



Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics

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

Third Report of the Democracy
in the UK after Brexit Project

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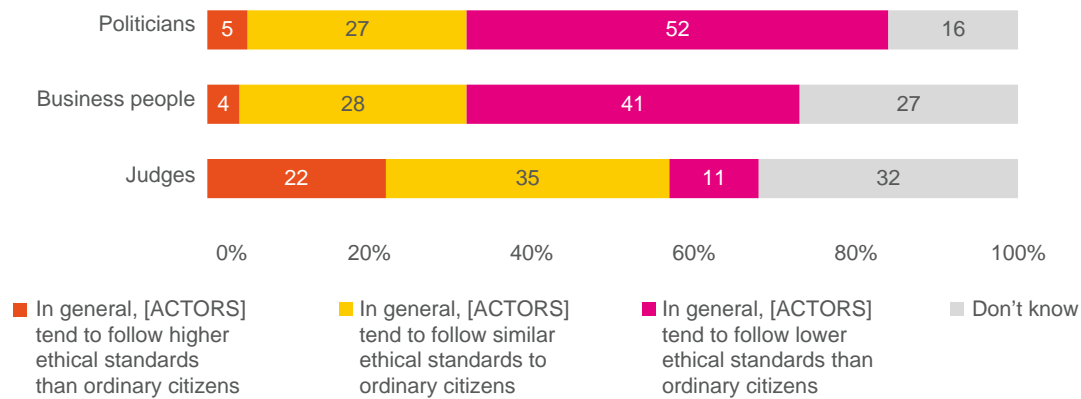
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Trust and integrity Trust and integrity Many people see a disconnect between citizens and their representatives as one of the central weaknesses in UK democracy today. That disconnect can be seen in low levels of trust in key democratic actors. Our 2021 survey – conducted before the Owen Paterson affair and ‘Partygate’ – showed that

his resignation, but before Liz Truss came to power – repeated the same question. Trust had fallen still

Question: Which comes closest to your view?



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

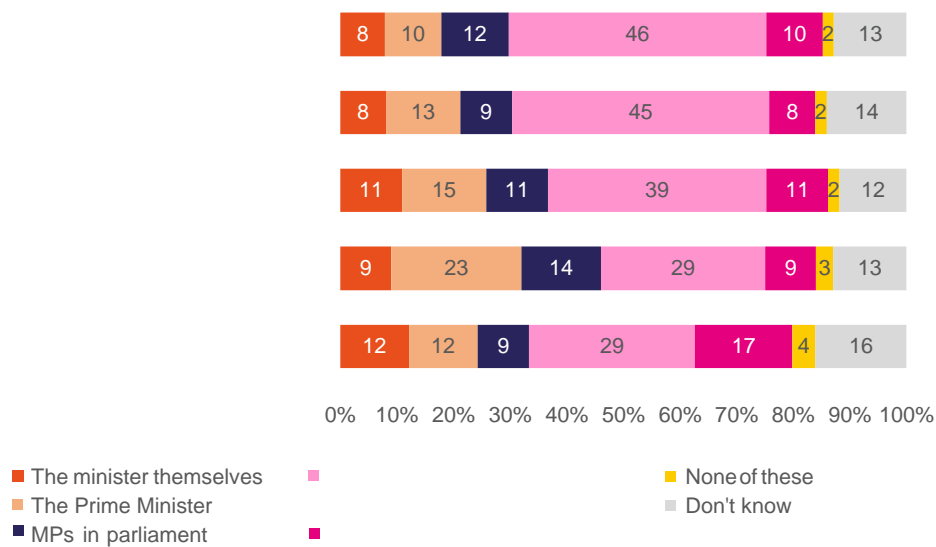
Question: Which comes closer to your view?

We asked two specific questions about how to reform the integrity system: one on investigations into alleged misconduct, the other on who should decide a minister's fate when failure had been demonstrated. In the first, a clear majority thought that, whatever the nature of the alleged wrongdoing, an independent regulator should be able to launch an investigation themselves. Around twice as many took this view as held that such matters should be left to the Prime Minister or to parliament, and it was the most favoured option even among Conservatives.

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

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

Question: Please imagine there is clear evidence that a minister in government has [FAILURE]. Which, if any, of the following do you think should decide whether they ought to resign?



