COMMON SENSE POLICY GROUP →

Make Politics Work for Us

A Common Sense pathway to democracy that delivers

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Suggested citation

Funding

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Common Sense Democratic Reform in 5 minutes

The 2024 UK General Election was notable for many reasons: the Conservatives' lowest seat total ever and Labour's third-most but on the lowest vote share (33.7%) for any post-war single-party majority government and with the lowest turnout (59.7%) since 2001. The result is the most disproportionate House of Commons in modern history, with Reform UK receiving just five seats from 14.3% of the vote compared with the Liberal Democrats' 72 from 12.2%. The results led to calls across the political spectrum for electoral reform, but with concern expressed by some about the possibility of delivering greater far-right representation rather than the compromise and coalition previously envisaged. However, it would be foolhardy to believe that a) the right will remain fragmented between Conservatives and Reform, and b) that 4.1 million Reform voters' grievances will evaporate without substantive change. The systemic causes of Britain's problems run far deeper than elections alone, driven by failure to replace a millennium-old feudal system that rears its head not only in the House of Lords, but also in citizens' day-to-day life. The leasehold scandal, with 'owners' leasing their homes from often offshore corporate freeholders, paying annual ground rent for the 'privilege' and having little control over management or costs, would not have occurred in a modern system.

This report sets out a plan to make politics work for us, the vast majority, by ensuring that ordinary voters' interests are foremost in the minds of parliamentarians and government. We call for a more representative electoral system, Alternative Vote Plus (AV+), for the House of Commons and support the recommendation of Labour's Commission on the UK's Future to replace the House of Lords with an Assembly of the Nations and Regions. We propose making a virtue of required repairs to Westminster Palace to move Parliament around the UK every five years, embedding nationwide thinking and development and saving money in the process.

Special interests have underpinned an increase in inequality and sleaze across the political spectrum. We call for an end to lobbying and donations by profit-making bodies and foreign individuals and entities, a genuinely independent Integrity and Ethics Commission, and a ban on political deception based on forthcoming Welsh legislation. Recent reports that Elon Musk wishes to expand the influence he derives from wealth, ownership of X and as part of Donald Trump's inner circle by donating $100 million to Reform has cemented the proposals' importance despite their being developed in 2023. Musk subsequently called for Reform leader Nigel Farage to be replaced due his unwillingness to support jailed anti-immigration figurehead Tommy Robinson's release and party membership. It is clear that there is no limit to the extremes to which international billionaires like Musk (a migrant and supporter of the immigration Robinson opposes) are willing to go to secure their interests at everyone else's expense. There is no justification for one person or company to be able to exert such control.

The report's proposals have a high level of support among the public, shown in a survey of adults both nationwide (1,052) and in the 'Red Wall' (851) which switched from Labour to Conservative in 2019. Those who want change through progressive policies in health and social care and public utilities see democratic reform as an instrument for delivering a more equal and affluent society. Focusing on those outcomes drives support among opponents. On the other hand, without seeing the benefits in their everyday lives, the public will give up on democracy. Democracy is not inevitable, but nor is decline and disillusionment. Common sense change is essential to secure a democracy that delivers and to win votes in the process.

Our Common Sense Recommendations

Transform Parliament

1. Increase proportional representation by adopting Alternative Vote Plus (AV+) for the House of Commons and Single Transferable Vote (STV) for the Second Chamber.
2. Reform constituencies: 500 constituencies with 150 top up seats allocated proportionally by regional Strategic Authorities across the UK.
3. Replace the House of Lords with an Assembly of the Nations and Regions.
4. Introduce term limits to stop entrenched and dysfunctional thinking from dominating Parliament.
5. Make a virtue of the essential repairs to the Palace of Westminster by moving Parliament to other parts of the UK every five years to embed parliamentarians in UK-wide thinking and save money in the process.
6. Ensure that political candidates live in a constituency for two years before becoming eligible for election in order to stop party 'parachuting' of candidates.
7. Introduce a uniform structure of Unitary Local Authorities and regional Strategic Authorities across the UK.

