
DEMOCRACY ON TRIAL

WHAT VOTERS REALLY THINK OF
PARLIAMENT AND OUR POLITICIANS

By Peter Kellner





INTRODUCTION

When news programmes report the “Arab Spring”, or vote-rigging in Russia or repression in China, one implication is clear: they have far to go to catch up with us. Britain’s political system may have its faults, but fundamentally we occupy the right end of the spectrum between democracy and tyranny. Likewise when we learn about the past struggles of the Levellers, Suffragettes and others who fought for the right to vote: the story on offer is of a journey that has reached its proper destination.

How far do British people share this rosy view? YouGov has conducted what we believe to be the most thorough ever survey of public attitudes to British democracy. What do we like most – and least – about our political system? How well or badly does Parliament do its job? How much can our votes change our lives? Has too much power drained away to Europe or big global companies? Who do we think has most influence on our lives? What should MPs do when their own judgment conflicts with the views of their constituents? Should we hold more referendums – or are they a dangerous threat to representative democracy?

In January 2012, YouGov questioned more than 5,000 adults throughout Great Britain. What emerges is a picture of massive discontent that goes far beyond a dislike of particular politicians, parties and policies. To be sure, a majority thinks Britain’s political system is better than most – but that is not nearly good enough. They believe it to be fundamentally flawed. Individually, many of the public’s complaints are unsurprising. What our research shows is that the combined effect of these complaints is more profound than is widely realised. Unless action is taken to restore the reputation of our political system, its very legitimacy may be at risk.

This report sets out what we asked and what we found. YouGov’s survey was prompted by the invitation from the BBC and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism to deliver the 2012 Butler lecture – an annual series to honour Dr David Butler, the great pioneer of political and electoral analysis. In the lecture* I offer my explanation for what has gone wrong, and what could be done to put things right.

This report has a more specific purpose: to inform the debate about how to revive British democracy, and to provide evidence for anyone who wishes to debate its future, however much or little their views about the way forward match mine.

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* To view the lecture please visit reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk



HOW DEMOCRATIC DO WE THINK BRITAIN IS THESE DAYS?

I graduated from university in 1969, having taken part in my share of the many demonstrations against Harold Wilson's government. A motley crew of us had briefly occupied the university's administration building in sympathy with the far more massive confrontations with authority that swept European capitals in May 1968. Anger in America over the Vietnam war was intense. All in all, the late Sixties saw more widespread protests against elected western governments than at any time in the two decades before, or the four decades since.

In October 1969, Gallup asked a sample of Britons: *would you describe Britain as a democratic country or not?* Just over two-thirds (68%) said yes, but a substantial minority either said no (20%) or don't know (12%).

YouGov has repeated that question. Today's economic difficulties are greater than those of the late Sixties but – despite the 'occupy' movement – organised challenges to our political system are rarer and feebler. Yet faith in British democracy is no higher than it was then. 67% say we are a democracy, while 17% say we are not and another 17% aren't sure. We obtain similar figures when we asked people whether they agree or disagree with the statement: *"for all its faults, Britain's democratic system is one of the finest in the world"*. 63% agree, while 23% disagree.

Yet even those figures are deceptively reassuring; for many of the same people who are broadly proud of British democracy are nevertheless unhappy with the way Parliament works.

TABLE 1

Percentage who agree that Parliament does a good job...

	All	Those who say UK is a democracy
...debating issues of public concern in a sensible and considered way	24%	32%
...reflecting the full range of people and views of the British electorate	16%	21%
...representing the interests and wishes of people like you	15%	20%
...understanding the daily lives of people like you	12%	16%



As the figures in table 1 show, when most people place Britain near the top of the world's democracy league table, they do so despite Parliament's failings, not because of its excellence.

These attitudes are broadly the same in each of the countries that comprise Great Britain. Devolution does not seem to have greatly affected underlying attitudes to British democracy. We boosted our samples in Scotland and Wales, to achieve more than 1,000 respondents in each. These are the results by country:

■ **England:** 67% describe Britain as a democratic country, 64% think Britain's system is one of the best in the world, but just 15% think the Westminster parliament does a good job on 'representing the interests and wishes of people like you'.

■ **Scotland:** 66%, 58%, 12% respectively.

■ **Wales:** 63%, 64%, 14% respectively.

SNP voters are slightly more disenchanted with British democracy. Their figures for the same three points are: 60%, 47%, 6%. Even so, the noteworthy thing is how close their figures are to Britain as a whole, not how different. (Plaid Cymru voters in Wales do not display even that level of disenchantment. Their figures – 62%, 67%, 14% – are very close to the British average.)