Do people want a strong leader?

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

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

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

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

² Hansard Society, see Yascha Mounk,

, p. 51. For cross-national evidence,

Relations between government and parliament



Question: Which comes closer to your view?

Respondents overwhelmingly thought that parliament's approval should be needed before changing

The voting system

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

Our 2022 survey gave respondents a simple choice between voting systems, in each case deploying one of the key arguments used in favour of the system. Almost twice as many people supported reform 'so that the number of MPs ... matches more closely the number of votes' as supported the status quo 'so there is normally a clear winner and voters decide who forms the government'. Support for reform was overwhelming among 2019 Labour voters (66%, against 12% who backed the status quo) and Liberal Democrat voters (69% to 10%). The greatest number of Conservative voters preferred the status quo, but by a much smaller margin: 34% backed reform, while 46% opposed it.

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

We also explored the principles that respondents thought the voting system should advance. Our 2021 survey asked what respondents thought were the most important features of a democracy, and the highest-ranked feature was that 'if those in power do a poor job, they can be voted out'. This emphasis on accountability might suggest that the case for adopting a proportional voting system could be hard to make. The 2022 survey followed up on this by asking specifically what it is 'more important for the voting system used in general elections to do'. This time, the principle that the voting system should 'produce a clear winner, so that it is voters who decide who forms the government' came only fourth, with the top principle being 'Give each party its fair share of the seats in parliament, based on how many votes it got'. But the differences were small: the 'clear winner' option is at 3 on the scale in the chart on the following page while the 'fair share' option is at 8, which indicates that, faced with a choice between the two,

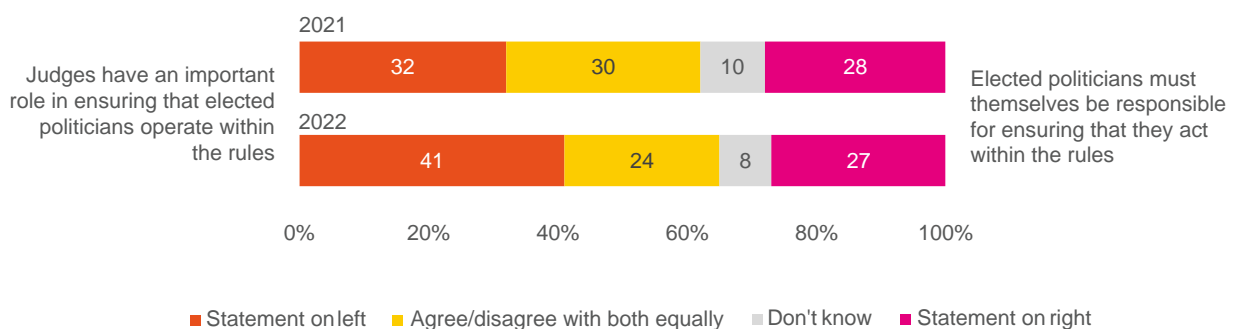


The role of judges

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

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

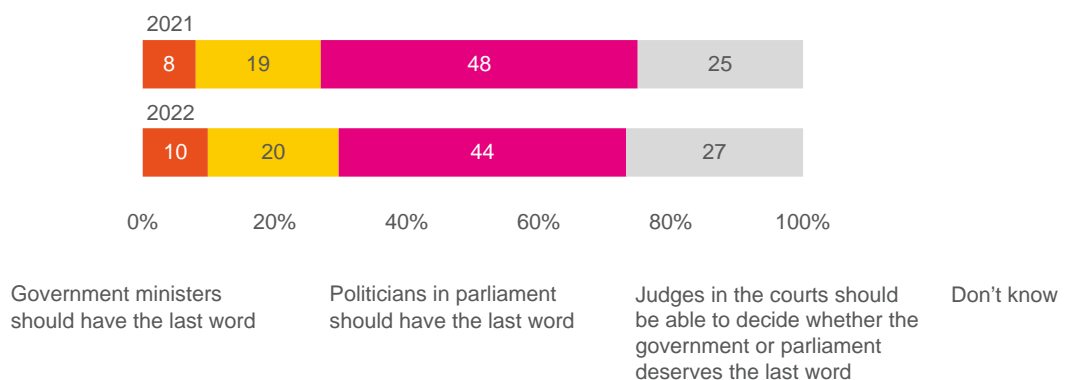
Question: Which comes closer to your view?



