Is Britain Facing a Crisis of Democracy?

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Executive Summary

Britain is widely believed to be suffering a crisis of democracy. This briefing examines whether this perception is justified or not. Our findings—which are based on a four year research project funded by the ESRC—address four key issues: the legitimacy of governments, patterns of participation in politics, the impact of constitutional reform, and the explanation for any crisis.

Legitimacy

There has been a decline in levels of trust in government and confidence in the political system. Thirty years ago, four in ten people in Britain trusted government to put the needs of the nation above those of their political party; today, just one in five do so. But much of this decline set in during the early 1990s, although trust and confidence have fallen further since 1997.

Participation

Turnout has been low in elections held since 1997. This was most noticeably so at the 2001 general election, when the participation rate was the lowest since 1918 (although there was some recovery in the most recent local and European elections). At the same time, levels o ˢ the v ᴶn

Introduction

Britain is widely believed to be suffering a crisis of democracy. Levels of turnout at elections have fallen. Cynicism about politics and politicians is thought to be rife. And nowhere are these problems perceived to be more evident than amongst young people who appear to comprise a new generation of the politically disengaged. In short, we no longer participate in politics and no longer lend respect, authority or legitimacy to our political leaders.

This problem is thought to persist despite the introduction in recent years of a substantial programme of constitutional reform, one of whose aims was "to renew the relationship between politics and the people".[1] The use of proportional representation in European and devolved elections would help persuade people that their vote mattered. Freedom of information legislation would help make government more open and accountable. And in perhaps the most radical reform of all, creating a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly would bring decision making closer to the people. If after all this we now face a crisis of democracy, these claims appear rather hollow.

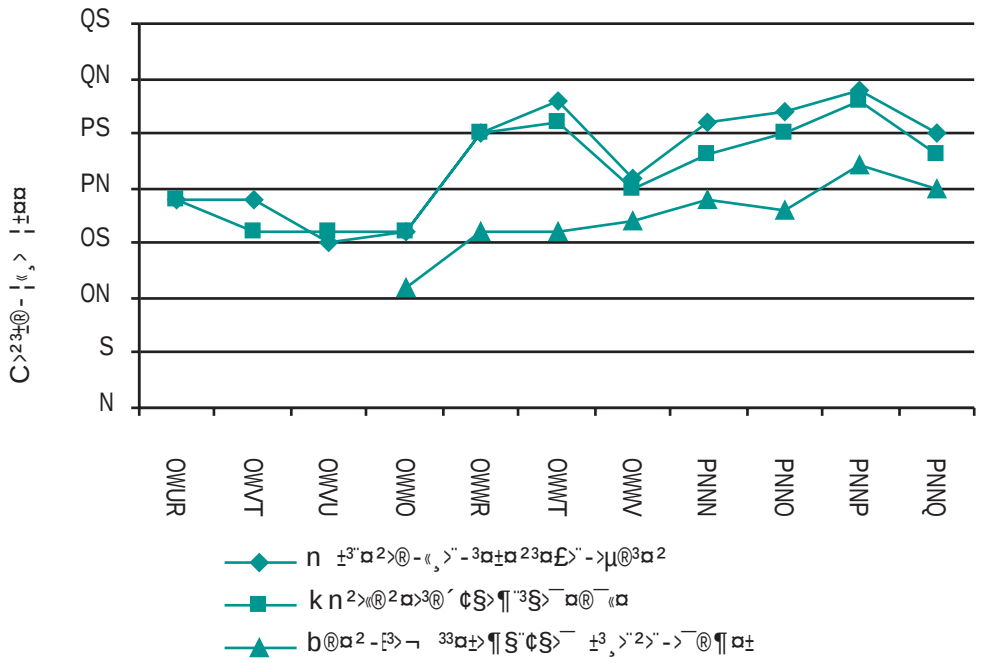
But is there really a crisis of democracy in Britain today? Do fewer people participate in politics? Do we no longer trust our political leaders or the way we are governed? Are young people particularly disengaged? Why might these changes have occurred and what role has constitutional reform played? These are the questions addressed by this briefing, which summarises the results of a four year research project on 'Legitimacy, Participation and Constitutional Change', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its 'Democracy and Participation' research programme.

