

GOVERNANCE PROJECT



Annex 7 – Overview of public opinion

A.7.1. This annex provides an overview of public opinion and public engagement relating to the themes which the Commission has engaged with. The sources below are varied, ranging from surveys by polling companies to academic journal articles. They demonstrate that the reforms put forward in the Recommendations should command real public support, and further indicate that the actions of political parties in these areas are highly likely to influence voters' electoral decisions. Some of the sources date back several years but are, nevertheless, cited to show that the relevant issues are long-standing and that public sentiment has been building steadily for quite a long time. The summaries of some of the sources are kept brief and organised by theme to aid readability, but references to the full sources are provided below. Of particular note is the work done by the UCL Constitution Unit which has contributed several of the most recent and cogent sets of data.

Confidence and trust in democracy, Parliament, and Government

- There is a high level of dissatisfaction with the quality of democracy in the UK, with just 38% of respondents describing themselves as 'satisfied' by the summer of 2022, versus 52% who were dissatisfied (Renwick et al., 2023a).
- There is found to be majority support for the principle of democracy among British voters, though this is somewhat contingent on the delivery of effective Government. 32% of respondents agree that 'democracy is always the best form of Government', while 54% say 'democracy is good so long as it delivers effective Government' (Renwick et al., 2023a).
- Confidence in Parliament among Britons has declined markedly since 1990, when 46% of voters said they had faith in the institution. This confidence (as of March 2023) had fallen to a historic low of 23%. This is matched by a marked decrease in confidence in political parties and government in general (The Policy Institute, 2023).
- Levels of confidence in government in Britain are among some of the lowest found in Europe. A quarter of Britons said they have confidence in the government, on a par with Poland (23%), Brazil (23%) and Italy (23%), behind the European average of 43% (The Policy Institute, 2023).
- The public is wary of politicians' ability to act honestly or competently overall. Just 18% of voters trust the Prime Minister to act in the interests of the public, as do 20% for Parliament. (Renwick et al., 2023a).
- 63% of voters believe that British governance is rigged to the advantage of the 'rich and powerful' (Bruce, 2022).
- There has been a rise in the number of people believing politicians are 'out for themselves' over time. In 2021 IPPR found that 63% voters now view politicians as such, compared to 35% in 1944 and 48% in 2014, with such distrust concentrated among those with lower levels of education, Leave voters, and those furthest away from Westminster geographically (IPPR, 2021).
- A distrust of politicians to prioritise voters' priorities is shared across the political divide, with 64% of Conservative and 69% of Labour voters seeing politicians as 'out for themselves' (IPPR, 2022).
- As of January 2022, 54% of people either strongly distrusted or distrusted the Prime Minister (then Boris Johnson), compared to 43% who distrusted Parliament (Renwick et al., 2022a).

Public concern and support for reform

- As of November 2021, 80% of those polled by YouGov believed there was either ‘a lot’ or ‘fair amount’ of corruption in British politics. (English, 2021).
- 51% of voters believe that ‘sleaze’ in government has got worse in recent years, with a general agreement across party lines that this is an issue plaguing the political system (Spotlight on Corruption, 2022).
- Almost 70% of 2019 Conservative voters are similarly concerned about the presence of corruption in government (Cowburn, 2021).
- Citizen Assembly groups coordinated by The Constitution Unit often came to the view that dissatisfaction with governance and democracy can be traced to a perceived lack of honesty and integrity. The Assembly groups produced statements referring to a “lack of honesty and integrity in politics (...) with the sleaze, scandals and incompetence of a few politicians give[ing] Parliament a bad name” (Renwick et al., 2023a).
- 29% of people believe the UK system of governance needs ‘a great deal of improvement’ (Renwick et al., 2023a).
- Many voters state that the health of British democracy matters as much to them as policy issues such as housing, crime and immigration, albeit less than the cost of living, economy or NHS. (Renwick et al., 2023a).
- A survey conducted in 2023 found that 89% of respondents favoured some kind of constitutional reform, with this support found across political and geographic boundaries. 31% stated that the parliamentary system needed ‘complete’ reform, compared to 32% who said ‘some’. Just 6% backed no change at all. (Hussen, 2023).