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

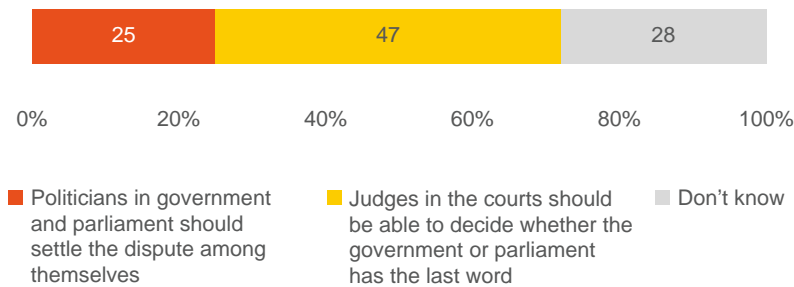
Question: Please imagine there is a dispute over whether the government has the legal authority to decide a particular matter on its own or whether it needs parliament's approval. How should this dispute be settled?

Report 1



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

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



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

Question: Which comes closer to your view?

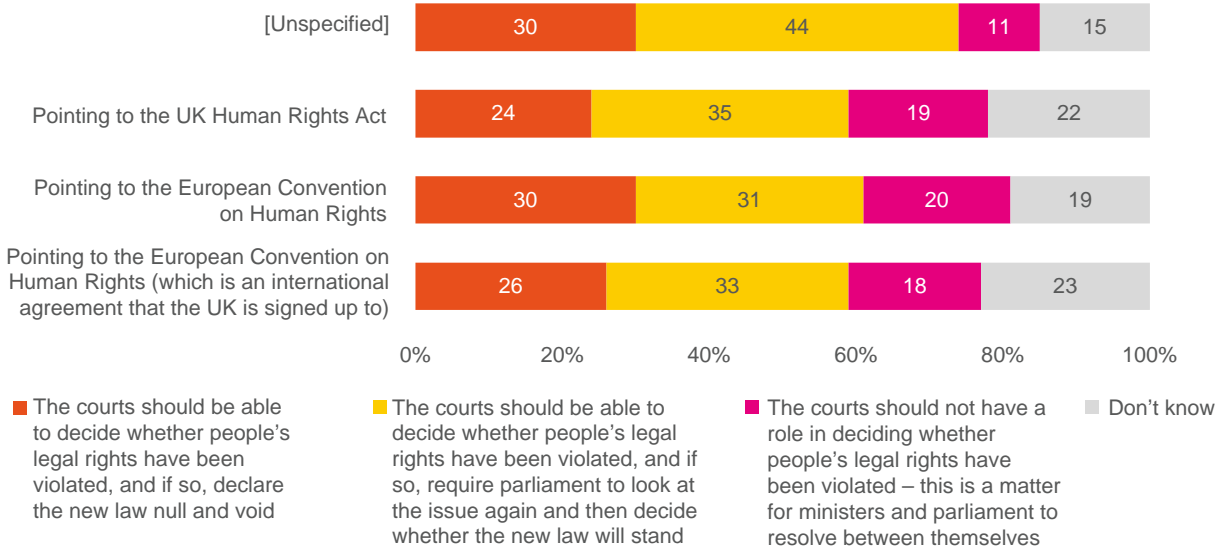
We also revisited a question from the 2021 survey that examined attitudes towards courts and human rights in more detail. The 2021 version of the question focused on whether people's attitudes to judicial involvement were affected by which rights were under discussion. It found that there was some variation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

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

Question: Please imagine the government has proposed a new law and parliament has approved it. Some people believe that this law violates [RIGHT]. Should the courts be able to decide whether people's legal rights have been violated as claimed?

