent of over 40s).
- Asked whether they feel "it is more important to stop offensive speech than it is for people to have free speech", or whether "it is more important to protect free speech than it is to regulate what people say to avoid offending groups", views among Gen Z are evenly divided, whereas Millennials give free speech priority by a margin of 43 to 24 per cent, and over 40s by an even larger margin of 60 to 17 per cent.
- At the same time, there is some evidence of other Britons in Gen Z holding contrary views, and being concerned that there is too little protection of freedom of expression. Some 35 per cent of Gen Z are concerned about the lack of protection of freedom of speech, compared to an overall average of 28 per cent.

More focus needs to be given to strengthening social trust and solidarity among Gen Z and Millennials, which shape people's orientation towards democracy. Among Gen Z and Millennials, evidence points towards higher levels of anxiety and loneliness, worsened by the experience of greater isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. These dynamics play out in very real ways, such as their comparatively higher levels of vaccine hesitancy, with one in four Gen Z and one in five Millennials saying in January 2021 they were unlikely to get vaccinated compared to an average of 12 per cent – also related, of course, to their lower risk of becoming seriously ill from Covid. The findings also point towards the value of practical civics-based education at the school and university level, especially in connection with engaging with views and opinions different from their own and how pluralism is central to democracy.

The power of place

Getting involved locally provides a pathway to greater trust and confidence for many less-engaged Britons

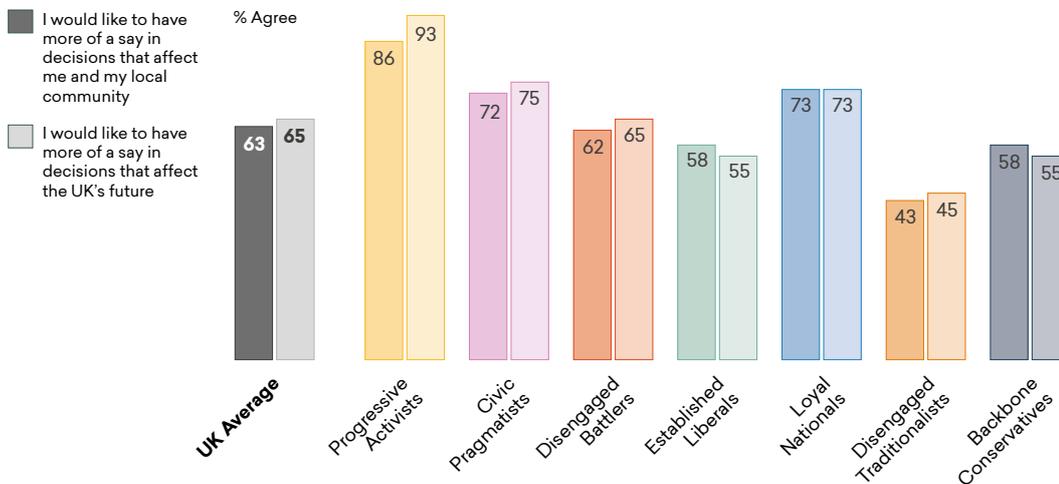
National debates often feel distant from the values, priorities, and experiences of ordinary British people. Politicians on a national stage prefer to talk in sweeping terms about issues at a scale that feels unrelatable to many, while less-engaged Britons focus more on the practical concerns of day-to-day life. They respond more positively to leaders whom they perceive as rooted in their communities, with life experiences relevant to those communities.

For the same reason, when Britons think of becoming more involved in democracy and decision-making, many are likely to start with the community where they live. A majority of Britons want more say in decisions made at both a local community level (63 per cent) and a national level (65 per cent). Interest is strongest among Progressive Activists, Loyal Nationals and Civic Pragmatists, and considerably lower among Disengaged Traditionalists.

Figure 10

Britons want their say

Most Britons want more of a say in decisions made about their local community and UK



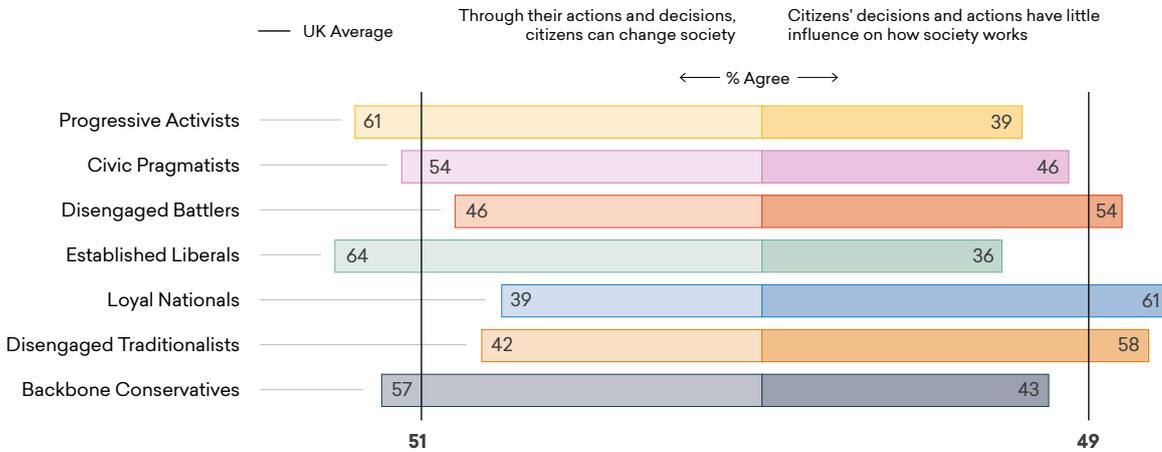
Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Source: More in Common February 2021

Britons are evenly divided on the question of whether citizens can change society through their decisions and actions, with the highest levels of confidence among Established Liberals (at 64 per cent) followed by Progressive Activists, and the lowest among Loyal Nationals (at 39 per cent), followed by Disengaged Traditionalists and Disengaged Battlers.

Figure 11

Can Britons make a difference in society?

Britons are split over whether citizens can make a change in society through their actions and decisions



Question: Which do you agree with more? Source: More in Common February 2021

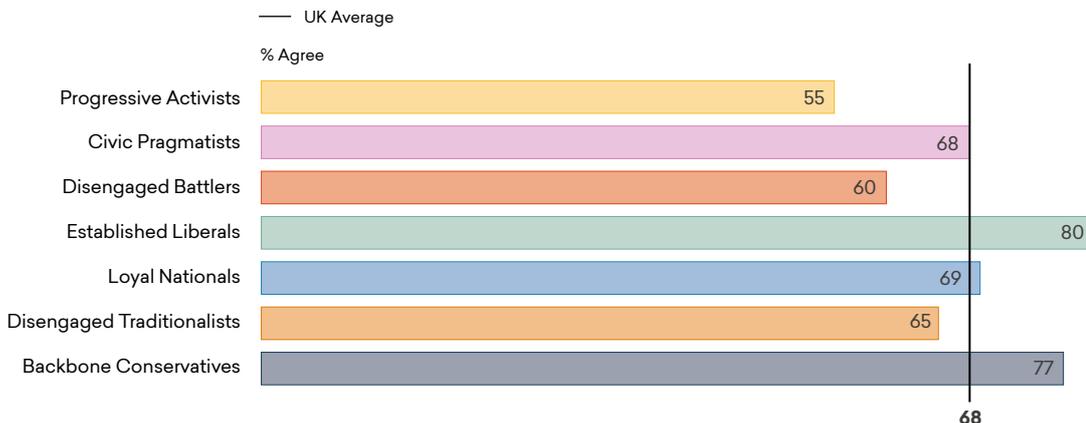
The contrast between people’s sense of agency at the level of society generally and in their local community is striking. The potential for local impact gives people a greater sense of agency and democratic confidence. By a margin of 68 to 32 per cent, Britons believe that people in their area can find ways to improve society when they want to. This sense of confidence in making a difference locally is strongest among Established Liberals (at 80 per cent) followed by Backbone Conservatives, and weakest among Progressive Activists (at 55 per cent) followed by Disengaged Battlers and Disengaged Traditionalists. A comparison between these findings highlights how Progressive Activists are less oriented towards their local community and more towards national issues. More significantly, it highlights that low-trust groups such as Loyal Nationals have much greater confidence in their capacity to engage and make a difference locally than at a broader societal level.

Figure 12

Local agency

Most Britons believe that people can find ways to improve their local area

People in our area are able to find ways to improve things around here when they want to



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: People in our area are able to find ways to improve things around here when they want to. Source: More in Common-MHPC, January 2021



Manchester Town Hall, September 2021
Chris Curry, Unsplash

In conversations about their local community, Britons express a greater sense of agency over action and initiatives rooted in their local community – feeling it is a sphere where they can make a real difference, and solve issues that are meaningful for them and their families in the day-to-day, unlike national debates which feel distant from their lives.