Standards and ethics

- 52% of people agree with the statement that politicians follow ‘lower ethical standards’ than ordinary citizens (Renwick et al, 2023a).
- Voters consider certain attributes of parties and politicians when casting their vote, particularly competence, honesty, and leadership (The Hansard Society, 2021).
- Neither of the main two political parties perform particularly well when voters are asked to evaluate them based on their adherence to the Nolan Principles. Around 60% of those surveyed disagree that the Conservative Party does so, with 44% saying the same of the Labour Party (Survation, 2021).
- There is strong support for several reforms to the enforcement of standards. Those proposals with high levels of public support include the creation of an independent ethics commission (76%) and more powers for ethics regulators (70%), as well as the creation of a statutory ministerial code (80%), and increased independence of public appointments (74%) (Spotlight on Corruption, 2022).

Ministers and advisers

- A majority of respondents surveyed by Spotlight on Corruption believe there are ‘major problems’ with the current system for investigating and punishing Ministers thought to have violated the Ministerial Code (Spotlight on Corruption, 2022).
- A majority of respondents (70%) in the same survey say they have little or no faith in the way the ministerial code is currently enforced. 80% support placing the ministerial code on a statutory footing (Spotlight on Corruption, 2022).

- When presented with a scenario where a government minister has ‘failed’ in some way (i.e. breaching the ministerial code), respondents show a preference for an independent authority to decide their fate, though there is a preference for the Prime Minister to have ultimate authority over dismissal in some cases (e.g. a Minister failing to control their department). (Renwick et al., 2022).

Sanctions for wrongdoing

- Respondents value acting honestly and within the law over delivery, with low levels of approval of rule breaking in pursuit of political objectives (Renwick et al., 2023b).
- Citizen Assembly groups held by UCL came to the conclusion that there is an ‘embarrassing political culture of dishonesty and lack of serious consequences for bad behaviours’ within Parliament (Renwick et al., 2023a).
- A similar statement coming from said Assembly meetings on this issue included “they get away with it [bad behaviour]– there is no reprimand. Like in other professions, if you do something wrong or like do not adhere to some standards, there is always consequences. But I feel like there is no consequences [for politicians]” (Renwick et al, 2023a).
- 74% of contributors say democracy in the UK could be improved if MPs were ‘thrown out’ of Parliament for lying or faced some form of consequences for their actions (Renwick et al., 2023b).
- Citizen Assembly participants in groups held by The Constitution Unit came to the conclusion that independent regulators should be able to investigate allegations of wrongdoing against MPs and ministers, with stronger action taken than at present. They rejected the view that holding politicians to account should be left solely to voters, with said regulator able to launch an investigation into wrongdoing unilaterally (Renwick et al., 2023b).
- 41% of respondents to a survey in January 2022 believed that there is a role for judges in ensuring politicians ‘follow rules’, compared to 27% who feel their fellow elected officials are responsible for this (Renwick et al., 2023).
- 54% of respondents surveyed by Spotlight on Corruption stated that if their MP were to vote for more stringent sanctions for those MPs found to have broken rules, they would be more likely to vote for them. This is particularly the case among those respondents who have ‘left’ the Conservative Party since 2019 (Spotlight on Corruption, 2022).

Transparency, lobbying and second jobs

- A majority of respondents in a survey by OpenDemocracy found that around 70% of people are concerned when presented with data showing a majority of FOI requests put to the UK government are answered without all the corresponding materials. These concerns are shared across the political spectrum, with 83% of Conservative and 76% of Labour voters agreeing with the statement that disclosure is important to democracy (Bychawski, 2021).
- A majority of voters believe cronyism in Westminster around public contracts and lobbying is an issue; 73% of survey respondents said more should be done to prevent such issues with 69% supporting more stringent rules around lobbying (Woodcock, 2021).
- 53% of voters believe those who donate to parties should not expect MPs or Ministers to engage or further their interests in return (Omnisis, 2021).
- Data by the ONS shows that a just a quarter of UK citizens believe a serving government minister would refuse a job in the private sector in exchange for a ‘favour’, lower than the average across OECD countries. Around two thirds believe it is unlikely that an official would refuse (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