Eliminate corruption

1. End graft by banning second jobs, paid lobbying and all lobbying by foreign citizens and entities.
2. Fund political party work that is in the public interest through expanded Policy Development Grants of £5 million.
3. Ban donations to political parties by profit making organisations and individuals beyond individual membership of a maximum of £6 per month.
4. Make Parliament a normal work environment: normal offices, normal expenses arrangements, and sitting-time accommodation in the immediate vicinity of Parliament for those who cannot commute.
5. Tie politician pay to the national median wage via a wage ratio of a maximum of 2:1 in order to give Parliamentarians a direct interest in the average citizen's interests.
6. Introduce an independent Integrity and Ethics Commission as well as a ban on political deception modelled on forthcoming Welsh legislation

The impact: A system that delivers

Implementing these policies would:

1. Improve the quality of the politicians that represent us and of the policies they implement by making elections competitive.
2. Increase the power and wealth of ordinary citizens and reduce that of elites by improving the chances of parties being elected that support these outcomes.
3. Secure citizens from instability in the political system caused by politicians appealing to small sections of society in small areas of the UK to be elected.
4. Ensure that all people are represented by an MP with more than 50% of the vote and that parties that currently receive millions of votes for little result would have more MPs to better represent more parts of the electorate.

1. Introduction

The 2024 UK General Election was notable for many reasons. It marked: the first transfer of power from one party to another for 14 years; the first Labour Party general election victory for 19 years; the third-largest single party majority behind only Tony Blair's in 1997 and 2001; the Conservative Party's worst result by seats won ever; the lowest combined Labour and Conservative vote share (57.4%) in more than 100 years[1]; the lowest vote share (33.7%) for any post-war party forming a majority government; and the lowest turnout (59.7%) since 2001.[2] The result is the most disproportionate House of Commons in modern history,[3] exemplified by Reform UK winning just 5 seats (0.8% of the total) from 14.3% of the vote compared to the Liberal Democrats' 72 seats (11.1%) from 12.2%.[2] Indeed, the Green Party received 6.7% of the vote, but only one fewer seat than Reform.[2] This is the first election in recent history in which the political right has been more disadvantaged than progressives by the first-past-the-post electoral system.

The results led to calls across the political spectrum for electoral reform, but with concern expressed by some about the possibility of delivering greater far-right representation rather than the compromise and coalition previously envisaged.[3] However, it would be foolhardy to believe that a) the right will remain fragmented between Conservatives and Reform, and b) that 4.1 million Reform voters' grievances will evaporate without substantive change. The systemic causes of Britain's problems run far deeper than elections alone, driven by failure to replace a millennium-old feudal system that rears its head not only in the House of Lords, but also in citizens' everyday lives. The leasehold scandal,[4] with 'owners' leasing their homes from often offshore corporate freeholders, paying annual ground rent for the 'privilege' and having little control over management or costs, would not have occurred in a modern system. Scotland showed that the issue could be resolved by eliminating its equivalent form of residential ownership completely in 2012.[5] Unfortunately, the Westminster Government's own inadequate reforms in the early 2000s failed to enforce the switch to modern forms of ownership[6] and, as such, permitted the practices, such as ground rents that double repeatedly, that make reform much more difficult now.[7]

Britain is marked by a condition of ultra-insecurity, of which property ownership is just one example. The policies required to reduce that insecurity have been dismissed by both Conservatives and Labour during their periods in government. Conservative leadership like David Cameron, George Osborne, Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt believed strongly in austerity and 'trickle-down' economics that caused such insecurity, while others, like Teresa May and Boris Johnson, could not sufficiently break out of such party orthodoxy to make a meaningful difference.

For Labour, fears of being viewed as 'fiscally incompetent', 'radical' or simply bogged down in constitutional issues have usually played a significant role. And for Tony Blair's period in office, that seemed reasonable. To enough people for enough of the few decades leading up to 2007, the neoliberal settlement was able to effectively substitute an expansion in consumer goods for the collective provision of security and diversity of good lives that had underpinned Britain's post-war recovery. The Global Financial Crisis of 2007/08, subsequent austerity measures, Brexit as a wholly dysfunctional response and the cost-of-living crisis exacerbated by the privatised energy sector's exposure to international insecurity have made clear the

dangers of that trend. There is growing recognition that the settlement benefits an ever-smaller proportion of the population whose wealth is unchecked by democratic interventions that a majority of us support. There has been a growing consensus that only the state can deliver the change we need, including in areas like public utilities and health and social care. In both of those areas, there are high levels of support for state ownership and for reducing inequality through progressive taxation. This is common sense: why would we rent our essential services in perpetuity from those who have a material interest in not delivering those services to the same standard as we would expect from ourselves?