Q Like I keep my say at the moment to local level, because it gets heard and something happens. I don't bother anymore with the national because it doesn't get heard. You know it's just left there.

– Molly, Civic Pragmatist, Cheshire

Q I think you have to start small and do it locally, because unless you are an MP, where you're in a position to actually go down, be part of that bigger picture covering the country, your voice is too small. But if you start small and then the representative from your group that meets the next tier up and so on and so forth, it's a snowball effect. And hopefully then the messages get down to Whitehall or wherever. And that's what happens.

– Betty, Disengaged Battler, Leeds

Even in connection with larger national and international issues, local and more practical concerns often provide the prism through which people engage with larger issues such as climate change or economic inequality. In discussions on climate change for instance, rather than debating temperature changes, or the 'net zero' target, we find that Disengaged Battlers, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Loyal Nationals are interested in the practical and have many questions – how much will a heat pump cost? Are there enough charging points for electric cars? Is this another white elephant? Grounding debates in what they mean for people in their everyday lives could be a more fruitful method of engagement. This is not always about local community – sometimes it will be connected with national figures who enjoy high levels of public trust and credibility on the issues they speak out on, such as David Attenborough and Marcus Rashford – but for less engaged Britons, what is more relatable will provide the starting point for thinking about larger issues.

Q But the thing is, now as well, they wanting everybody now to go hybrid or electric. I've not gotten an electric car but we was thinking of getting one. You go to any shopping center or whatever, most we've been to, and you can bet your life there's one charging point. What do you do, if there's two people in that supermarket and you both were queuing up to park your car to charge it?

– Donna, Loyal National, Leeds

Q I notice as well, as far back as when double-glazing became a big thing, you get lots of cowboy firms knocking on doors. They've got no idea what they're doing. They did it with the cavity wall insulation. They've got no idea what they were talking about, most of them. It was just, "Oh yeah, we come and drill some holes in your wall," because they got paid a massive amount of money for doing it to a lot of properties that it was definitely not suitable for. Then, you get another big thing where loads of cowboy firms are knocking on your door going, "have you been ripped off with cavity wall insulation?"

– Celine, Disengaged Battlers, Blackpool

Q I think, like you say, it's one of those that, it depends if the trends get picked upon and if it's what's fashionable. The likes of Kardashians making lip fillers trendy. Why can't you make being healthy trendy? Why can't you make being eco-friendly trendy?

– Sonya, Loyal National, Leeds

Q Yeah, I think it's all doable by 2050, provided everybody chips in and does their part. I don't know about electric cars. They're not cheap...Well, I like older cars. But, what are they going to do with all the old cars?

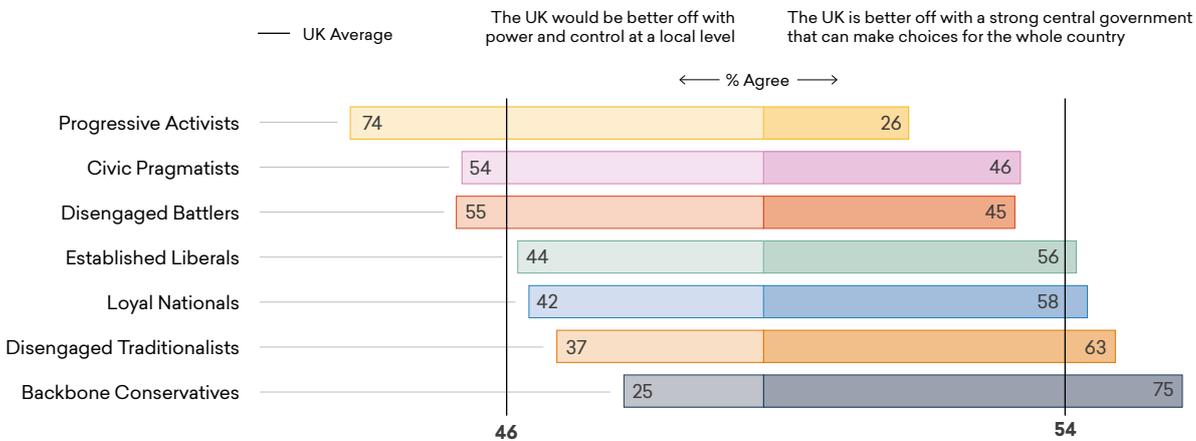
– Wayne, Loyal National, Blackpool

The potential for place-based initiatives comes with the caveat that it does not necessarily translate into widespread support for a change in the UK's constitutional settlement and greater devolution. When asked to choose between stronger local or stronger central government, public opinion slightly favours strong central government, by a margin of 54 to 46 per cent. The differences among segments on this question suggests that many view devolution of power from central government in Westminster through the lens of debates about the future of the Union.

Figure 13

Central government v local government

Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives have clear cut views on devolution, but most segments are conflicted



Question: Which do you agree with more? Source: More in Common February 2021

This nuance in British public opinion is important to understand for those advocating for greater local power and decision-making. Pitched against strong national Government, local decision-making narrowly comes second (likely exacerbated by dissatisfaction with the four nations approach to Covid rules). Arguments for devolution, which are often technocratic and managerial, resonate less than arguments about empowering pride of place at the local level. As on other issues, most Britons are balancers. They have strong pride of place at their local level and feel that local decision-making can breathe life into communities that feel neglected⁵. At the same time, most want to shy away from bureaucracy and want central government to ensure strong governance and a well-ordered, well-functioning society.

⁵ For examples of such initiatives to strengthen local engagement and participation, see the October 2021 paper from New Local, and written by ten Conservative MPs from the 2019 intake: Trusting the People: The Case for Community-Powered Conservatism <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/trusting-people-community/>

7. Disengagement increases the likelihood of compromise on democratic principles

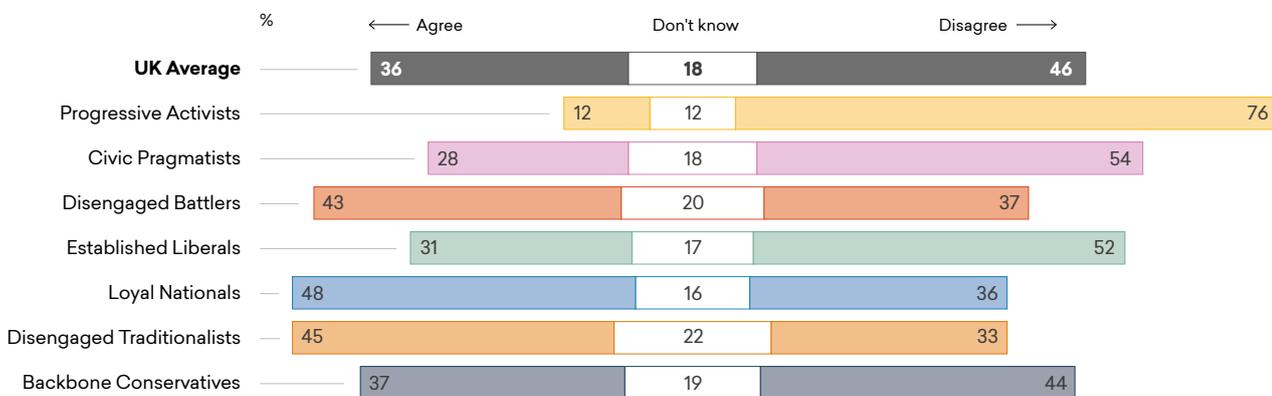
The groups who are more disengaged and have the lowest trust in the system (Disengaged Traditionalists, Disengaged Battlers and Loyal Nationals) are least likely to see a problem in compromising on democratic principles. They are more likely to believe that the end justifies the means and, for example, support rule-breaking ‘strong-man’ approaches to leadership. Asked about whether they would be willing to trade away certain freedoms for a better quality of life, or to sacrifice the rights of minorities, they are more likely to say yes.

Figure 14

Support for authoritarian leadership

Most Britons reject the proposal that we need a rule-breaking leader, but Disengaged Groups and Loyal Nationals are more likely to agree than disagree

To fix this country, the UK needs a leader willing to break the rules



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement.
Source: More in Common February 2021

Just over one third of Britons (36 per cent) believe that the UK needs a leader who is willing to break the rules to fix the country’s problems – a commonly-used yardstick for identifying the strength of people’s commitment to democratic principles. International surveys such as the Ipsos Global Advisor survey show that Britain scores relatively low on the ‘System is Broken’⁶ index, ahead of other western democracies which record larger majorities in favour of a more authoritarian leadership style. Loyal Nationals, Disengaged Traditionalists, and Disengaged Battlers are significantly more likely to embrace the idea of a leader who offers to fix the country by bending and breaking the rules. Significant majorities of Progressive Activists and smaller ones of Civic Pragmatists, Established Liberals and Backbone Conservatives, reject that proposition.