This briefing falls into four sections:

Legitimacy: Has public trust] e

recent years, but equally it is not particularly the product of those years. Even so, are the chances of reversing the decline being eroded by a new generation of particularly cynical young voters entering the electorate?

Chart 2: Trends in political efficacy, 1974–2003



Source: Political Action Study (1974) British Social Attitudes

There is, in fact, little reason to think this is so. As Table 1 illustrates, those aged 18–24 are, if anything, somewhat *more* trusting of government, and less inclined to believe strongly that parties are only interested in votes or that MPs lose touch quickly. Rather than being particularly cynical

Participation

The low level of electoral turnout in recent elections is perhaps the most obvious reason why there seems to be a crisis of democracy in Britain. At 59%, the turnout in the 2001 election was the lowest since 1918, and probably represented the highest level of voluntary abstention since the advent of the mass franchise. And it is not just at general elections that turnout has fallen. As Chart 3 illustrates, until the combined elections in June 2004 at least, it has also declined at recent local and European elections.

But voting at elections is only one way of participating in politics. Another is taking to the streets. And it would seem that this has not gone out of fashion. The demonstrations against the Iraq war in February 2003 involved an estimated 4% of people in Britain. There have been large demonstrations too about f¾ ʌ o ɔ Meo & Ŏ ξ 4%ʻ 3 ↑ . Ъ%ʻ . Ъ%ʻ . o ! n

Table 2: Non-electoral political participation, 1986–2003

	1986	1989	1991	1994	2000	2002	2003
Signed a petition	34	41	53	39	42	43	42
Contacted MP	11	15	17	14	16	17	16
Gone on a protest or demonstration	6	8	9	9	10	12	11
Contacted media	3	4	4	5	6	7	5
Spoken to an influential person	3	3	5	3	4	6	5
Contacted a govt. department	3	3	4	3	4	5	5
Raised the issue in an organisation they already belong to	5	4	5	4	5	6	3
Formed a group of like-minded people	2	3	2	3	2	2	2

Source: British Social Attitudes.

But this raises a different question: have people abandoned the ballot box for the street? There is, in fact, no evidence to support this. Those who take part in non-electoral political activities are actually *more* likely to vote in elections than those who do not participate in protest actions. For example, the 2002 British Social Attitudes survey found that 80% of those who had undertaken three or more protest actions said they had voted in the previous year's general] Myear'Mr

political process. For example, as Table 4 shows, just as many people express an interest in politics now as did in the mid-1980s.[2] Equally, people are just as likely now to feel that they have the skills and abilities needed to participate effectively in the political process. This sense of 'personal efficacy' can be measured by how people respond to three statements:

"*People like me have no say in what the government does.*"

"*Voting is the only way people like me can have any say about how the government does things.*"

"*Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on.*"