- In a survey by IPPR in 2022 just 6% of voters believe that voters have the greatest sway over the actions of MPs and public policy, compared to half who said that political donors, businesses, and lobbyists do (IPPR, 2022).
- Data from YouGov shows there is strong opposition toward MPs working for or lobbying for private companies whilst in office. 80% of respondents said it is not acceptable for MPs to advise companies attempting to win government contract, while 63% said it is wrong for them to 'strategically advise' companies. 77% said MPs should not advise on how to lobby Parliament (English, 2021).
- Qualitative research by the CSPL found that the public have little tolerance for MP and Ministerial conflicts of interest and believe there should be clear and strict rules around parliamentary lobbying (CSPL, 2018).
- A survey by YouGov in 2021 found general opposition to second jobs for MPs, particularly on allowing MPs to work for foreign governments (67% oppose). There are more divided opinions on other professions, such as working as a barrister (35% acceptable versus 40% unacceptable), after dinner speaker (35%:40%) or a local councillor (36%:37%) (English, 2021).
- In the aftermath of the Patterson saga, 39% of voters believed that additional employment for MPs should be permitted in specific circumstances, such as the NHS or legal profession (Ibbetson, 2021).

HOLAC and Honours

- The current appointment system to the House of Lords lacks public support, with just 6% of those surveyed supporting the current procedure. 58% support an independent body to appoint new members, including half of those who voted Conservative in 2019 (Renwick et al., 2022).
- The majority of voters in a survey by Omnisia agreed that those who donate to political parties should not be rewarded with honours or access to government ministers (72%) (Omnisia, 2021).
- Polling by the Electoral Reform Society found that only 7% of people supported Johnson's use of political appointments upon resignation, as of March 2023. This was a decrease from 13% in the immediate aftermath of his resignation in July 2022 (Hughes, 2023).
- 61% of voters oppose Boris Johnson being given the opportunity to issue resignation peerages, up from 50% in May 2019 (Hughes, 2023).
- When asked by Savanta, most voters were opposed to the offer of a knighthood to Boris Johnson's father, with 14% backing the proposal compared to 65% opposed. (James, 2023).
- Over half of those surveyed in March 2023 believed the honours system as it exists should be scrapped, compared to the 37% who believe the Prime Minister should reserve the right to offer orders and medals (James, 2023).

Executive power

- In a survey conducted by The Constitution Unit in 2022, 47% of respondents said it was unacceptable for a leader to not engage with Parliament, while 57% said it was unacceptable that a leader be considered 'above the law'. (Renwick et al., 2023a).
- 54% of people believe that, where there is a trade-off, the Prime Minister should prioritise acting within the law over 'getting things done'. (Renwick et al., 2023b).

- In Citizens' Assembly groups organised by The Constitution Unit, respondents express a preference for power in the political system to not be concentrated (i.e., with the Prime Minister and Cabinet) but diffused, with some constraints placed on executive power (Renwick et al., 2022).
- Polling conducted by YouGov in 2020 found that over a quarter of voters wanted the Prime Minister to have less power (Dinic, 2020a).
- Survey data and citizen assembly groups conducted by The Constitution Unit found that there is a strong element of public opinion which believes Parliament should play a stronger role in policymaking and scrutiny than it does at present, having greater control over its agenda and timetable, and scrutinising all changes to the law. 47% say Parliament should be strengthened so ministers' proposals are more carefully scrutinised (Renwick et al., 2023b).