The openness to authoritarian leadership among the three lowest trust groups is shaped by different factors. For Disengaged Battlers, a rule-breaking leader may appear as the best chance to fix a broken system that constantly creates obstacles to a fairer society. For Disengaged Traditionalists and Loyal Nationals, who together made up half of the Conservative vote in the 2019 General Election, it can often feel like rules and procedures are standing in the

⁶ Ipsos Global Advisor, 25 Country survey, “Broken-system sentiment in 2021. Populism, Anti-elitism and nativism” July 2021 < <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-07/GA%20-%20Broken%20System%20Sentiment%20-%20Populist%20Anti-Elitism%20and%20Nativism%20in%202021%20-%20Graphic%20Report.pdf>

way of the Government delivering their commitments. They are, for instance, more likely to feel frustrated at the perceived use of the Human Rights Act to block deportations or of tougher criminal sentences. However, they tend to distinguish between red tape rules that can justifiably be bent or broken to get things done, and corruption or the breaking of social rules such as during the pandemic, where they expect strong enforcement.

While there is no perfect way of measuring people’s willingness to trade away democratic rights or freedoms, one in four Britons say that they are either willing to accept, or are ambivalent towards, trading rights and freedoms if it can secure a better future for their family (28 per cent; a further 36 per cent neither agree nor disagree). This does not amount to an outright rejection of democracy, but rather shows that for many democratic principles are not absolute. While a hypothetical question about trading off democratic principles for material gains is imperfect, it provides valuable insights into the differences in people’s attitudes towards democracy which may come into play in future national debates:

- Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Battlers are more willing to accept limitations to their democratic rights if makes their family better off.
- Backbone Conservatives and Disengaged Traditionalists are more likely to be neutral about the prospect of trading away rights.
- Progressive Activists are alone in overwhelmingly rejecting trading off democratic principles, while Established Liberals and Civic Pragmatists are more likely than not to prioritise democratic principles over material gains.

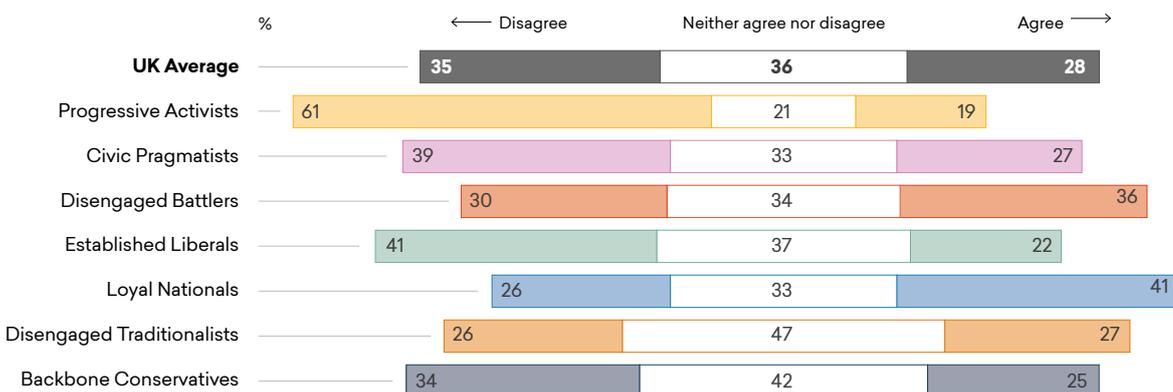
These findings suggests that despite their commitment to democracy, many Britons do not think about democracy in terms of abstract unimpeachable principles, as many Progressive Activists do. Instead, they are concerned about how democracy delivers results in practice. If democracy fails to deliver for them, three in ten say they might consider other systems. To make democracy in the UK more resilient to future threats, more people need to feel that democratic principles are not in tension with, but integral to making progress on issues that ordinary Britons prioritise – concerns such as jobs and prosperity, reducing inequality, tackling crime, and controlling illegal immigration.

Figure 15

Willingness to trade democratic freedoms

When presented with the promise of something better, a significant minority of Britons contemplate giving up democratic rights and freedoms

I would accept some limitations to my rights and freedoms if it meant my family would be better off than they are now





Crown Court, London, December 2020
Paul Chard, Unsplash

Figure 16

Protecting ethnic minority rights

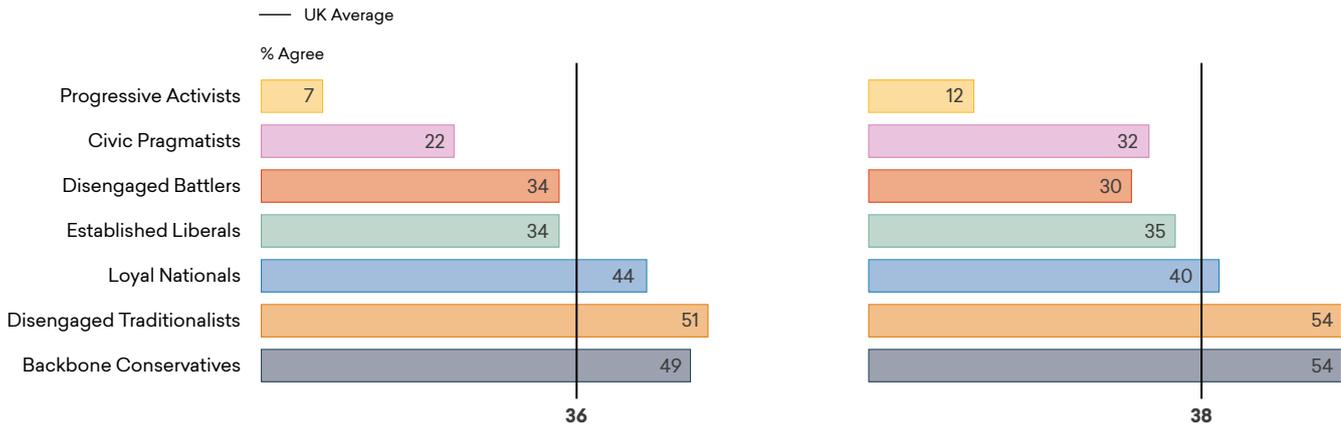
Most segments reject that the rights of ethnic and racial minorities should take a backseat, but the strength of this belief varies by segment

Protecting the rights of those out of political power

Most segments want minority rights to be safeguarded, but the strength of this belief varies by segment

In a democracy, the concerns of racial/ethnic minorities should take a back seat if they conflict with the majority

In a democracy, the concerns of people out of political power should take a back seat if they conflict with the majority



Question: Which do you agree with more? Source: More in Common February 2021

One measure of public commitment to the values of pluralism and democracy is support for the protection of the rights of minorities when they are in conflict with the will of the majority. Applied to either ethnic minorities or to political minorities, this principle enjoys relatively strong support in Britain: by a margin of two to one, Britons reject the idea that the majority will should be able to override the concerns of minorities.

- Significant majorities of Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, Disengaged Battlers and Established Liberals embrace this principle. Among Progressive Activists, it is an article of faith (93 per cent agree that ethnic minority rights need to be even if a majority disagrees, and 88 per cent that a similar principle should apply to people out of power). Civic Pragmatists, who are motivated by concern for others, also strongly agree (78 per cent and 68 per cent respectively, reflecting a stronger concern for racial and ethnic minorities than for political minorities). More than two-thirds of Disengaged Battlers and Established Liberals also agree on both counts.
- While a majority of Loyal Nationals support the protection of minority rights, they are on average more likely than most others to think that the concerns of racial or ethnic minorities should take a backseat. This is likely driven by the fact Loyal Nationals are: more engaged when issues are framed in terms of ‘us-versus-them’ group identities, the most sceptical of immigration, and more likely to believe that the rights of ethnic minorities are currently well protected.
- Disengaged Traditionalists and Backbone Conservatives are the two groups most likely to believe in a majoritarian approach that allows the majority to override the concerns of minorities. Even then, they are almost evenly divided on this question, with slightly stronger support for the protection of ethnic and racial minorities than political minorities. It is a measure of the relatively strong commitment to

pluralism in the UK that despite their strong belief in authority and an ordered society, and their high levels of distrust, one in two Disengaged Traditionalists still rejects the principle that the majority will should be able to override the rights of minorities.

These findings provide valuable insights on the ways in which different population segments connect to the values of pluralism. These values can often be obscured, but emerge most strongly when people from a segment are brought together in conversation. Although Disengaged Battlers and Disengaged Traditionalists have much in common in their low levels of trust and engagement in democracy, they diverge in their attitudes towards pluralism. Disengaged Traditionalists are far more likely to feel that minority rights should take a 'back seat'. Their commitment to the principles of democracy is likely to be stronger when they can see that democratic principles make a system of government more accountable and more effective. In contrast, Disengaged Battlers are likely to feel more committed to democracy when they feel confident that our system of democratic government, and adherence to the rule of law, are the best way of affording protections to minorities. In both instances we find that Disengaged groups resonate more with democratic principles through the concrete reality of how the system works, rather than more abstract principles.