Table 4: Trends in political interest, 1986–2003

Chart 4: Personal efficacy, 1974–2003

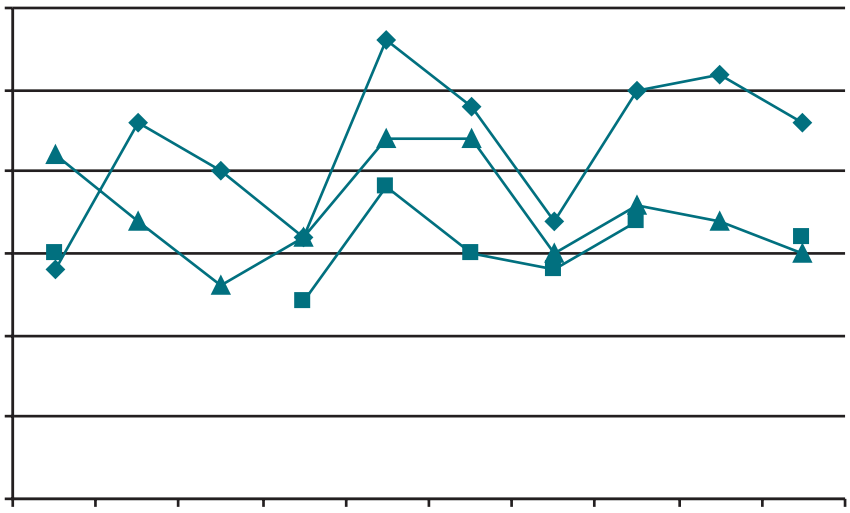
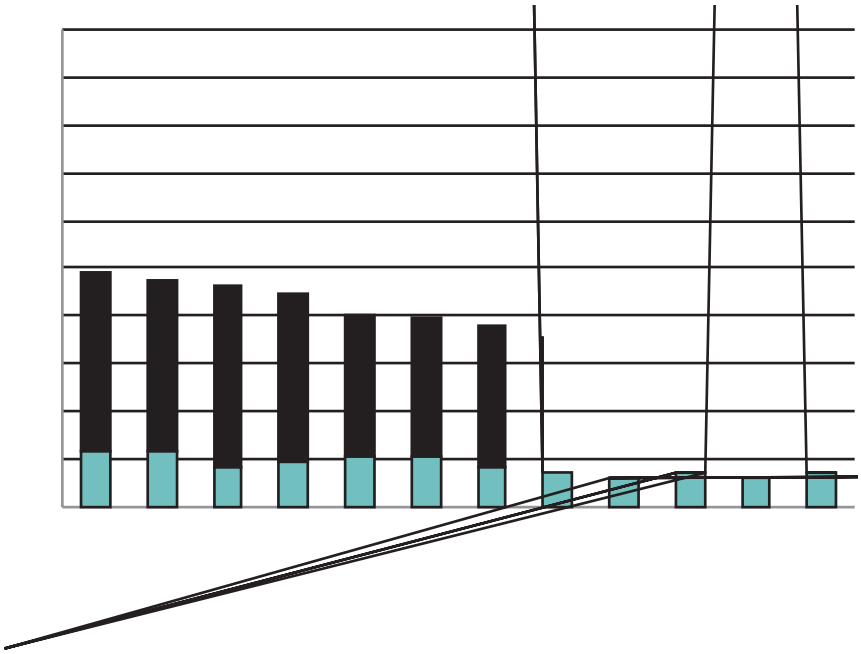


Chart 5: Party identification, 1987–2003



Constitutional change

Constitutional reform was meant to help restore trust and confidence in government. Yet as well as a fall in electoral participation, we have shown that the proportion who identify with a political party has continued to decline, trust in government has hit a new low, while levels of political efficacy have not returned to the levels enjoyed in the 1980s. What has gone wrong?

One possibility, of course, is that constitutional change has been unpopular with the public. This, however, does not seem to be the case. For example, 44% of Britons support the principle of using proportional representation, while just 15% are opposed. And even in England, only 13% oppose the idea of Scotland having her own parliament.

What is in doubt is whether constitutional reform is thought to have made a difference. On our last reading, as many as 72% thought that reforming the House of Lords had made no difference to the way Britain as a whole is governed, 64% said the same of creating the Scottish Parliament, and 60% the introduction of Freedom of Information legislation.

But perhaps the best test of whether constitutional change has had any impact on levels of trust and efficacy is to examine what has happened in Scotland since the advent of the Scottish Parliament. The creation north of the border of a parliament with significant legislative powers has arguably been the most radical of the various reforms introduced in recent years. In England, only London has enjoyed any kind of elected devolved institution. If constitutional change has had any effect on trust and confidence in government, there should have been more favourable trends in Scotland in recent years than in England.