But when there are so many policy areas to deal with, why look at constitutional issues? The problem is that the shape and nature of our political discourse simply excludes such common sense proposals from even being discussed. This is, in turn, due to the structures and culture of our democratic system. In general, much of our democratic architecture is unfit for purpose. In the absence of the ability and willingness of progressive policymakers to deliver change, public support has often been channelled in self-destructive and anti-democratic directions. There is increasing evidence that an increasingly financially and mentally distressed public attribute Britain's decline to 'the Westminster system and the failure of politics to tackle the big issues, with many pointing to a lack of accountability and short-term calculation taking precedence over long-term planning'.[8]

There is, then, a real need to understand how the system can be reformed and how those reforms can be presented to Britain in a way that emphasises their outcomes. In this report, we set out a plan to make politics work for us and demonstrate its popularity through findings from a series of surveys examining narrative development among Red Wall voters and presentation of those narratives within the Red Wall and nationally. We find high levels of support for electoral reform and suggest that narratives that tie reform to redistribution are highly persuasive in Red Wall constituencies, while narratives that focus on overall benefits to society are more persuasive elsewhere across the UK.

We begin by explaining the structural basis of political dysfunction and means of rectifying it quickly.

2.   The problem: A dysfunctional political system that has failed to deliver

There is widespread recognition that Britain is in an extended period of crisis, with politicians increasingly appearing hapless in their attempts to make the country function. Part of the reason that politicians have failed to deliver is because the democratic system as it stands promotes bad outcomes.

The UK has one of the most centralised political systems on the planet and is bound together with few written rules. The First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) voting system, combined with incentives for long-term post holding mean that parties have internal dynamics and interests that tend towards inertia. The winner-takes-all system locks in a two-party system, in which the worst outcome for the largest parties is finishing second[9] and retaining the public funding that goes with it. Even with an unprecedentedly low level of support and a much greater combined vote share among other, smaller, parties, the Conservatives did just that in 2024.

This is a gilded system that demonstrably attracts a great number of politicians with the wrong understanding of public service and the wrong set of interests. And it keeps them in post for decades. They know that they merely need to retain the support of their party, which, in turn, knows that it needs only to retain vague engagement with parts of the media, in order to pursue highly lucrative and secure careers. This is a system that locks out talent, innovation and both the long-term policy thinking and the willingness to take short-term electoral risks at the very point in which we need these things most. Good politicians do break through and enter Parliament, but they face steep odds both in taking that first step and in making a difference through the political machine in which they must operate. Increasingly, the vanguardist nature of political parties means that politicians are tied to demonstrably unpopular policies that are outlying ideologically and make little economic sense.[10]

Participation in democracy is declining, with a demographic cliff edge approaching. Baby boomers, who have, until 2024, almost always seen their favoured party in Government since the 1970s, are being replaced by younger voters whose interests have consistently been sacrificed to appease the larger, more-likely-to-vote, older bloc. Unlike baby boomers, younger voters are yet to see demonstrable evidence of their vote producing better outcomes and there is urgent need for politics to work for people aged under 50, in particular.[11] There are real risks of not doing so.

A report for Onward, the right of centre think tank, found that 61% of 18-34s agree that 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections would be a good way of governing this country' while 46% agree that 'having the army rule would be a good way of governing this country'.[12] Against the backdrop of this structural crisis, even the election of a well-meaning progressive government could accelerate the descent to autocracy if it fails to deliver on the promise of necessary change.

Evidence suggests that our electoral system contributes to this. First-Past-the-Post means that the candidate with the most votes in each constituency is elected as an MP, even if they receive far lower than 50% of the vote. This means that governments can be formed that reflect the preferences of a small proportion of those who vote and an even smaller proportion of society, given that turnout is often low in the UK. In 2015, the Conservatives gained a majority with 36.1% of the vote on a turnout of 66.45%,[13] meaning that less than a quarter of the electorate gave the government its express consent. The 2024 General Election was even more unrepresentative. Cross-party pressure group Make Votes Matter found that 58% of votes cast were for a losing candidate, while a further 16% were above what the winning candidate needed in their constituency, meaning that, in total, 74% of votes were non-decisive.[14] And with just 59.7% turning out,[2] more than 19 million additional registered voters didn't feel it worth taking those odds.[15]

There is little appetite for the *status quo* or slow progress, as the polling ratings for the new Labour Government show,[16] and those committed to addressing Britain's structural crises have good reason to view democratic reform as being bound up both with implementation of progressive policy. Indeed, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) found that support for democratic reform increases the more that people understand its role in producing better outcomes.[17] There is a compelling body of evidence to suggest that proportional representation is associated with governments that are to the left of those produced by systems like our own.[18] Explanations for this include the notion that, in systems such as Britain, those in the middle of the wealth distribution vote for right-wing parties out of the

belief that they will protect wealth and promote their interests,[19] even if they disagree with other aspects of their policies, while left parties are disadvantaged by having their voters clustered in urban centres[20] with higher rates of poverty,[21] winning seats by large margins, but not benefiting on a proportional basis. While Labour's performance in 2024 bucked this trend, that was, in large part, down to the split vote between Conservatives and Reform, and there is little reason to believe either that the outcome will be replicated.[16]