8. Britons nevertheless share a concern about growing extremism

Three in five Britons believe that British democracy faces serious threats, with concern greatest about the growth of extremism. In recent years, Britain has experienced political violence, including the tragic murder of Jo Cox MP in 2016, growing tensions in Northern Ireland, and the high volume of threats and abuse online, targeting women and minorities – and particularly those in public life. There is strong public support for countering online abuse and extremism.

- Other than Progressive Activists, all population segments rank “growth of extremism” in the top three challenges facing democracy.
- 84 per cent of Britons believe that democracies “must protect citizens from those who incite hate and violence”.
- Three times as many people believe that current protections against hate speech are inadequate as those who believe the protections go too far. Some 42 per cent consider existing protections ‘too little’, 44 per cent about right, and only 14 per cent think they are too much.
- Three in four believe that social media companies should have the right to limit speech on their platforms if rules are violated.

The attitudes of Disengaged Traditionalists towards extremism highlight the key challenge of addressing their distrust in institutions. Disengaged Traditionalists rank the growth of extremism as the greatest challenge facing British democracy, but they are more ambivalent than others about how to address it, and whether a democracy should try to protect citizens from hate and violence (27 per cent neither agree nor disagree, compared to an average of 13 per cent). A majority of Disengaged Traditionalists feel that social media companies should have the right to limit hateful and offensive speech, although their support for such regulation is not as high as other groups (67 per cent compared to a population average of 75 per cent). They are less likely to trust government or corporations to solve problems, and least likely to believe that governments should better regulate social media companies (although they still support regulation by a margin of two-to-one). On many issues they are also most likely to answer that they do not know. Given that they are the largest

segment (comprising 18 per cent of the population), better understanding the outlook of Disengaged Traditionalists, and connecting with them on their own terms, could significantly increase overall levels of democratic confidence.

Finally, it is worth noting the strong connection in Britons' minds between social media and the growth of division and extremism. Across all British Seven segments, social media is seen as a key driver of division, with three in four people believing that social media over-represents the most extreme voices (74 per cent). More than one third identify its divisive impact as one of the most important challenges facing democracy in the UK today. There is a widely held expectation that social media companies need to do more to address its divisive effects, and to limit hate speech on their platforms.



I do think, you know, there needs to be some responsibility with the social media organisations to perhaps be a bit more vigilant over what is being said in these and they don't seem to be taking it very seriously.

– Phil, Surrey, Backbone Conservative

Conclusion and Recommendations

The health and resilience of our democracy is critical to Britain's future prosperity and place in the world. A healthy democracy is better able to manage change and adjust to unforeseen events. It is more cohesive and forward-looking. It can prevent the huge costs incurred by deeply polarised societies, including instability, losses, and injustices. There is enormous economic and social benefit in building and sustaining a well-functioning democracy with high levels of trust. Equally, the cost of democratic dysfunction can run to the tens of billions of pounds – from frequent policy delays and reversals, distortions to decision-making, the loss of investor confidence, and the costs associated with countering extremism.

From this perspective, long-term investments in the infrastructure of our democracy can make it more resilient and provide a very strong return on investment – so long as those investments are effective. Greater priority should therefore be given to an evidence-based programme of work to make Britain's democratic system stronger, more widely trusted, more relevant to people's lives and more connected to their sense of identity, both locally and as British citizens. Measures should also be evaluated for their effectiveness in lifting trust, satisfaction, and people's sense of having a stake in the system.

Britain's democracy is rightly a source of national pride, but it has only proved enduring and successful because of constant improvement and expansion. It must remain forward-looking – we should not lose sight of the fact that democracy is a relatively recent development even in British history, with the full franchise extended to all adults in the UK less than one hundred years ago. It is unsurprising that there is more to be done to make it better.

The findings from this report suggest that democracy in the United Kingdom is not in immediate crisis, but it is facing more serious threats than at any time since the era of the Cold War in the UK as elsewhere. The threats to democracy today come less from outside forces, and more from weaknesses in the system itself, which can be exploited by populists who override democratic principles in the name of the people. The system's flaws are far more visible in the era of social media platforms and 24-hour news cycles – such as politicians' past histories, their vices and failings, and blunders in government delivery that may have been unnoticed a generation ago. At the same time, our information environment makes it easier than ever before for extremists to reach large audiences. Sunlight may be a great disinfectant, but increased connectivity also makes it easier to create division and foment conspiracy thinking.

The deep frustration that many people share has the potential to undermine their commitment to the principles of liberal democracy. With the threats to democracy likely only to grow in the medium to longer term, the renewal and strengthening of British democracy must assume a higher priority in national life. It is for this reason that More in Common aims to work, in partnership with other organisations, in the months and years ahead on the strengthening and renewal of our democratic system.

Some will be sceptical of the value of specific efforts to strengthen democracy. Even if convinced of the threats to democracy, they may question the extent to which initiatives such as civics courses, citizen assemblies and localised experiments can operate on a scale that can make a real difference. Those questions and concerns are legitimate and should be taken seriously – and such efforts should be evidence-based and offer real answers to the deep frustrations with the system held by the segments discussed in this report.

There is a strong argument for building on existing good work to orient more efforts towards the less-engaged, lower-trust groups in the population who are least attached to democratic principles and most likely to embrace alternatives. We need to find ways to put them at the centre of efforts to strengthen democracy and identify the most effective approaches.

The objective of such efforts is not the end of all types of political conflict or universal satisfaction with the system. That is patently unrealistic. Dissatisfaction with government's political leaders is a part of democratic life and creates the healthy impulse towards reform and rebalancing. The fact that people feel able to openly and freely express their feelings about politicians is healthy, and is in contrast with countries such as Russia and China where that is not possible. But just because dissent, argument, and the desire for change are all parts of a healthy democracy, does not mean that democracy today is in a healthy state. The findings in this report point to serious underlying conditions that, if addressed, can make our democracy and society more resilient, united and cohesive.

Democratic systems are never static – they respond and adapt to changing technologies, economies, and societies. The challenges to democracy in the 2020s require change, and sustained effort. It is a new generation's challenge to work out how best to meet the challenges of the 2020s, and bring our democracy closer to people's vision for a democracy in which overwhelming majorities feel they have a stake. The good news is that whatever complaints the British public has with how democracy is functioning, they have not given up on it. The challenge is for the advocates and stewards of our democratic institutions – politicians, policy makers, media, tech giants and civic institutions – is to bring people's real-world experiences closer to Britain's widely-shared vision for democracy.

Drawing on the findings in this report, with its emphasis on those least engaged and satisfied, below we identify nine recommendations for renewing democracy in the UK.

Focus on satisfaction and trust, not higher engagement

As Progressive Activists' frustrations make plain, engagement is not a proxy for satisfaction. Similarly, expecting high levels of participation from the groups that are currently most disengaged is not the solution to democratic renewal. Instead, as well as their efforts to lower the barriers to participation, the goal of those working to strengthen British democracy should be higher satisfaction, increased trust in people and institutions, and the feeling that they have a stake in the country. Part of that also involves rebuilding trust in politicians through improved transparency and accountability, so that those who would prefer to leave the 'job of politics to politicians' feel the confidence to do that.

To increase participation, meet disengaged and low-trust Britons on their own terms

There is real promise in innovative methods of democratic engagement such as citizen's assemblies and participatory budgeting – and there are examples of them being used to help societies find new ways to navigate highly charged issues, as in Ireland's reform of abortion laws. But it is also important that these mechanisms engage with people on their own terms. For most people, the notion of giving up scarce free time to attend a citizen's assembly is unappealing. For others, it simply is not possible. The risk is that these forums then become dominated by highly-engaged groups who do not necessarily represent the wider community. Approaches to making these processes more inclusive could include:

- Using more innovative ways of reaching people in their own space at their own time, deploying lessons about user experience drawn from people’s experiences during lockdown.
- Using data to gain greater insight into revealed rather than declared preference, to provide additional insights into public priorities.
- Focusing participatory mechanisms on practical issues that affect people’s everyday lives, such as improvements to the local community, or how individuals interact with systems (such as health, housing, education, and welfare) rather than on abstract national debates.
- When engaging people on those national debates, grounding the engagement in what it will mean for their lives, families, and community – discussing practicalities rather than simply principles.⁷

Select political candidates who are more representative

There is no doubt that Britons assume their political class does not reflect the diversity of the country they are supposed to represent. Most people assume that politicians are drawn from the ranks of the wealthy and highly educated, and large numbers do not see themselves represented in national life. While there has been admirable progress in improving representation of women, people from LGBT and ethnic minority backgrounds in Parliament, more needs to be done (for example, to address the startling absence of people with disabilities) for people to feel truly represented by their MPs. Given that less-engaged Britons often think about the challenges they face through the lens of their local communities, a stronger focus on identifying, preparing, and selecting candidates from within local communities, from different class and educational backgrounds, can help re-build confidence in the system.