The Civil Service

- There has been a consistent rise in faith in the ability of the UK civil service since 1981, particularly between 2009–2018, in line with other European nations. As of March 2023, around 49% of people express faith in the Civil Service in Britain, with the UK ranking 14 out of 23 countries in the World Values Survey on this measure (The Policy Institute, 2023).
- In 2022 the ONS found similar levels of trust in the Civil Service among the British public, with 55% expressing faith (Office for National Statistics, 2022).
- As of 2020, 51% of voters believed the Civil Service was 'running well', compared to 26% who believed it was not (Dinic, 2020a).
- 60% of people believe that the Civil Service should be neutral and permanent as opposed to being appointed by the government of the day. The support for this kind of Civil Service is consistent regardless of other political preferences (Renwick et al., 2022).

ACoBA

- 66% of respondents to a survey run by Spotlight on Corruption believe that ACoBA should be given stronger sanctioning powers (Spotlight on Corruption, 2022).

Elections

- Polling conducted by YouGov after the 2019 election showed that most voters have confidence in the fair running of elections and counting of ballots in UK elections, with over 60% believing there are few restrictions on the ability of candidates and activists to campaign freely (Dinic, 2020b).

REFERENCES

Renwick, A., Lauderdale, B., and Russell, M. (2023a). The Future of Democracy in the UK. **The Constitution Unit.**

A summary of the Constitution Unit's work on public attitudes to democracy in the UK since 2021, including a citizens' assembly and two large scale quantitative surveys. The work considers the 'type' of democracy British citizens want to exist and their views of governing institutions. This report compiles this research in its entirety to conclude some key themes about public attitudes to democracy, Parliament, and Government.

The Policy Institute. (2023). UK has internationally low confidence in political institutions, police and press.

King's College London. The Policy Institute at King's College London undertook polling across 28 countries (including 3000+ people in the UK) exploring the faith of individuals in their national institutions such as government, the legislature, police and national broadcaster, amongst others. This article considers some key findings which are of interest in the context of the Commission's Recommendations, in a comparative context.

Renwick, A., Lauderdale, B., Russell, M., and Cleaver, J. (2023b). Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics. **The Constitution Unit.**

Research by University College London in March 2023, which found that most voters believed stronger mechanisms to ensure politicians follow codes of conduct are needed, with stronger sanctions for those who do not. The survey found support for a stronger, independent regulator to monitor ministerial wrongdoing.

Hughes, D. (2023). Polling shows 61% oppose Boris Johnson's resignation peerages. **The Electoral Reform Society.**

Polling conducted by the Electoral Reform Society, finding low levels of support for Boris Johnson's use of political appointments.

Hussen, D.A. (2023). Britons' trust in politics has fallen significantly since Covid, report finds. **The Guardian.**

A write-up of a FocalData survey of 8000 people for IPPR, which showed that distrust in the political system has significantly increased since the onset of the pandemic, with 89% of respondents now supporting constitutional reform.

James, L. (2023). Just 14% of people think Stanley Johnson should get a knighthood, poll shows. **The Independent.**

A write-up of a poll by Savanta on the honours system.

Lelii, M. (2022). Trust in government, UK. **The Office for National Statistics.**

Data collected by the ONS on trust in government in comparative context, with other OECD countries.

Renwick, A., Lauderdale, B., Russell, M. and Cleaver, J. (2022). What Kind of Democracy do People Want? **The Constitution Unit.**

A series of surveys (6,500 people) and a Citizens Assembly group conducted by the UCL Constitution Unit in 2021, focusing on what voters want from their government and leaders and perceptions of democracy.

Bruce, D. (2022). Public trust in politics is at record lows- overhauling the rules is the only way to turn things around. **Transparency International.**

A blog post for Transparency International, arguing that enforcement of standards via changes to the Ministerial Code and Independent Adviser on Ministerial interests could help to tackle the issue of voter apathy and disengagement. The post states that reforms would help to prevent further scandals such as Greensill and reinforces the idea that those in public office should be focussed on representation as opposed to acting on behalf of private interests. The ultimate proposal is a reform on the scale of the introduction of the Nolan Principles in the 1990s.