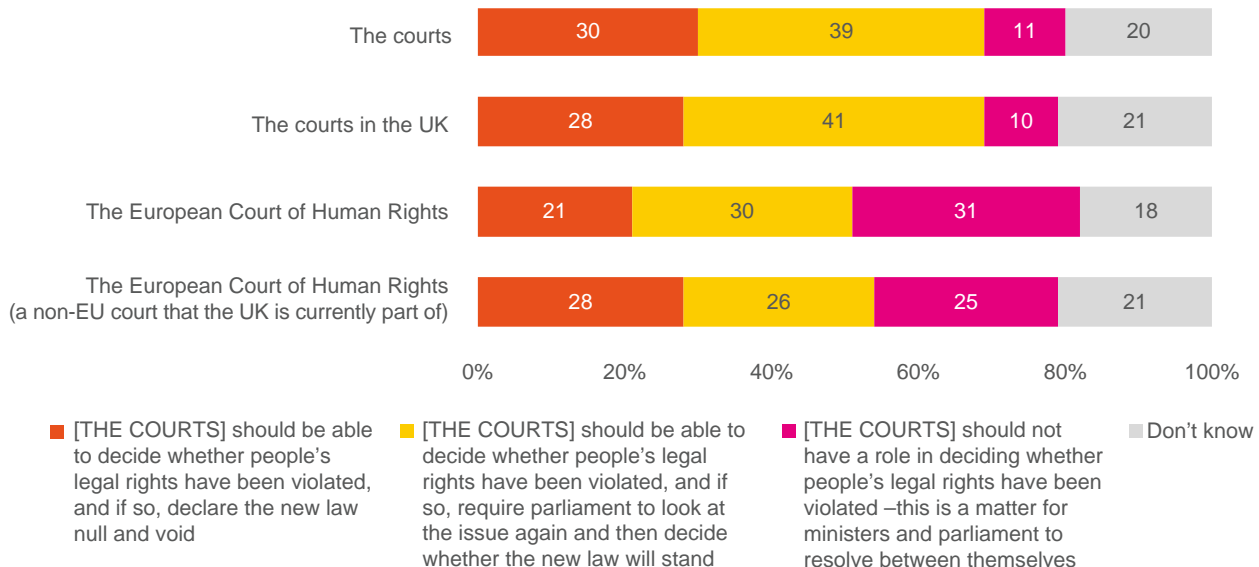
Most respondents to this question answered slightly altered versions of the question, designed to gauge two further possible influences upon people's responses. First, we wanted to see whether specifying a particular legal origin of claimed rights – the UK Human Rights Act or the European Convention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

Question: Please imagine the government has proposed a new law and parliament has approved it. [ORIGIN] Some people believe that this law violates [RIGHT]. Should the courts be able to decide whether people’s legal rights have been violated as claimed?



Meanwhile, specifying the European Court of Human Rights significantly reduced support for court action – though this effect was reduced when the question explained what this court is. Nevertheless, more than half the respondents thought that even the European Court of Human Rights should have a role, against fewer than a third who thought that it should not.

Question: Please imagine the government has proposed a new law and parliament has approved it. Some people believe that this law violates [RIGHT]. Should [THE COURTS] be able to decide whether people’s legal rights have been violated as claimed?



Participation in politics

Most respondents to our 2021 survey thought that people like themselves had too little influence on how the UK is governed. But the results also showed ambivalence towards some forms of popular participation in politics, such as referendums (see [redacted], pp 12–13). The 2022 survey sought to examine further the

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

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

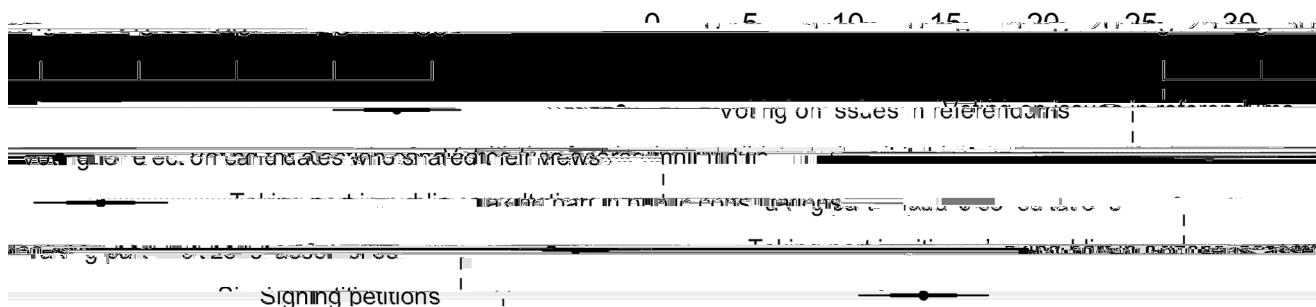
When asked about why they did not get more involved, the greatest number of respondents said they felt they did not know enough to do so. Many also said they did not like how politics works, or did not think they could make a difference. There were few marked differences between different groups, though Labour voters were slightly more likely than Conservatives to cite a dislike for how politics works.