Belonging and place should be at the centre of efforts towards greater devolution

While there is a widely-held consensus that too much power is centralised in Westminster, and people want their local community to have more decision-making power, this does not translate into a consensus or even interest in regional devolution settlements. Very few see devolution itself as the solution to problems in our democracy. In part this is because devolution is often presented as adding another layer of decision making, when devolved administrations and combined authorities can feel as remote as Westminster. Debates about devolution and governance reform, such as around the expansion of metropolitan mayors, need to be more connected to people’s sense of belonging and place, to find ways to empower those who live and work in a local community to have a greater stake in its future.

Accountability in public life needs to be substantively and visibly improved

We should not be surprised that if the rules of a game are being ignored, participants will eventually become disillusioned with the game. The same is true with public attitudes towards our system of democracy. People feel that the structures of accountability such as codes of conduct, reporting systems and conventions are applied or ignored as it suits those in power. While ordinary citizens pay a price for breaching standards, they feel that political elites do not – and few issues ignite as much public anger as this impunity. If the rules are not being followed, people become much more open to rule-breaking populists

⁷ The tension between practical and abstract policy issues is captured in the interaction between participants in the BBC television documentary on the UK Climate Assembly, *The People vs Climate Change*, which drew on the Britain’s Choice segmentation for the selection of participants. <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/committees/climate-assembly-uk/news/climate-assembly-uk-the-path-to-net-zero/>

who portray themselves as being on ‘the side of the people’ against the system. Demonstrating to the public that officials and elected representatives are accountable for their actions would strengthen confidence, restore trust, and challenge widespread cynicism stemming from a belief that the system is being run for the benefit of elites.

Politicians, journalists, and campaigners should think twice before trashing political life

As a profession, politics is deeply discredited – and yet people express far more positive views about their own member of parliament. Across parties, most MPs work hard for their constituents, and much of the work of politics behind the scenes is demanding and unglamorous. Yet political actors themselves bear significant responsibility for the contempt in which they are widely held. Too easily they succumb to the temptation to present themselves as being on the side of people against ‘other’ politicians, creating a vicious cycle where it is in everyone’s interest to trash the brand, and in no-one’s to stick up for them. This in turn weakens the talent pool by discouraging potentially excellent representatives from stepping into the political arena as candidates (especially women, who are viciously targeted on social media). At its extreme, this spills over into abuse, threats and violence against politicians. Most Britons are not highly partisan, and campaigners across the divide would do better to make the robust case for their policy platforms, without impugning the motives or commitment of those on the other side.

Use schools as places to foster strong democratic commitment among young people

In conversations about culture, respect and democracy, Britons often cite schools as the best starting point for building a more cohesive society. Schools play a key role in preparing the next generation for adult life in modern Britain. For the most part that will be through their academic studies, giving them the knowledge to access all society has to offer. But it also about inculcating an understanding of our democratic processes, and the principles underpinning them. Helping students to value participation in democratic processes is a powerful way for school to fulfil their requirement to promote fundamental British values. Schools can play a more positive and powerful role in preparing students to practice the principles of a healthy democracy. Opportunities exist with the citizenship curriculum, school debating, and student assemblies that build understanding of the viewpoints of others and the value of robust but respectful debate.

Link democratic principles to Britons’ pride, values, and sense of identity

Democratic checks and balances are often criticised for getting in the way of delivering on the ‘people’s priorities’. The three years of parliamentary wrangling following the Brexit referendum heightened those sentiments. Commentators also often criticise democratic processes and legislated rights (such as in the Human Rights Act or Equality Act) for frustrating progress or benefiting one group at the expense of the majority.

Greater efforts are needed to bring the arguments for liberal democracy into the 2020s, in ways that resonate with the worldviews of low-trust groups. Democratic safeguards and the rules of the game are ultimately to the benefit of everyone, and they are essential to an orderly society – a priority shared by many low-trust Britons. The case for democratic norms and safeguards

also needs to be better tied to our national story and to feelings of patriotism and pride for the ‘Mother of all Parliaments’ and the democratic progress that is such a part of British history and identity (and in particular, English and Scottish identity). Making the promotion of democracy more central to Britain’s foreign policy could also help to link democratic principles to national pride.

In an era of increasing media fragmentation, more needs to be done to tackle disinformation and present a common view of the ‘facts’

The impact of Britain’s information and media environment on the future of our democracy may well be more important than any other single factor. While this report has only touched lightly on the role of media – a topic that More in Common plans to address in a more focused way in 2022, recognising the complexity of those issues – without social media platforms and the information environment changing in some significant ways, it will be difficult to shift the dynamics that shape how our democracy works day by day.

- Traditional media outlets need to move away from the horse race style of political reporting that focuses constantly on which personalities or parties are winning or losing. This approach appeals to highly engaged audiences but drives frustration among less-engaged groups, for whom it often feels irrelevant. This style of reporting also contributes to perceptions that the media increases division by portraying complex issues as if there are just two sides to the debate.
- Social media platforms and parts of traditional media are driving people away from participation in civic life, by reinforcing conflicts and weakening people’s confidence that they can rely on the information they read. Recent efforts by social media companies to tackle vaccine disinformation reflect a growing awareness of their need to take greater responsibility for their platforms’ social impact. But far more is required: practising transparency on how their algorithms function, and calibrating those algorithms to encourage healthy democratic behaviours, rather than accentuating polarisation.
- A more vigorous local media is essential to strengthen democracy at a local level. There is clear evidence of a link between the decline of local media outlets and falling democratic participation.⁸ Given that the least engaged groups are the most likely to view politics through a ‘place-based’ lens, revitalising local media in the digital era is an important step in strengthening democracy and is a vital part of local infrastructure.

⁸ <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/uk-gov-report-finds-direct-link-between-local-newspaper-circulation-and-voter-turnout-absence-of-journalism-in-some-areas-potentially-catastrophic/>

Appendix 1

The British Seven Segments and their democratic attitudes

Progressive Activists

‘Britain is a compromised democracy.’
Dylan, Progressive Activist, Sheffield

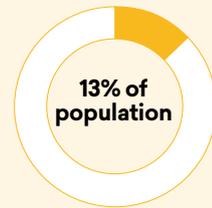


Key words

politically-engaged
 critical
 opinionated
 frustrated
 cosmopolitan
 environmentally-friendly

Preferred media

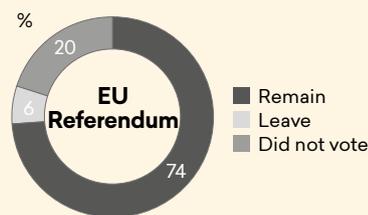
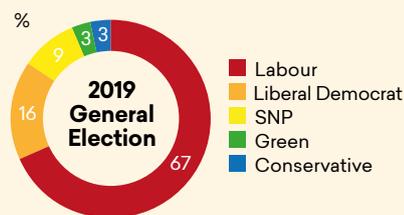
The Guardian
 Channel 4
 Twitter
 podcasts
 BBC Radio 4
 local newspapers



Demographic characteristics

Highest income segment
 more people earning over £50k than in any other segment

Above average number of young people and students,
lowest number of over 65s



Political participation

Progressive Activists are the most politically engaged of all segments, and their political views are important to their personal identity. They are three times as likely as the population overall to frequently discuss politics with friends, and far less likely than any other group to say they never discuss politics with friends. More than three quarters of them have signed a petition in the past year. They are far more likely than any segment group to share content on social media in support of an issue and contact a member of Parliament or an elected official. Despite the pandemic, 11 per cent of them participated in a protest over the past year, in contrast to 2 per cent of the general population.

Most Progressive Activists are actively interested in political issues. They follow politics most of the time because they believe that politics affects us all, they like knowing what is happening in the wider world, and think we need to engage in politics to solve important problems. More than any other segment they believe that improving society requires radical change.

Most Progressive Activists (74 per cent) voted remain in the Brexit referendum, and this “Remainer” identity is important to them. However, for those Progressive Activists that voted leave (6 per cent of Progressive Activists), their “leaver” identity is not central, perhaps because on this aspect they are likely to disagree with most of their friends. One in three Progressive Activists regularly discuss politics with their friends when they get together, and they are the least likely to say that they never do so.

This high level of engagement does not stem from a place of contentment or joy. An overwhelming majority of Progressive Activists (90 per cent) believe that most politicians do not care what people like them think. Almost a quarter of them say that they do not feel adequately respected in life and they are the most likely to disagree with the statement “I know where I am at home and where I belong” (only half of them agree).

Yet they still believe that through their decisions and actions, citizens can change society (unlike the Disengaged Battlers who, while similarly disenchanted with politicians, are mostly detached from active engagement). Progressive Activists yearn to have more of a say in decisions that affect the UK’s future.

Democratic norms and the British model

Progressive Activists are more dissatisfied than any other group with the way democracy works in the UK today. In fact, no Progressive Activists feel very satisfied with the way UK democracy works. Progressive Activists believe that our democracy is rigged to serve the rich and influential, a sentiment they share with the Disengaged Battlers and the Loyal Nationals.