In short, the mixture of pride and concern is common to people in all parts of Britain – and also people in every social, political and democratic group. To adapt Winston Churchill's famous words, British democracy is thought to be the worst in the world, except for most of the others.

WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

Parliament stands at the heart of our political system, but our views of that system are informed by many other things. We offered people a list of eight such features and asked them to pick out the two or three they liked most, and the two or three they liked least. As table 2 shows (see next page), one noteworthy finding is that 35% of the public can't pick a single feature to praise, while all bar 16% can list at least one feature to criticise.

The difference between the popular and unpopular features could scarcely be more marked. Five of the eight concern the business of gathering, using and monitoring power – how MPs and peers are chosen, the quality of our parties and politicians and the way ministers are held to account. In each of these five cases, significantly more people put these high on their 'like least' list than their 'like most' list. The three features that score well are those that stand near, but separate from, the business of power: the role played by the Queen and the coverage of politics by broadcasters and newspapers.

The fact that newspapers score relatively well might raise some eyebrows: other YouGov research shows that few people trust the red-top and mid-range tabloids to tell the truth. It is a sign of how unpopular our political system is that parties and politicians score even worse than journalists, when people are asked to compare their performance side-by-side.

TABLE 2

Q. Which two or three of these features of Britain's political system, if any, do you like MOST?

Q. Which two or three of these features of Britain's political system, if any, do you like LEAST?

	Like most	Like least
Features that more people like than dislike		
The coverage of politics on radio and television	36%	7%
The role played by the Queen	32%	9%
The coverage of politics in our newspapers	23%	10%
Features that more people dislike than like		
The degree to which MPs hold ministers to account	13%	22%
The fact that Britain normally has single-party governments, elected with less than half the votes	13%	23%
The quality of our political parties	5%	39%
The way peers are selected to be members of the House of Lords	3%	39%
The quality of our politicians	3%	53%
None of these	26%	6%
Don't know	9%	10%

The Queen's rating is significant for a different reason. Other research confirms her popularity. The striking thing here is how well she scores in a question specifically about our political system – as distinct from, say, her ceremonial role. A central feature of Britain's history, including all-out civil war, has been the struggle to wrest power from monarchs and to secure it for Parliament. Yet today, it is the monarch who commands political respect by the general public, while Parliament is regarded with something approaching contempt. Were the Queen to try and exert political power, her popularity would doubtless evaporate; but as things stand, we have little faith in the institutions that won Britain's long battle for supremacy.



Are our attitudes to our political system by the fact that Britain now has a coalition government – either positively, because together the governing parties won almost 60% of the total vote, or negatively, because nobody actually voted for the coalition programme that was agreed between the Conservatives in the days after the 2010 election? Our data suggests that this is not a significant factor either way. As table 2 has already shown, relatively few people regard our normal state of affairs – single-party governments elected with less than half the total vote – as either a treasured ornament or a fatal flaw in our political arrangements. When we asked a more direct question about the coalition, views were divided, with attitudes conditioned by their party loyalties:

TABLE 3				
Q. Putting aside your own party preferences, which of these views about Britain's current coalition government comes closer to your own?				
	All	Con	Lab	Lib Dem
'The agreement to form the coalition was democratically legitimate, given that no one party won the last general election outright, and the two parties that formed the coalition won 60% of all votes cast'	47%	75%	27%	74%
'The agreement to form the coalition was NOT democratically legitimate, as nobody voted for this particular government. Coalitions are legitimate only when the parties tell voters BEFORE the election that they intend to work together'	37%	16%	60%	18%
Don't know	16%	9%	13%	8%

Even though we asked people to put aside their party preferences, big majorities of Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters regard the coalition agreement as legitimate, while most Labour supporters do not. On this point, practical outcomes seem to matter more than the democratic principles that underpinned what happened. If this is a general truth about the public attitudes it's another cause for concern; for one of the vital features of any healthy democracy is that people overwhelmingly accept the legitimacy of what is decided, even if they are on the losing side.



WHAT WE THINK OF OUR MPS

If Parliament is the principal stage on which democracy is displayed, MPs are the principal actors. Our poll explored what voters knew and felt about their own local MP (repeating questions that Gallup asked back in 1954), and what they think about politicians in general. The main results are shown below.