So far as trust in government is concerned, Table 5 suggests there is little evidence that this has happened. Trust in government is lower in Scotland now than it was prior to the advent of devolution, just as it is in England. But when we look at political efficacy, there is a somewhat more positive story to tell. Up to and including 2000, the proportion who strongly disagreed with the propositions put in our surveys was much the same on both sides of the border. But since then, it appears that slightly fewer people in Scotland have fallen into this category than have done so south of the border, or did so in Scotland itself in the mid-1990s.

Table 5: Political attitudes in Scotland and England, 1994–2003

	1994/6	1997	2000	2001	2002	2003
% trust British governments 'just about always'/ 'most of the time'						
Scotland	29	29	13	27	21	21
England	23	34	17	29	26	18
% strongly agree that parties are only interested in people's votes, not their opinions						
Scotland	29	16	24	21	25	20
England	26	16	26	26	30	26
% strongly agree that MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly						
Scotland	26	na	24	22	25	20
England	25	na	23	24	29	24

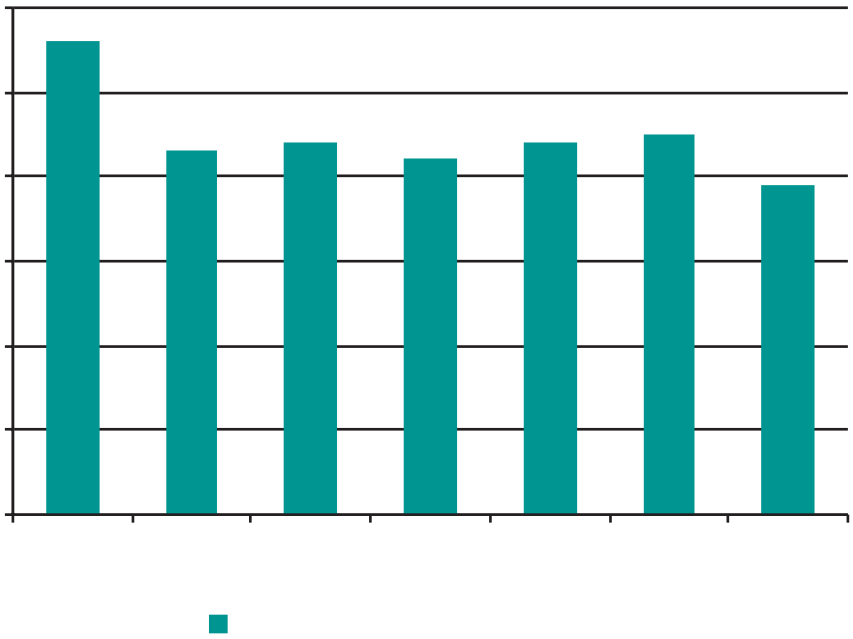
Source: British Social Attitudes; Scottish Social Attitudes

Constitutional change is not responsible for the current low levels of trust and efficacy. But for most people, it has simply not made enough difference to alter their views.

Explanation

So how can we explain the adverse trends we have identified? Why have trust and confidence in government declined? And why has turnout fallen at election time? In particular are these trends the result of long term social forces that will be difficult to change? Or are they the product of more short-term developments that might more easily be reversed?

Chart 6: Trends in social trust, 1959–2002



Sources: Peter Hall, 'Social Capital in Britain', *British Journal of Political Science*, 29:3, July 1999 (1959, 1981, 1990 figures); British Social Attitudes

Finally, what of the role of the tabloid press? As Table 8 shows, those who read a tabloid newspaper at least three times a week are less likely to trust governments than are broadsheet readers. They are also somewhat more cynical than those who do not regularly read a newspaper at all. However, we cannot tell from this snapshot evidence whether reading a tabloid makes people more cynical about politics or whether people read a tabloid newspaper because they are cynical about politics. To distinguish between these two possibilities we need to be able to monitor the attitudes of the same people over time.