When asked if they would be willing to restrict their rights and freedoms to make their family better off, Progressive Activists express complete opposition to that idea. Despite their expressed dissatisfaction with the system as it exists, they would not consider alternative forms of government, believing that democracy is the best form of government for the UK. They are the most convinced that the country being united is not related to how many elections we have, and almost all (94 per cent) reject the idea of doing away with elections if it meant their preferred political party could stay in power.

When it comes to freedom of speech, almost all Progressive Activists agree on the need to protect the rights of people who disagree with them politically, and that democracies need to protect citizens from those who incite hate and violence. They are the group most worried about other Britons having different values and beliefs than them on important subjects, and are also more likely than any other group to believe that those who disagree with them are wrong on the facts.

Progressive Activists are more likely than any other group to support the rights of those with extreme views to express them (a view shared by one half of Progressive Activists). At the same time, Progressive Activists are more than twice as likely as average to have tried to get something ‘cancelled’ in the last year (16 per cent v 7 per cent average) and are also most likely to believe that it is fair for people who say grossly offensive things to be at risk of losing their livelihoods (77 per cent, compared to a population average of 48 per cent).

Progressive Activists also have frustrations with aspects of how democracy works in Britain. For example, they believe that the UK’s system is less democratic because members of parliament get elected without winning an overall majority of votes (88 per cent think the first-past-the-post system makes the UK less democratic). Three in five believe that a truly democratic society should not have a monarchy (versus an average of 26 per cent).

Civic Pragmatists



'I feel locally, we could do stuff but with the big stuff, we can't.'

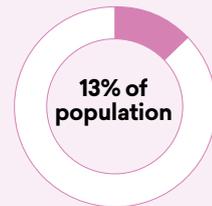
Molly, Civic Pragmatist, Cheshire

Key words

charitable
concerned
exhausted
community-minded
open to compromise
socially liberal

Preferred media

BBC
ITV
Channel 5
Radio 4

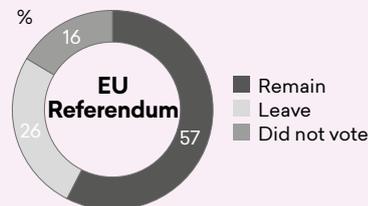
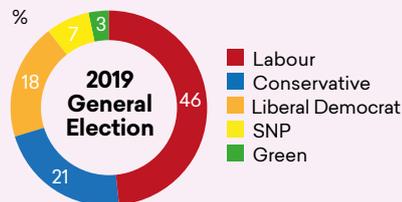


Demographic characteristics

Twice as many women as men

Spread across all age groups, proportionately

Most likely to live in **West Midlands, Northwest England** and **Scotland**



Political participation

Politics is less central to the personal identity of Civic Pragmatists than Progressive Activists, but they share similar views on many issues. They are less politically engaged than Progressive Activists, and more civically engaged – indeed, they are more likely than any other segments to donate to charity or vote in a reality TV show, and second most likely to have signed a petition in the past year.

Civic Pragmatists are inspired by a sense of civic duty. They are more likely than any group to think that they should pay more attention to current affairs (45 per cent), and almost three in four say they are likely to discuss politics with friends and family occasionally. Those who follow politics do so because they like knowing what is happening in the wider world and believe that politics affect us all. Three quarters of them would like to have more of a say in decisions that affect the UK's future and their community.

Civic Pragmatists dislike conflict and extreme forms of activism, and they are more likely than any other group to believe that listening and compromise is important. Almost three quarters of Civic Pragmatists believe that differences should not prevent us from coming together. They are concerned by the amount of anger and conflict that exists around politics. They also have a higher-than-average perception that the world is becoming a more dangerous place.

Democratic norms and the British model

Civic Pragmatists have a strong commitment to democratic principles. They hold strong beliefs (after Progressive Activists) that people who disagree with them politically deserve the same rights, and they expect democracies to protect citizens from hate and violence. On the protection of minority rights, 8 in 10 Civic Pragmatists reject the notion that the concerns of ethnic minorities should take a backseat if they conflict with the majority (the second highest level of rejection after the Progressive Activists).

While they believe that peaceful protest is an important democratic right, Civic Pragmatists are not activists. Just 2 per cent have participated in a protest in the past year, and only one in four Civic Pragmatists think that confronting others online is justified to defend democracy, compared to 55 per cent of Progressive Activists. No Civic Pragmatists think that physically attacking people is justified in a democracy.

Civic Pragmatists are concerned about the threat of extremism. More than half of them believe that there is 'too little' protection from hate speech today, and almost all (92 per cent) believe that democracies need to protect citizens from hate speech and violence. This leads to a similarly overwhelming belief that social media companies should be entitled to limit free speech if rules are broken.

Disengaged Battlers



'I question what am I voting for? Democracy feels like Britain's Got Talent, lots of people voting for something that I don't care about.'

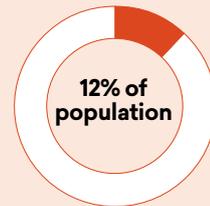
Mason, Disengaged Battler, Cardiff

Key words

tolerant
surviving
insecure
disillusioned
disconnected
overlooked
socially liberal

Preferred media

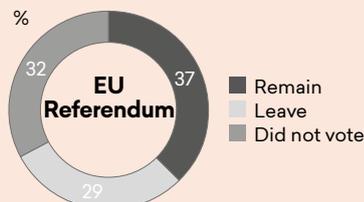
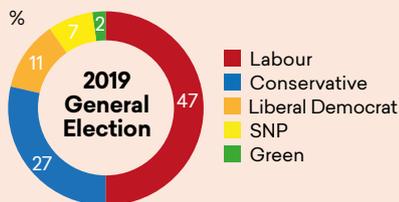
Daily Mirror
The Metro
commercial radio
large numbers with
no interest in the news



Demographic characteristics

Highest proportion (along with Disengaged Traditionalists) of **C2DE grades** (54 per cent)

More likely to live in **London** or **Scotland** and more likely to live in **post-industrial towns and core cities**



Political participation

Disengaged Battlers are the least engaged segment of all. From voting to volunteering, they are less likely to participate. Although one in three donate to charity and 37 per cent have signed a petition in the past year, this is still below the British average. They are also the least likely to follow politics closely.

Those Disengaged Battlers that follow politics at least some of the time do so out of an interest in what is happening in the wider world and because they believe politics affect us all. But one third of them also follow politics because they do not trust politicians to do the right thing. Those who do not keep up with current events give the same reasons, but the lack of trust leads them to conclude they have better things to do with their lives than engage with politicians who they feel are just in it for themselves.

This lack of engagement is possibly due both to feelings of frustration and neglect: almost a quarter of them say that they do not feel adequately respected in life (like Progressive Activists) and they are almost unanimously convinced

that most politicians do not care what people like them think. More than half are sceptical of the idea that through their decisions and actions, citizens can change society, yet most would like to have more of a say in decisions that affect the UK's future.

Disengaged Battlers feel ignored and unacknowledged in UK society. Half of them feel that they are 'not free in my own country,' and 72 per cent feel mainstream media does not reflect the views of people like them. This breakdown in trust is illustrated in their approach to the pandemic. We have tracked the views of Disengaged Battlers about the Covid vaccination program, and while their scepticism has declined, they have consistently been among the most hesitant and distrustful.

Democratic norms and the British model

While a majority of Disengaged Battlers say that it is important to them to live in a society that is governed democratically, fewer believe this than in any segment other than Disengaged Traditionalists. A small but above-average group of Disengaged Battlers (18 per cent) are open to considering alternative forms of government where leaders are given more power. This is perhaps related to the view of some in this group (shared by more Disengaged Battlers than any other segment) that in general democracies are not better at making fair societies (21 per cent agree with this proposition). They are also the most likely to question whether democracies are the best way to ensure an orderly and peaceful society. Some 30 per cent of Disengaged Battlers do not trust election results in the UK.

After the Progressive Activists, they are the second least satisfied with the way democracy works in the UK today. Eighty-two per cent believe that democracy is rigged to serve the rich and influential and 58 per cent are turned off politics by the amount of anger and conflict around political issues today. Their frustration towards the system, coupled with their personal circumstances, leads a third of them to say that they would be willing to accept some limitations to their rights and freedoms if it meant that their families would be better off.

Disengaged Battlers are used to not being listened to, and this may account for their support for taking the concerns of racial and ethnic minorities into consideration, even if the majority disagrees. They also believe that the views of people out of political power should be taken into consideration regardless of the views of the majority (70 per cent of Disengaged Battlers feel this way).

Established Liberals



'I always try and vote because, as the other people said, it's been a family thing that's been hammered into me that you have the right to do this, so you should do it, and sometimes it does feel like you're choosing the least worst option.'