TABLE 4

Q. Do you happen to know the name of your local MP?		
	Gallup 1954	YouGov 2012
Yes	67%	63%
No	33%	37%
Q. On the whole, would you say that he or she is doing a good job or a bad job as your MP?		
Good	38%	15%
Bad	5%	13%
Average	10%	37%
Don't know	47%	35%
Percentage who...*		
...think that, however they start out, most MPs 'end up becoming remote from the everyday lives and concerns of the people they represent'		66%
...agree that 'politicians tell lies all the time - you can't believe a word they say'		62%

* Was not asked by Gallup in 1954

Attitudes to voters' own MPs are poor rather than terrible. Most people's verdict is 'average' or 'don't know'. And the minority that hold a definite view divide evenly between 'good' and 'bad'. Back in 1954, almost half offered no verdict at all; but most of the rest thought their own MP was doing a good job. Today's voters are plainly less satisfied than their grandparents.

However, it is when we gauge attitudes to politicians in general that the true calamity reveals itself. Big majorities think politicians 'tell lies all the time' and become remote from 'the everyday lives and concerns of the people they represent'.



The view that politicians are liars is obviously worrying; so we drilled down to investigate this feeling further. We find only modest differences by age, gender, social class or region. Among supporters of the Greens, UK Independence Party and British National Party, agreement rises to 80% or more. Clearly, one reason for backing one of the smaller parties is profound disenchantment with the big parties. But even among the bigger parties, agreement is high, ranging from 50% among Tory supporters to 67% among Labour supporters. The high Labour figure partly reflects the fact that the Conservatives are in power: I suspect that, had a similar poll been conducted when Labour was in power, more Tory voters and fewer Labour voters would have said politicians are liars.

One big change in recent decades has been the proliferation of media outlets. People can easily avoid political news – or, indeed, any news – if they have no interest. Could it be that MPs are more trusted by those who follow politics closely than those who don't? We identified three distinct groups, each of which comprises around 14% of the population:

- **Political junkies.** They watch one of the main politics programmes on TV (e.g. Newsnight, Daily Politics, Channel 4 News) at least once a week, and also discuss politics with their family or friends at least once a week. 57% of them agree that politicians are liars, while 40% disagree and 3% don't know.
- **Reality TV but not political junkies.** These are people who vote in reality TV shows such as X Factor or Big Brother but 'never or almost never' watch political TV programmes or discuss politics with their family or friends. They divide: 65% agree, 27% disagree, 9% don't know.
- **Neither Reality TV nor political junkies.** They don't follow or discuss politics or vote in Reality TV shows. They divide: 63% agree, 15% disagree, 22% don't know.

The big picture is that scepticism is rife across the board. Greater familiarity with politics does only a little to dispel the view that MPs are liars. However, the minority that thinks well of MPs is much greater among political junkies. And among the other two groups, it is significantly higher among reality TV voters than the least active electors. Given that people in both of these groups don't watch politics on television or discuss it with their friends or neighbours, it seems a little odd that one is almost twice as likely as the other to consider politicians to be honest. Perhaps we are witnessing disillusion at two levels: against politicians specifically, and against people with power and authority of any kind, including the media.

This chimes with other YouGov research into the decline of trust in recent years. This could be why the proportions agreeing that politicians are liars are similar in all three groups, while the proportions disagreeing vary more widely. Thus 40% of political junkies reject the view that MPs are liars, compared with just 15% of those who neither follow politics nor vote in reality TV shows.



This group is not only least inclined to consider MPs trustworthy; of the three groups it is by far the least inclined to consider Britain to be democratic, and by far the most likely to say ‘don’t know’ to almost any question in our survey. Many of them seem to be alienated from those who run Britain’s big institutions, whether government or TV stations. They have given up, or never started, trying to make sense of how decisions are reached in Britain today, whether in Parliament or Strictly Come Dancing.

The decline in trust seems to be long-term. After each general election since 1987, British Social Attitudes have asked people how much they ‘trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their political party’. The proportion trusting governments ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ has collapsed from 47% in 1987 to just 20% in 2010. And the decline has been remorseless, with the proportion at each election lower than the election before.

With all the data reported here, the point is not whether the bad reputation of MPs and Parliament is deserved or undeserved. It is what people think. Whether MPs need to behave better can be debated; that they need to improve their reputation is beyond doubt.



DO OUR VOTES MATTER?

One common observation these days is that parties, elections and governments matter less than they used to. This rests on two propositions: first, that the old ideological differences between the main political parties have largely vanished, so that they are now much more alike than they used to be; second, that British governments are much more constrained nowadays by the economic and financial forces of globalisation and the political power of the European Union.

We tested both propositions. Most people agree that ‘it doesn’t make much difference to my daily life who wins general elections these days – there’s very little real difference between the main political parties’. Barely one in three disagrees.