Proportional representation, which aims to ensure that the proportion of votes matches more closely the proportion of seats held by parties, would seem, therefore, to be a popular reform. However, it has generally been promoted by parties that are disadvantaged by First-Past-the-Post, notably the Liberal Democrats,[22] the Green Party,[23] UKIP,[24] and now Reform UK, and has largely been justified on the basis of making voting fairer or finding means of achieving consensus between parties. When such arguments are deployed, they are often associated with the fringe interests of losing parties within the political system that, by their very nature, are assumed to be outliers either socially or ideologically. Those who prefer either of the two main parties or who feel that their interests are adequately advanced feel no reason for change.

That was the basis for the 2011 Alternative Vote Referendum, which was advanced by the Liberal Democrats as one element of the agreement that enabled formation of the 2010-15 Coalition Government.[25] Arguing on the basis for fairness and inclusivity at a time in which the Coalition agreement was enabling introduction of austerity measures that reduced control and, in particular, the increase in Student Tuition Fees that breached one of the key Liberal Democrat manifesto pledges, made no sense. This was a junior partner in an unpopular Government arguing for a system that would produce more bad outcomes.

What is increasingly clear is that Britain is much more receptive to justification for reform grounded in the outcomes that matter to ordinary people. IPPR's *Talking Politics* presents a coherent starting point.[17] The report holds that there is widespread dissatisfaction with democracy and that this feeds into populist movements with regressive ends that highlight the capture of political systems by elites and elite interests. They conclude that democrats need specifically to justify democracy in terms of outcomes. The problem, as the report authors note, is that our representatives fail to deliver:

> 'Delivering' better for citizens means policy that is more equally responsive to people across the country, and stronger means to hold that that to account. That requires changing where power lies in the democratic system and recognising what is recognised in very different societies, such as Taiwan, that, 'for democracy to be taken seriously, it has to deliver'.[26]

The following sections sets out how the democratic system ought to be reformed to produce better outcomes and how policymakers can make the case for that reform effectively.

3. The solution: A competitive and responsive system

As explained above, the current First-Past-the-Post system means that many, often a majority, of voters do not get the representative they want, and even more don't get the party they want in government. This means that governments often reflect the preferences of a small proportion of those who vote and an even smaller proportion of society, given that turnout is often low in the UK. This is particularly damaging insofar as the people most likely to be excluded are those whose interests have been least well served by politicians. These people then become apathetic and are further excluded as parties focus on appealing to those more likely to vote. Proportional Representation aims to ensure that the proportion of votes matches more closely the proportion of seats held by parties. But promotion of such approaches has been ineffective since those who prefer either of the two main parties that inevitably win under the current system or who feel that their interests are adequately advanced feel no reason for change. Only a case for Proportional Representation built on delivering on people's day-to-day interests has a chance of success. We need to build on more proportional examples in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to improve outcomes in England and Westminster.

The Jenkins Commission (1998)[27] set out plans for a system of proportional representation that maintains the link between constituencies and the interests of constituents and their representatives and ensures greater proportionality in allocation of representatives. Alternative Vote Plus (AV+) combines two elements. The 'Alternative Vote' system in each constituency means that voters list candidates in order of preference, having the choice to allocate a preference to any or none of the candidates. All first preferences are allocated to candidates. If a candidate has over 50% of the vote, they are elected. If not, the candidate with the fewest first preferences is eliminated and their second preferences allocated, and so on until a candidate reaches 50% of the vote.

This system ensures that more votes count. While there is evidence in different contexts that systems involving ranking benefit centrist candidates,[28] presenting a sufficiently broad policy platform offers genuine capacity to appeal to the majority of us, and hence be electorally successful under such a system. The policies in *Act Now*[29] do exactly that. In the top up element, voters choose from a list of candidates to represent, in our case, their region, electing several representatives allocated according to the number of people within their Strategic Authority, a uniform system proposed by the Westminster Government's *English Devolution White Paper*[30] to include Combined Authorities, Combined County Authorities and the Greater London Authority. We would extend the system to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Again, the need to appeal to a broad section of society increases the likelihood of political parties endorsing popular policies, while also being forced by smaller parties to consider more radical interventions. We believe that there should be 500 seats allocated to enlarged constituencies, with 150 top-up seats allocated proportionally to Strategic Authorities. There is a body of evidence to suggest that, while more complex systems are associated with larger numbers of ballots being rejected[31] and need for guidance to enable participation,[32] more proportional systems are associated with more stable and more diverse government than our own.[33]