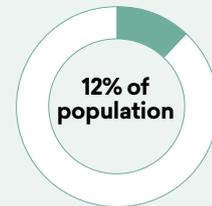
Aimee, Established Liberal, Wiltshire

Key words

comfortable
privileged
cosmopolitan
trusting
confident
pro-market

Preferred media

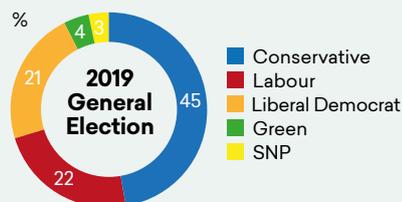
BBC
The Times
Daily Telegraph
BBC Radio 4
podcasts



Demographic characteristics

Likely to live in **London, the South, South West, East of England** and **coastal areas**

Most likely to have **volunteered in their community** in the past year



Political participation

Established Liberals are broadly comfortable with their lives, and feel safe, rooted, and connected. They are more likely than any other group to volunteer in their community, something almost a quarter of them do (versus 12 per cent average). Most of them also donate to charity. They feel adequately respected in life and believe in the idea that through their decisions and actions, citizens can change society.

They like knowing about what is happening in the world and are likely to believe that politics affect us all (61 per cent versus 51 per cent average). Those who do not follow current affairs (17 per cent of Established Liberals versus 21 per cent average) feel that they have more important things to do in life and believe there is too much anger and conflict in politics.

Established Liberals are stabilisers in their local communities. Half of them will have played a leadership role in a community voluntary organisation at some time in the past (versus 29 per cent average). They have the strongest assurance that citizens can change society (64 per cent compared to 51 per cent overall), and they have the greatest confidence among the segments that people can improve things locally. But they are less likely than average to want more of a say on the UK's future (55 per cent want more of a say, compared to an average of 65 per cent). This is likely grounded in the fact that Established Liberals think they already have a say in the future of the UK and their local communities as the group most likely to believe that politicians are interested in what people like them think (31 per cent versus 16 per cent average).

Established Liberals are trusting of their fellow citizens and have the strongest belief that our differences are not so big that we cannot come together. They are most likely to feel part of a community where people care and look out for each other, and this leads to their powerful belief (highest among the segments) that we have more in common than what divides us. That helps to explain why they see social media's role in deepening divisions as the top challenge facing British democracy.

Democratic norms and the British model

Most Established Liberals are satisfied with the way democracy works in the UK today, with only a few feeling dissatisfied. This contributes to strong belief in British democracy and a rejection of other forms of governance.

Established Liberals are positive about the state of democracy in the UK. They are most likely to describe Britain as a 'genuine democracy' and are the second most satisfied segment with British democracy, just behind Backbone Conservatives. They are most likely to think that our democracy delivers the 'right amount' of freedom of expression and press, freedom from hate speech and the freedom to protest.

Established Liberals have a stronger than average conviction that the government should play by the rules, and most reject the proposition that we need a rule-breaking leader to fix the country. Instead, they prefer gradual reform over radical changes. That said, almost three in five Established Liberals believe the first-past-the-post voting system is undemocratic.

Loyal Nationals



‘Can you imagine if we had one election, where there was two or three people that were totally inspiring and we couldn't choose between them because they were so brilliant, instead of having to go through this to choose the least offensive one.’

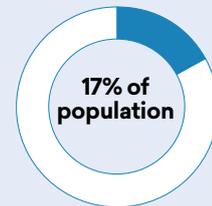
Tessa, Loyal National, Bridgend, Wales

Key words

**proud
patriotic
tribal
threatened
aggrieved
worried about inequality**

Preferred media

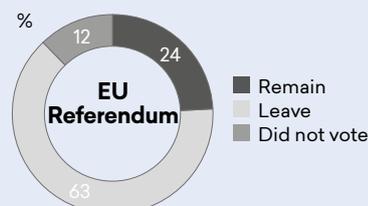
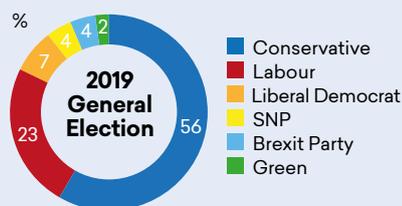
**Daily Mail
ITV
The Sun
Facebook
local newspapers**



Demographic characteristics

More concentrated in **Yorkshire, North East England and Wales**

Most likely to live in **post-war new towns and medium sized towns**



Political participation

Loyal Nationals participate in political and civic life. Two thirds of them donate to charity and half of them have signed a petition in the past year. Most Loyal Nationals voted to leave in the EU referendum and some retain a “Leave” identity – 68 per cent of “Leaver” Loyal Nationals say that this is an important part of their identity (compared to 58 per cent of “Remainer” Loyal Nationals who say the same).

Loyal Nationals' support for the Conservative Party jumped from 46 per cent in the 2017 General Election to 56 per cent in the 2019 General Election, at the cost of the Labour Party whose vote from Loyal Nationals fell sharply from 32 to 23 per cent. Understanding the Loyal Nationals group is key to understanding political realignment in England – they reflect many of the dynamics of the so-called ‘Red Wall’ voter.

Those Loyal Nationals that follow politics do so because they like knowing what is happening and believe that politics affect all of us. One in three also say that they follow current affairs because they do not trust politicians to do the right thing. Lack of trust is also a common trait amongst Loyal Nationals who do not keep up to date with politics.

A sense of place and belonging matters to Loyal Nationals. More than any other segment other than Backbone Conservatives, Loyal Nationals say they know exactly where they are at home and where they belong (83 per cent, compared to an overall average of 76 per cent). They love their country but are anxious about its future, particularly in the face of cultural change – which drives their feelings of alienation from society. Some 54 per cent of Loyal Nationals say that they sometimes feel like a stranger in their own country – more than any other segment.

Loyal Nationals feel a sense of anger at the system and political leaders. They are almost unanimously convinced that most politicians do not care what people like them think. More than half (61 per cent) are sceptical of the idea that through their decisions and actions, citizens can change society. Only 18 per cent think politicians are better qualified than ordinary people to make decisions on our behalf.

Given their large numbers (one in six Britons), level of engagement and feelings of dissatisfaction, Loyal Nationals are a key group to engage in democratic renewal. They are at risk of developing anti-democratic perspectives: one in four do not trust election results, three in five have low levels of trust in their fellow citizens, and they are most likely to believe that a secret powerful group is in control of what happens in society and what is told in the media.

Democratic norms and the British model

Three quarters of Loyal Nationals say that democracy in the UK is rigged to serve the rich and influential. Living in a democracy is still important to them, as to other Britons, yet many have doubts about democracy's ability to deliver.

Loyal Nationals take a more flexible view on issues involving rights and freedoms. They are more open than any other group to accepting limitations to rights and freedoms if it means their families will be better off (41 per cent versus 28 per cent average). They are also more likely than average to believe that the concerns of racial minorities should take a backseat if they clash with the views of the majority.

Loyal Nationals do not see themselves reflected in politics or in the media and are keen to have more of a say both locally and nationally. They worry about their country becoming more divided and the world more dangerous. They see extremism as the greatest challenge facing UK democracy. That perhaps explains why almost half of them are willing to embrace a rule-breaking leader to fix the country's problems.

Disengaged Traditionalists

‘There’s things I’m not happy with but I’m not unhappy enough to give up time.’

Pearce, Disengaged Traditionalists, London

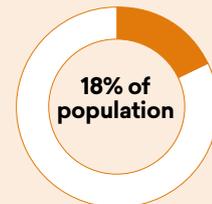


Key words

self-reliant
ordered
patriotic
tough-minded
suspicious
disconnected

Preferred media

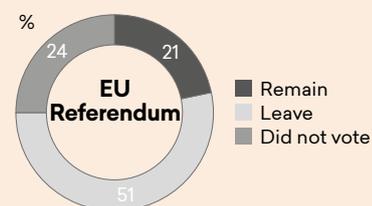
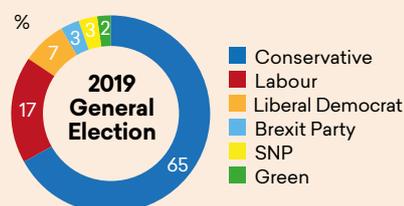
The Sun
Daily Express
large numbers have
no interest in the news



Demographic characteristics

Likely to live in an **urban area**, be in **full-time work** and be employed in a **manual occupation**

Concentrated in the **English Midlands** and are more likely than average to **live in post-industrial towns**



Political participation

Disengaged Traditionalists are the least likely to participate in civic and political life, whether by giving to a charity, voting in local elections, participating in protests, or sharing content on social media. Apart from Disengaged Battlers they are the least likely to volunteer.

Disengaged Traditionalists are also the least likely to follow politics. Almost one in four say that they do not follow much current affairs, and 12 per cent say that they do not follow current affairs at all. They are also unlikely to discuss political matters with friends. In fact, one in three say that politics does not interest them and can never imagine becoming more interested.