TABLE 5	
Percentage who agree that:	
It doesn't make much difference to my daily life who wins general elections these days - there's very little real difference between the main political parties	58%
We have a good choice of parties at election time - I feel able to vote for a party that represents my views and concerns	47%
Britain would be governed better if our politicians got out of the way, and instead our ministers were non-political experts who knew how to run large organisation	38%
Thinking about outside pressures, such as globalisation, modern technology, the European Union, big multinational companies and the financial markets, which of these views comes closer to your own?	
'These pressures are so great these days that Britain's Government and Parliament have largely lost their power to make big decisions about Britain's future'	47%
'These pressures are real, but Britain's Government and Parliament still have plenty of power to make big decisions about Britain's future'	39%
Don't know	14%



We should not be surprised that Liberal Democrat supporters agree by two-to-one, or that supporters of the Greens, UKIP and BNP agree by five-to-one. Indeed, the perception that there is little difference between the main parties has fuelled the rise of minor party voting at general elections and, even more, elections to the European parliament, whose proportional voting system helps smaller parties refute the argument that a vote for them is a wasted vote.

What is more striking is that around half of Labour and Conservative voters also agree that there is little difference between their parties. Their attitude to politics could not be less like that of party activists, whose normal stance is their opponents belong to a different universe.

The picture is similar when we tested the argument: ‘we have a good choice of parties at election time – I feel able to vote for a party that represents my views and concerns’. Minor party supporters are least likely to agree, while Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters divide evenly. Conservative voters agree by two-to-one. Again, this probably reflects the fact that we have a Conservative-led government: people tend to be happier with the way things are when they are on the winning side.

As for the second proposition, that British governments have little real power these days, the public is divided. Slightly more agree (47%) than disagree (39%). These figures can be combined to provide a net score of +8. Not surprisingly, supporters of minor parties agree overwhelmingly; their net score is +47. Among other groups, the most striking contrast is between readers of the red-top and mid-range tabloids, such as The Sun and Daily Mail, whose score is +14, and the readers of the upmarket papers such as The Times and Guardian, whose score is -7. It’s hard to say whether this contrast – real, if modest – reflects the kind of readers the different types of paper attract, or the influence they have on these readers, or a bit of both; but it does confirm that any analysis of why the public thinks as it does, and what needs to be done in the future, must involve the role of the media. For the time being, the key finding is that less than half the public think our Government and Parliament ‘still have plenty of power to make big decisions about Britain’s future’.

Given that, we should not be too surprised by another finding that, on its own, might seem shocking. Both Greece and Italy have recently acquired technocratic governments run by non-politicians. How would Britons feel if we followed suit? We tested the proposition that ‘Britain would be governed better if our politicians got out of the way, and instead our ministers were non-political experts who knew how to run large organisations’. Almost as many people agreed, 38%, as disagreed, 43%. On this occasion, the explanation is NOT that Labour voters want to use any means to get rid of Tory ministers, or that Conservatives are happy that their party’s politicians are in charge. Views among supporters of all three main parties are very similar. The stark truth is that while there is no majority for technocrats to take over, neither is there an overwhelming insistence that political decisions in Britain today should be taken by politicians.



WHO MATTERS – AND WHO SHOULD MATTER – IN TODAY’S BRITAIN

We have established that voters have a dim view of the quality and power of Parliament. So which people and institutions do matter, and which should? Our survey explored this in two ways: asking people to judge the actual and ideal power wielded by six groups of people; and asking them to say which people MPs should – and do – pay most attention to. The results are shown in table 6 (see next page).

Britain’s government is just one of four institutions that are thought to ‘make a great deal of difference to the daily lives of people like you’. The others are the banks, the European Union and big businesses. We offered respondents four options: ‘a great deal of power’ to make a difference, ‘a fair amount of power’, ‘not much power’ and ‘little or no power’. For each of the four institutions, more than 70% chose the first option. 58% also think local councils have the power to make a difference, presumably because of their influence over the quality of local services. ‘Your local MP’ is felt to have the least power.

When it comes to who *should* wield power, there is a simple divide between those who are elected to handle Britain’s affairs and those who are not. More than 70% think government, MPs and councils should be powerful, while fewer than a quarter think the same of banks, businesses and the EU.

At first sight, the figures for ‘your local MP’ are curious. We have already seen that MPs have a low reputation, and that only 15% think their own MP is doing a good job. Yet as many as 71% think MPs should have real power. The answers to our next question help to make sense of this. The typical voter wants MPs to behave very differently from the way he or she thinks they do today.

The greatest influences on MPs are thought to be business leaders, senior civil servants and the owners and editors of tabloid papers. The people who voters think MPs *should* listen to most are their local voters, ‘people like you’ and poor families. It is worth repeating that polls measure perceptions, not necessarily reality. Anyone familiar with the workload of a reasonably diligent MP can testify to the time they spend tackling the problems of specific constituents, and taking up local issues. Most voters seem unaware of this. This chasm between behaviour and reputation matters, not just for its own sake, but because it helps to explain the problems facing British democracy when we consider the next set of issues.