IPPR. (2022). Revealed: Trust in politicians ‘in free fall’ after ‘year of chaos’, poll reveals. **IPPR.**

Research for IPPR by YouGov, comprising of a survey of 1700 adults in November 2022, which found that public trust in politicians had fallen by almost 9% compared to the position 18 months earlier, with two-thirds of voters saying politicians are ‘out for themselves’.

Spotlight on Corruption. (2022). New polling reveals huge public support for raft of reforms to improve standards in public life. **Spotlight on Corruption.**

Polling commissioned by Spotlight on Corruption, which found that large numbers of voters wished to see reform to standards in public life; this feeling was strongest amongst Conservative 2019 voters who no longer supported the party.

Bychawski, A. (2021). 70% of public concerned by UK government secrecy. **Open Democracy Foundation.**

The Open Democracy Foundation highlights concern among voters around government transparency, particularly in terms of responses to Freedom of Information requests and declarations of interest.

IPPR, 2021. Revealed: Trust in politicians at lowest level on record. **IPPR.**

A poll and accompanying report by YouGov and IPPR, suggesting that recent ‘sleaze’ scandals have had a significant impact on political trust, with a particular rise in the number of those believing politicians are “out for themselves” (57%). The report concludes that declining trust can lead not only to disengagement, but greater polarisation between voters, and that institutional reform is necessary to prevent further decline.

Omnisis. (2021). 72% of voters are against the award of peerages and honours following political donations. **Omnisis.**

A survey summary of a poll conducted by Omnisis for the ByLine Times on political honours. The resulting findings show that a majority of voters believe those who donate to parties should not be rewarded with honours or access to government officials.

Cowburn, A. (2021). Three quarters of public concerned about corruption in government, poll shows. **The Independent.**

A write-up of a poll conducted by Savanta on public trust and faith in government in the aftermath of the Patterson scandal.

Woodcock, A. (2021). Sleaze poll finds overwhelming public demand for action on lobbying and cronyism. **The Independent.**

Write up of a poll conducted by Find Out Now for the Independent on public trust and faith in government in the aftermath of the Patterson scandal.

English, P. (2021). What kind of second jobs should MPs be allowed to have? **YouGov.**

A survey by YouGov in 2021, which found general opposition to some (but not all) kinds of second jobs for MPs. General consensus is found against allowing MPs to work where there may be a conflict of interest (e.g., for a foreign government or for a corporation) but more tolerance if this is for a public service (e.g., NHS doctors).

Survation. (2021). Polling the Nolan Principles: The Public’s take on ethical standards in public life. **Survation.**

Polling for Survation, showing that almost 60% of voters do not believe the current government upholds the principles of integrity or honesty, including almost half of 2019 Conservative voters.

Ibbetson, C. (2021). Second jobs and sleaze: What do Britons make of a murky week in Westminster? **YouGov.**

Polling for YouGov in the aftermath of the Patterson saga, which showed that two fifths of the public thought that second jobs for MPs should not be permitted, with 39% believing additional employment should only be permitted in specific circumstances.

Dinic, M. (2020b). Democracy and the election process: what Britons think about UK elections. **YouGov.**

YouGov polling after the 2019 election, which showed that most voters had confidence in the fair running of elections and counting of ballots in UK elections, with over 60% believing there are few restrictions on the ability of candidates and activists to campaign freely.

Committee on Standards for Public Life. (2018). MPs' outside interests- testing public expectations. **Committee on Standards in Public Life.**

Qualitative research carried out by the CSPL on conflicts of interest in transparency, which found that the public have little tolerance for conflicts of interest and believe there should be stricter reforms on second jobs for MPs and parliamentary lobbying.

The Hansard Society (2018). How important do voters think competence and leadership are when choosing a political party? **The Hansard Society.**

An experiment by the Hansard Society exploring how much voters consider certain attributes when casting their vote, demonstrated the importance of competence, (and the increasing belief that those who hold high office should possess this quality), as well as other attributes such as honesty and leadership.

Comments on these proposals, whether from press, the public, academic or other interested parties would be welcome directly to the Commission by email to:

contact@ukgovernanceproject.co.uk