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

As for what form people would want participation to take, we asked respondents which forms they thought should have more impact in an ideal democracy. They favoured mechanisms involving broadly representative participation by all – referendums and elections – and more deliberative mechanisms, such as consultations and citizens' assemblies. They did not want donations to yield an impact.



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



Direct and deliberative democracy

Our 2021 survey found rather ambiguous views on the value of referendums. On the one hand, 48% of respondents said that 'decisions on the most important issues should be made by everyone, voting in referendums', against 23% who thought such decisions 'should be made by MPs, voting in parliament' (



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



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

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

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

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

Options for reform

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

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

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

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



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

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



Do people care about political process?

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

Our 2021 survey contained two questions giving insights on this issue. One explored whether people saw democracy as intrinsically or merely instrumentally valuable. 32% of respondents said ‘democracy is always the best form of government’ while 54% said ‘democracy is good so long as it delivers effective government’ (another 3% said ‘democracy is not the best form of government’; see [redacted], p. 15). This might imply that most people are not particularly interested in political process in itself. But we also asked what a Prime Minister should do if faced with a choice between acting with integrity (for example, acting honestly, or within the law) and delivering what was best for the country or what most people wanted. Across most variants of this question, the majority of respondents chose the integrity option – suggesting that they do care about process ([redacted], pp. 4–5).

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

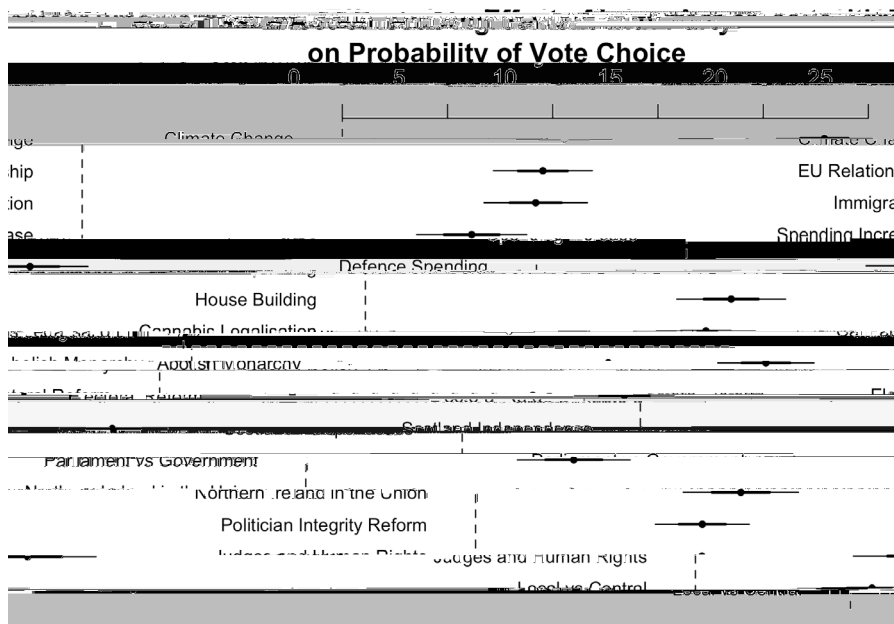
Our second approach is to ask respondents directly which issues are more or less important to them. We did this by asking them to consider pairs of issues randomly selected from the list in the first figure on the following page. The figure indicates that the cost of living was, unsurprisingly, the issue that people



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



The impact of issues on vote choice



Appendix: Survey Details

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

(London: UCL Constitution Unit, January 2021).

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

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

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

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

Funding: This survey has been completed as part of the Democracy in the UK after Brexit research project, which is examining public attitudes to democracy in the UK today through surveys and a citizens' assembly. Full details of the project are available through the link above. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Governance after Brexit research programme (grant number ES/V00462X/1).

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