TABLE 6

Percentage who think each institution (a) does and (b) should 'make a great deal of difference to the daily lives of people like you?'

	(a) Do	(b) Should
Britain's government	85%	87%
The people who run big international banks and other financial institutions	79%	16%
The European Union	74%	24%
The people who run big businesses in Britain	71%	24%
Your local council	58%	75%
Your local MP	29%	71%
Q. (a) Which three or four of the following do you think MPs generally pay most attention to?		
Q. (b) Which three or four of the following do you think MPs SHOULD pay most attention to?		
	(a) Do	(b) Should
Voters who live in their own constituency	27%	77%
People like you	5%	73%
Poor families	4%	40%
White men and women born in Britain	4%	29%
Pressure groups such as Liberty, RSPCA, Migration Watch and TaxPayers' Alliance	15%	20%
Senior civil servants in Whitehall	44%	14%
Trade union leaders	22%	12%
People who run large companies	56%	9%
Immigrants	17%	5%
Senior officials in the European Union	30%	2%
Senior members of the American government	20%	1%
Owners and editors of tabloid newspapers	35%	1%
Don't know	14%	18%



SHOULD MPS BE DELEGATES OR REPRESENTATIVES?

When Edmund Burke faced the electors of Bristol in 1774, one of his rivals, Henry Cruger, argued that MPs should be delegates to Westminster, and vote in parliament according to their views rather than his own. Burke's reply became the classic statement in favour of MPs being representatives rather than delegates:

Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living... Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

Today, of course, life for MPs is very different. Virtually all adults have a vote, not just men with property. Parties are much stronger. MPs are expected to spend far more time in their constituencies; and modern communications allow local voters to keep tabs on their MP and tell him or her what they think. Table 7 (see next page) sets today's views about representative democracy in the context of these points.

Again, we find a big difference between the way MPs are thought to behave, and what voters think they should do. Understandably, the dominant influence is perceived to be their party leadership, whereas voters think the greatest influences should be the views of their constituents and the promises they made at the most recent election. As for the very thing that Burke regarded as most important – an MP's own judgement – few voters think it either does or should matter.

We then posed directly the dilemma that Burke addressed. In order to remove from consideration the issue of party whipping, we asked respondents to consider free votes – that is, where parties don't instruct their MPs what to do. In those circumstances, should MPs be delegates or representatives: vote according to their constituents' wishes or their own



TABLE 7

Q. (a) In general, how much attention should MPs pay to each of the following when voting in Parliament, for example on taxation, public spending, or proposed new laws?

Q. (b) If these different considerations are in conflict with each other, which ONE of them should MPs pay MOST attention to?

Q. (c) Which one of these do you think MPs nowadays pay most attention to in practice?

	(a) Should pay great deal	(b) Should pay most	(c) Do pay most
The policy of their party leadership	24%	5%	63%
Their personal judgement	28%	8%	17%
The majority view among voters in their constituency	64%	41%	4%
The promises they made at the most recent election	72%	38%	2%
Don't know	n/a	8%	13%

Sometimes there is a 'free vote' in Parliament, when parties do NOT advise their MPs which way to vote. In principle, when there is a conflict between an MP's own judgement and the majority view of his or her local electorate on a 'free vote', do you think the MP should generally...

...vote according to his or her judgement	29%
...vote according to the majority view of his or her local electorate	58%
Don't know	13%

Thinking about the four or five biggest policy decisions that Parliament considers each year, which of these views comes closer to yours?

'The best way to make such decisions is for MPs to consider them in detail and for the majority view in Parliament to determine what happens'	39%
'The best way to make such decisions is for Parliament to hold a referendum and for the majority view among voters to determine what happens'	45%
Don't know	16%



judgement? By a clear majority of two-to-one, voters want their MPs to be delegates. (Maybe the voters of Bristol thought the same way in 1774: theirs was a two-MP seat, and both Burke and Cruger were elected – but Cruger won substantially more votes than Burke.) Not a single group – political, demographic or regional – prefers MPs to use their own judgement; and in only one group is the verdict even close: the small minority who follow politicians on social media such as Twitter or Facebook and who, one imagines, have a more nuanced and sympathetic view of how at least some MPs think.

Next we posed the separate but related issue: whether ours should be a representative or direct democracy. Here the public is divided: 45% think major decisions should be taken by a referendum, while 39% think they should be decided by Parliament.

Once more, most groups divide fairly evenly, but there are exceptions. Political junkies, Lib Dem supporters and AB voters (managerial and professional workers) tend to favour representative democracy, while direct democracy is favoured most by manual workers, supporters of minor parties and those who think Britain is undemocratic.