Most Disengaged Traditionalists are sceptical of citizens’ ability to change society through their decisions and actions. They are also the most ambivalent when asked if they would like to have more of a say in the decisions that affect the future of the country or their community. Almost half say they neither agree nor disagree with that idea.

Disengaged Traditionalists have lower than average levels of trust in institutions and in their fellow citizens. They are more likely than all other segments to think you cannot be too careful with people today, and they are also more likely not to trust UK election results. Almost twice as many Disengaged Traditionalists as in the general population believe the vaccination program is part of a government plan to control citizens (13 per cent versus an 8 per cent average).

Democratic norms and the British model

While they do not hold strongly anti-democratic views, Disengaged Traditionalists value democratic processes less than other Britons. For example, one in two oppose the idea of doing away with elections in exchange for their preferred political party staying in charge, compared to two in three Britons overall. More than half (55 per cent) of Disengaged Traditionalists believe that we would be a more united country if we had fewer elections.

On many questions about how our democracy works today, Disengaged Traditionalists are more likely than any other segment not to hold firm views. They are more likely than others to be ambivalent (neither agreeing nor disagreeing) on a wide range of questions, including whether there are serious threats facing democracy, whether they can identify with political leaders, and whether experts and politicians are better equipped than ordinary people to make decisions.

This ambivalence mostly reflects disengagement rather than anger or frustration. In fact they are more supportive of the first-past-the-post system (55 per cent) than all but one other segment. Their support for first-past-the-post reflects a tendency to favour the majority view even if that comes at the expense of less represented groups. This is also reflected in Disengaged Traditionalists being more likely than any other group to believe that in a democracy the concerns of racial and ethnic minorities and those out of power should take a back seat if they conflict with the majority.

Backbone Conservatives



‘Things are said, and then somebody gets into power...and then actually a lot of the things that were said don't seem to happen. So I think there is things that could be improved, but I think, generally speaking, compared to a lot of countries I think we've got a pretty good [democracy], and I think it does work pretty well.’

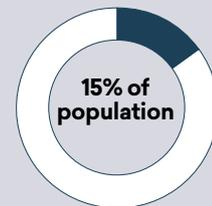
Nancy, Backbone Conservative, Yorkshire

Key words

nostalgic
patriotic
proud
secure
confident
engaged

Preferred media

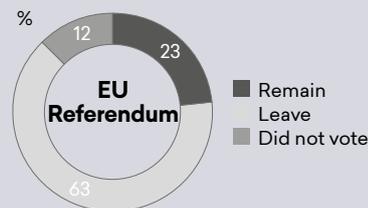
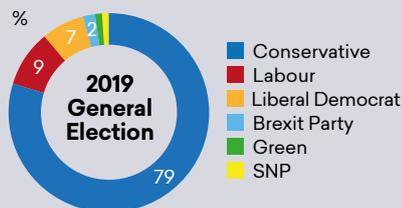
BBC
ITV
Sky News
Daily Mail
Daily Telegraph
Daily Express



Demographic characteristics

Concentrated in **East Midlands, South East** and **South West of England** - more likely to live in **villages and small towns** than average

Older than the rest of the population with the **highest levels of home ownership**



Political participation

Backbone Conservatives are reasonably content with British democracy and the country in general, perhaps reflecting their strong attachment to the Conservative Party, which has won four successive elections since 2010. For most Backbone Conservatives, their “Leave” identity has remained important beyond the Brexit debate (73 per cent consider it important, only 14 per cent would say it is not). In contrast, for the few “Remainer” Backbone Conservatives this identity is less important – 41 per cent say it is important to them, 34 per cent say it is not.

Backbone Conservatives are among the most likely to donate to charity (64 per cent), and are also more likely to donate to their place of worship than any others (16 per cent versus 8 per cent average). They are less likely to take actions that are more associated with more progressive segments of the population: for example, they are the second least likely to sign petitions and they do not participate in protests at all.

Backbone Conservatives like knowing what is going on in the world and they feel comfortable and safe in their neighbourhoods. They feel comfortable in the UK, respected, and valued in life, and most have a sense of home and belonging.

Democratic norms and the British model

Most Backbone Conservatives are satisfied with the way democracy works in the UK. In contrast to 62 per cent of the population who believe that in the UK our democracy is rigged to serve the rich and influential, most Backbone Conservatives believe that our democracy works for the majority. They are twice as likely than average to think that politicians care about people like them, yet many are unsure about whether there are enough people like them in politics with whom they can relate.

Change – if it needs to happen – is better when gradual, according to Backbone Conservatives. Just 9 per cent are convinced that it should be radical, and 56 per cent would prefer gradual reforms, contrasting starkly with Progressive Activists for whom 84 per cent believe societal progress requires radical change. However, Backbone Conservatives are unsure about whether they want more of a say in that change. They also value the status quo as the biggest supporters of the first-past-the-post system and the monarchy, and biggest opponents of devolution. Seven in ten Backbone Conservatives believe the UK is more democratic because the candidate with the most votes gets elected.

Backbone Conservatives show less attachment than other groups to some elements of liberal democracy. Forty-three per cent of Backbone Conservatives agree with the idea that we would be a more united country if we had fewer elections, with a further 45 per cent unsure of whether that proposition is true or not. They expect governments to abide by the law even if it limits their action, but a significant minority (43 per cent) would prefer government power to be less constrained by rules. Almost half of them believe that in a democracy the concerns of racial and ethnic minorities or the concerns of those out of power should take a back seat if they conflict with the majority.

Appendix 2

Comparative insights from More in Common's five country democracy study

Concerns about the state of democracy are not unique to Britain. Concerns are growing across the democratic world, as the list of countries who have backslided on democratic principles continues to grow longer. Frustration and disenchantment with politics, falling trust in each other and in institutions and the rise of populist movements has made work to strengthen democracy against divisive and destructive forces a transnational project.

In 2021, More in Common published a study on democratic attitudes in the US, Germany, France, Poland, and the UK⁹, published in partnership with the Robert Bosch Foundation in Germany. The study was not directly comparative, but a common set of challenges were addressed across the countries: what can we do to strengthen democratic culture across these Western democracies? Where are the gaps in existing projects and programmes? And who should we be reaching to better strengthen democracies across the West?

The positive conclusion from the cross-country study is that it **did not find an organised, anti-democratic group**, capable of seizing political power or influence, across those democracies. It did, however, find a **two-fold crisis in these democracies**: one, a **crisis of trust between citizens and democratic actors**, where the elite is perceived as not listening and system perceived as broken. The second is a **crisis of discourse among citizens** – where the tone of debate between people is becoming increasingly toxic, leaving people exhausted by division and recognising the need to disagree better. **In both areas, the UK is in a comparatively stronger position than other countries**, helped by the tendency of Britons to look for balance when faced with challenging and complex issues.

The study found that people have **different expectations of what democracy means** across countries. A challenge facing those working on strengthening and repairing democracy is one of building a more shared and comprehensive understanding of democracy should mean to regular voters. In the UK, this translates into a challenge of how to generate a sense of attachment, pride, and belonging to democracy. Particular work is needed around a shared feeling of ownership on the safeguards around democratic principles, and the protection of minorities.

People think about democracy in practical, concrete, and political ways.

Satisfaction with democracy is closely connected to people's thoughts and feelings about what governments do, and whether they feel that politicians are delivering for them. People in Britain, as well as France and Germany, feel unheard and unseen by their political leaders, and this is undermining faith and trust in political leaders. A practical repair job is needed in mending the bonds between people and their politicians.

There is a need for policymakers, campaigners and all those working on democracy to do a better job at addressing low-trust and low-engagement groups who are ambivalent towards democracy. Too often efforts to strengthen democracy across countries focus on those already engaged and

deeply attached to democracy – this is a failure to prioritise. At best these strategies miss an opportunity to strengthen democratic resilience in the UK and other countries, at worst they make democracy weaker.

On many measures, Britain is less polarised than the US – and this study found that this polarisation extends to the politicisation of democracy itself in the US. Insight from the Democracy Fund’s ‘Healthy Democracy Framework’¹⁰ and Over Zero’s work¹¹ on building resilience to political violence show the grave challenges facing American democracy. An overriding goal for Britain, and leaders of democracy institutions and civil society, is to ensure that deeper polarisation does not happen in our country. In countries where stacked identities exist on opposing sides of society, as More in Common’s *Hidden Tribes* found in America, the job of strengthening democracy becomes significantly more difficult as it becomes tangled with the political groups and issues of the day. Taking a common ground approach to strengthening democracy in the UK, and avoiding the polarisation around democracy in the US, should be a key aim for all of us working to strengthen British democracy.

¹⁰ Democracy Fund, Healthy Democracy Framework <https://democracyfund.org/who-we-are/healthy-democracy-framework/>

¹¹ Building U.S. Resilience to Political Violence, A Globally Informed Framework for Analysis and Action, Over Zero-New America, December 2019”