Table 8: Newspaper readership and political trust (2002)

	Non-reader	Tabloid reader	Broadsheet reader
% who trust government…			
…"just about always" or "most of the time"	26	22	35
…"only some of the time" or "almost never"	71	78	66

Source: British Social Attitudes 2002

We can do this using data from the British Election Panel Study 1997–2001, which tracked the same group of people on a regular basis between 1997 and 2001. As Table 9 shows, the data indicate that over that period, trust in government actually fell most heavily amongst those who regularly read a broadsheet newspaper, while the drop amongst those who read a tabloid was the same as amongst

Table 9: Newspaper readership and changes in political trust, 1997–2001

	1997	2001	Change 1997–2001
% who trust government "just about always" or "most of the time"			
Non-reader	31	29	-2
Tabloid reader	33	31	-2
Broadsheet reader	35	29	-6

Source: British Election Panel Study 1997–2001

So if the decline in trust is not easily accounted for by any of these long term forces, what might be responsible? Two pieces of evidence suggest that responsibility may lie in the allegations about

Table 10: Trust in government and electoral participation, 1997 and 2001

	% who voted		Change
	1997	2001	1997–2001
% who trust government…			
…"just about always" or "most of the time"	85	74	-11
…"only some of the time"	78	69	-9
…"almost never"	67	51	-16

Source: British Election Study (1997), British Social Attitudes (2001)

So if voters were no less motivated to vote in 2001 than they were in 1997, why did so many more stay at home? The answer is reasonably straightforward. The election failed to attract the interest and attention of those who were *already* less motivated to vote. For example, as Table 11 shows, turnout fell between 1997 and 2001 by only six points amongst those who have a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics, but by no less than 28 points amongst those who do not have any interest at all. A similar difference is found if we look at trends in turnout amongst those who do and do not feel a duty to vote, or those who do or do not have a strong sense of party identification.

Table 11: Political interest and electoral participation, 1997 and 2001

Table 12: Perceptions of party difference and strength of party identification

	% who say there is not much difference between the parties		Change 1997–2001
	1997	2001	
Strength of party identification…			
…very strong	15	20	+5
…fairly strong	18	31	+13
…not very strong	28	48	+20
…none	38	59	+21

Sources: British Election Study (1997), British Social Attitudes (2001)

There was probably one other good reason why those who were already less interested in politics stayed at home in 2001. For the second election in a row, the opinion polls were telling voters that Labour was bound to win. Of course, it remains a mute point whether the parties will or will not move further apart from each other in future or whether elections will become more competitive. But if they do, then the recent fall in electoral turnout may well be reversed.

Conclusion: Is there a crisis of democracy in Britain?

On certain measures, Britain does, indeed, appear to be facing something of a crisis in its political system. Levels of trust in government and confidence in the political system are lower than they were little more than a decade ago. Electoral turnout has fallen sharply, most noticeably at the 2001 general election. Meanwhile, the introduction of new political institutions since 1997, designed in part to restore people's trust and confidence, appears to have had little impact.

On the other hand, people do not seem more disengaged from the political system. Participation outside the ballot box has increased somewhat over the last fifteen or so years. Levels of political interest have not fallen, and people remain confident in their own ability to engage with the political process and to believe in the importance of voting at elections.

Perhaps the most reassuring evidence from our research is that which suggests the decline in trust and turnout is not due to long-term social forces, but to short-term political ones. The most plausible explanation for the decline in trust is the public reaction to allegations of misconduct and 'sleaze' on the part of politicians in the early to mid-199n ˛ imЧmidyr я hi _ h " do] a mid

Annex 1: Data sources

The core data for this briefing are drawn from modules of questions included on the 2000 and 2002 British Social Attitudes thi s ز א 0 l- Ů < " d aM

Annex 2: Further reading

1. Publications arising from this research project:

Catherine Bromley, John Curtice and Ben Seyd, 'Political Engagement, Trust and Constitutional Reform', in Alison Park et al, eds,

Annex 3: About the authors

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The Constitution Unit

Details of the Unit can be found on the inside back cover.

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CREST

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