That only four people in ten prefer a Parliamentary system is striking enough. What's more, most of them think MPs should vote in line with their true Burkeans in Britain today - those who think Parliament should remain supreme and also want MPs to use their own judgement in free votes - is a mere 15%.



WHAT REFERENDUM BRITAIN MIGHT LOOK LIKE

Referendums are relatively new to Britain. Some were held in different parts of Wales in the 1960s (over whether pubs should be allowed to open on Sundays), a number have been held in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since the 1970s on their constitutional arrangements, and in various English cities on whether to have directly-elected mayors. Only two UK-wide referendums have been held: in 1975 on whether to stay in the Common Market (as the EU was then called), and in 2011 on whether to switch from first-past-the-post to the alternative vote for electing MPs. However, different parties have promised referendums in other circumstances, most notably on Britain's relations with the rest of the EU.

Suppose direct democracy were to become more common. We asked people how they would vote on seven different issues where referendums have been, or might be, mooted. On one, the verdict is emphatic: by three-to-one, people say they would back a measure to reduce Britain's net immigration to zero.

TABLE 8

Q. How would you vote in a referendum to...

(Figures shown exclude those who answered don't know / would not vote)

	For	Against
Reduce net immigration to zero, so that the number of immigrants settling in Britain each year is no more than the number of Britons leaving this country to settle abroad	76%	24%
Provide parents with the names and addresses of all convicted paedophiles living in their area	61%	39%
Set a legal maximum earnings level of £1 million a year including bonuses	60%	40%
Withdraw the UK from the EU	58%	42%
Restore the death penalty for murdering a police officer	51%	49%
Prohibit local councils from increasing council tax for the next ten years	49%	51%
Make it legal to use and own small quantities of 'soft' drugs such as cannabis	37%	63%



On three other issues, the margin is around three-to-two for change – to withdraw Britain from the EU, to establish a maximum pay limit of £1 million a year, and to provide parents with the names and addresses of convicted paedophiles living nearby. On two issues, opinion is evenly divided – restoring the death penalty for murdering a police officer, and prohibiting any rise in Council tax for the ten years. On just one of the seven do most voters clearly prefer the status quo: making it legal to use and own small quantities of ‘soft’ drugs such as cannabis.

We should be clear what these figures do and don’t tell us. They depict what people thought at the time we conducted our survey. They do not predict what the result of a real referendum might be after weeks of campaigning. If we look back at the two UK-wide referendums that have been held, we find that most people favoured change more than six months before the vote (to leave the Common Market and to change Britain’s voting system), but that, as polling day approached, the status quo became more attractive. In the end, people voted by two-to-one on both occasions against change. On the seven issues that we tested in our survey, opinion may also shift as proponents of the different views fought to make their case.

People will draw different conclusions from the fact that polls may tell a different story from votes at the end of actual campaigns. Supporters of representative democracy can argue that this proves why MPs should be representatives rather than delegates, for the process of debate and deliberation is central to the business of making the right decisions; the parliamentary system achieves this in a way that counting the top-of-the-head views of constituents does not.

In contrast, supporters of direct democracy can say that the process of debate and deliberation need not be confined to MPs. Referendums would open up our political system by engaging voters more completely in the decisions that matter most to them, and so restore the legitimacy of a system that, as our survey shows, commands little public respect at the moment.



CONCLUSION

Britain's political system is plainly in trouble. Even the majority who regard our country as democratic think Parliament fails to do its job properly. Most of us think the wrong people have too much power, and the right people tell lies.

Our survey and this report have sought to gauge the depth of public dissatisfaction. Its root causes are another matter. To what extent is the public verdict justified, and to what extent based on a false impression of how our political system actually works? Has the media done a good job exposing that system's failings – or a bad job by twisting the truth? Or both? How much power have globalisation and the European sucked power away from Westminster? Is the true villain the inevitable complexity of modern political life and the frequent need for politicians to make tough choices that voters would rather avoid?

Each of us will probably answer these questions in different ways. As a result our views about what should be done will vary. However, if the reputation of British democracy is to be repaired, three things are surely needed: a recognition of how profoundly voters believe that the present system fails them, far more effective communications between politicians and voters, and the realisation that while better communication is vital, it will not be enough. Behaviour has to change as well. The public's failure to understand how government and parliament really operate may be a tenth of the problem, or a third, or half. It is unlikely to be the whole problem.



TOPLINE RESULTS

YouGov interviewed 5,160 adults online throughout Great Britain between January 12 and 21, 2012.

All figures are percentages. The full set of tables are available at yougov.co.uk.

Would you describe Britain as a democratic country or not?		
	Gallup 1969	YouGov 2012
Yes	68	67
No	20	17
Don't know	12	17

Which two or three of these features of Britain's political system, if any, do you like MOST? Please tick up to three		
Which two or three of these features of Britain's political system, if any, do you like LEAST? Again, please tick up to three		
	Like most	Like least
The coverage of politics on radio and television	36	7
The role played by the Queen	32	9
The coverage of politics in our newspapers	23	10
The degree to which MPs hold ministers to account	13	22
The fact that Britain normally has single-party governments, elected with less than half the votes	13	23
The quality of our political parties	5	39
The quality of our politicians	3	53
The way peers are selected to be members of the House of Lords	3	39
None of these	26	6
Don't know	9	10



With just a few exceptions, every adult citizen of the United Kingdom is allowed to vote in general elections. For each of the following groups, do you think they should or should not have the right to vote in British elections?

	Should	Should not	Don't know
People who have been unemployed for more than 12 months	87	7	6
People who are no longer in prison, but have been jailed for serious crimes in the past	61	28	11
People who fail a basic test of literacy and knowledge about British democracy	39	45	16
People serving prison sentences of less than 12 months	36	55	9
16 and 17 year-olds	29	62	9
Immigrants during their first five years in Britain	15	76	9

Putting aside your own party preferences and your views on the current government, do you think that, in general, the Westminster Parliament in recent years has done a good job or a bad job in...?

	Good	Neither	Bad	Don't know
Representing the interests and wishes of people like you	15	23	57	5
Debating issues of public concern in a sensible and considered way	24	28	42	7
Understanding the daily lives of people like you	12	19	64	5
Reflecting the full range of people and views of the British electorate	16	23	55	6

Again, putting aside your own party preferences, which of these views about Britain's current coalition government comes closer to your own?

'The agreement to form the coalition was democratically legitimate, given that no one party won the last general election outright, and the two parties that formed the coalition won 60% of all votes cast'	47
'The agreement to form the coalition was NOT democratically legitimate, as nobody voted for this particular government. Coalitions are legitimate only when the parties tell voters BEFORE the election that they intend to work together'	37
Don't know	16



Which of these views comes closer to your own about political parties in Britain these days:	
'For all their faults, political parties play a vital role in our democracy. Without them we would have no real way of voting for the government we want, and politics would become dangerously unpredictable'	50
'Political parties these days do more harm than good. They stifle debate and limit our choices. Britain would be governed better if all our MPs were independent, elected purely on their individual merits'	34
Don't know	16

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about Britain these days?			
	Agree	Dis-agree	Don't know
For all its faults, Britain's democratic system is one of the finest in the world	63	23	13
Politicians tell lies all the time - you can't believe a word they say	62	28	9
It doesn't make much difference to my daily life who wins general elections these days - there's very little real difference between the main political parties	58	36	6
We have a good choice of parties at election time - I feel able to vote for a party that represents my views and concerns	47	45	8
Britain would be governed better if our politicians got out of the way, and instead our ministers were non-political experts who knew how to run large organisations	38	43	19

How much power do you think each of the following has to make a difference to the daily lives of people like you?		
And how much power do you think each of the following SHOULD have to make a difference to the daily lives of people like you?		
	% saying a great deal / fair amount	
	Have	Should have
Britain's government	85	87
The people who run big international banks and other financial institutions	79	16
The European Union	74	24
The people who run big businesses in Britain	71	24
Your local council	58	75
Your local MP	29	71



Thinking about outside pressures, such as globalisation, modern technology, the European Union, big multinational companies and the financial markets, which of these views comes closer to your own?		
'These pressures are so great these days that Britain's Government and Parliament have largely lost their power to make big decisions about Britain's future'		47
'These pressures are real, but Britain's Government and Parliament still have plenty of power to make big decisions about Britain's future'		39
	Don't know	14

Do you happen to know the name of your local MP?			
		Gallup 1954	YouGov 2012
	Yes	67	63
	No	33	37
Have you heard or read about anything that he or she has been doing in Westminster lately?			
	Yes	23	20
	No	77	80
Have you heard or read about anything he or she has been doing in your area?			
	Yes	29	27
	No	71	73
On the whole, would you say that he or she is doing a good job or a bad job as your MP?			
	Good	38	15
	Bad	5	13
	Average	10	37
	Don't know	47	35
Which of these views comes closer to your own about Members of Parliament these days?			
	'However they start out, most of them end up becoming remote from the everyday lives and concerns of the people they represent'		66
	'Of course MPs lead different lives from most people, but most of them keep in touch with the lives and concerns of the people they represent'		21
		Don't know	13



**Which three or four of the following do you think MPs generally pay most attention to?
Please tick up to four**

**Which three or four of the following do you think MPs SHOULD pay most attention to?
Please tick up to four**

	Do	Should
People who run large companies	56	9
Senior civil servants in Whitehall	44	14
Owners and editors of tabloid newspapers	35	1
Senior officials in the European Union	30	2
Voters who live in their own constituency	27	77
Trade union leaders	22	12
Senior members of the American government	20	1
Immigrants	17	5
Pressure groups such as Liberty, RSPCA, Migration Watch and TaxPayers' Alliance	15	20
People like you	5	73
Poor families	4	40
White men and women born in Britain	4	29
Don't know	14	18



In general, how much attention should MPs pay to each of the following when voting in Parliament, for example on taxation, public spending, or proposed new laws?

If these different considerations are in conflict with each other, which ONE of them should MPs pay MOST attention to?

Which one of these do you think MPs nowadays pay most attention to in practice?

	Should pay great deal	Should pay most	Do pay most
The policy of their party leadership	24	5	63
Their personal judgement	28	8	17
The majority view among voters in their constituency	64	41	4
The promises they made at the most recent election	72	38	2
Don't know	n/a	8	13

Sometimes there is a 'free vote' in Parliament, when parties do NOT advise their MPs which way to vote. In principle, when there is a conflict between an MP's own judgement and the majority view of his or her local electorate on a 'free vote', do you think the MP should generally...

Vote according to his or her judgement	29
Vote according to the majority view of his or her local electorate	58
Don't know	13

Thinking about the four or five biggest policy decisions that Parliament considers each year, which of these views comes closer to yours?

'The best way to make such decisions is for MPs to consider them in detail and for the majority view in Parliament to determine what happens'	39
'The best way to make such decisions is for Parliament to hold a referendum and for the majority view among voters to determine what happens'	45
Don't know	16



How would you vote in a referendum to...	
Withdraw the UK from the EU	
Withdraw from EU	50
Remain in EU	36
Don't know / would not vote	14
Restore the death penalty for murdering a police officer	
Restore death penalty	44
Not restore death penalty	42
Don't know / would not vote	14
Reduce net immigration to zero, so that the number of immigrants settling in Britain each year is no more than the number of Britons leaving this country to settle abroad	
Reduce net immigration to zero	69
Not reduce net immigration to zero	21
Don't know / would not vote	9
Make it legal to use and own small quantities of 'soft' drugs such as cannabis	
Make it legal	32
Keep it illegal	54
Don't know / would not vote	14
Set a legal maximum earnings level of £1 million a year including bonuses	
Set a maximum pay level of £1 million a year	49
Not set a maximum pay level	36
Don't know / would not vote	15
Provide parents with the names and addresses of all convicted paedophiles living in their area	
Provide parents with this information	49
Keep this information confidential	34
Don't know / would not vote	18
Prohibit local councils from increasing council tax for the next ten years	
Prohibit council tax increases for next ten years	45
Allow councils some room to increase council tax	46
Don't know / would not vote	10



PETER KELLNER, PRESIDENT



Peter was previously a journalist and political commentator for more than 30 years, for the Sunday Times, Independent, New Statesman, Evening Standard, BBC Newsnight, BBC election programmes and Channel Four News.

He has been an adviser on polls and public opinion to the Bank of England, Foreign Office, Corporation of London, National Westminster Bank plc and Trades Union Congress. He has an MA in Economics and Statistics from Cambridge University. Peter is a member of the British Polling Council's committee on disclosure. He wrote the Journalists' Guide to Opinion Polls for the European Society for Opinion and

Marketing Research and is a regular speaker at industry conferences and seminars. In 2011 he was given a Special Recognition award by the Political Studies Association for his work over four decades on opinion polls, elections and political analysis.



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We know them inside out

47% of Brits prefer typing to writing with a pen*



54% of Brits prefer writing with black ink rather than blue ink*

29% of the British population chew on the end of their pen*

33% of Brits bought stationery, in-store or online from a major supermarket in a six month period**

57% of Brits have stained themselves or their clothes with pen ink after not putting the lid back on the pen properly*

If you want to avoid chewing your favourite pen in anxiety, speak to us about your research challenges.

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*Statistic from a nationally representative YouGov Omnibus survey conducted online. Fieldwork: 3 – 5 January 2012, sample size: 2028 British adults aged 18+. **Statistic taken from the YouGov SixthSense Specialist Non-food Retailing Report. Nationally representative YouGov survey conducted online. Fieldwork: 14 – 16 July 2010, sample size: 2199 UK adults aged 16+.

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