Alongside reforming voting systems, we need to end the conscious suppression of voting. Upon turning 16 or obtaining citizenship, all eligible voters[34] ought to be registered automatically to vote and have a legal requirement to remain registered to vote at each subsequent residence. We should move towards online voting in order to counter cynical exploitation of weather conditions and other environmental factors in order to suppress the vote.[35]

We also believe that no long-term political change can be possible without the elimination of the House of Lords, and support the recommendation of Labour's Commission on the UK's Future to replace the House of Lords with an Assembly of the Nations and Regions[36] as the second chamber. Our recommendation is for it to feature 200 members, allocated proportionally according to Strategic Authorities, with Mayors each represented by a delegate, and an electoral cycle in middle of House of Commons cycle. Elections would be by Single Transferable Vote[37] to ensure greater proportionality while leaving room for independent candidates to succeed.[38] The primary role of the second chamber would be formally to interrogate and consult on legislation and would retain the power to delay legislation for up to one year. It would complement the Commons.

In both houses, only those who have lived in a constituency for a qualifying period of two years should be permitted to stand for election within the constituency. This radically limits the capacity for political parties to place politicians with no understanding of local people's needs in safe seats for narrow factional reasons, potentially inflicting absent representatives for decades on end. It does not change eligibility for office in any other clear respect that would contravene the Equality Act (2010).

Beyond this, there is clear justification for term limits on service in Parliament overall, in order to reduce the view of politics as a career, rather than public service, and to check vested interests overall. We need only look at the gerontocracy in the US[39] to see the impact of having a single generation with outlying material interests dominate entire political systems for decades.[40] We see something similar in the UK, as the interests of older age groups that are more likely to vote are prioritised over younger groups.

There is widespread recognition, not least in the previous Government's *Levelling Up White Paper*[41] and the current Government's *English Devolution White Paper*,[30] that British politics is Westminster-oriented to the detriment of Britain as a whole. Centralisation of power has meant massive investment in London at the expense of the regions. There is also recognition that the cost of renovating the Palace of Westminster is great and that facilities in Westminster are often inappropriate for a fully functioning Parliament,[42] with office space, internet access and other key infrastructure inadequate. Put simply, Westminster is neither the right environment nor in the right location to enable Britain to recover.

We believe that there is good reason for Parliament to move out of Westminster to enable its renovation and that this can be done at far lower cost than through relocation within London. Parliament can be relocated on a rolling basis to York, Glasgow and Cardiff to sit in specially designed facilities and moved on a minimum five-year and maximum 10-year basis to coincide with House of Commons Parliaments. Creating purpose-built facilities not only creates a public asset that brings wealth to each of these regions, it also enables us to save an estimated £12 billion in facilitating safer, easier, swifter renovation of Westminster.[29] Most importantly, as with relocation of Civil Service offices, it forces politicians into areas of the

country that are not London, removing the distortionary experience of working in a city that often has little in common with life elsewhere.

The UK-wide reforms above require restructuring of councils and their funding. In *Act Now,*[29] we proposed that to ensure effective devolution and administration, the Scottish model of Local Authorities[43] should be adopted across the rest of the UK, with Combined Authorities[44] created on a regional basis across the UK to ensure regional coordination and representation to the Second Chamber. We cannot sustain the current incoherence of five types of council in England, with all of the additional bureaucratic malaise it produces. The new Government's

English Devolution White Paper,[30] does much of this work by proposing the uniform adoption of Unitary Authorities for local government and Strategic Authorities for regional government within England. We therefore endorse that approach and propose that it be adopted across the UK.

The reforms provide the basis for a much more robust and integrated set of relationships between layers of government. We then need to tackle corruption directly.

4.   Removing corruption in full

Our system is fundamentally corrupt. The process of procurement of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) during the pandemic merely made visible to the public the longstanding practice of Government contracting to donors and partners. Politicians' opposition to public ownership stands at odds with the way in which state contracts are given to a small number of large businesses that act as state agents without providing the level of public service to the nation and employment security to employees.[45,46] Neoliberalism merely sub-contracts the big state to a small number of profit-making partners. Decorrupting it can only be achieved by emphasising the return to public service.

The Labour Party suggested some good means of achieving change in its 2024 manifesto.[47] Banning second jobs for the entire duration of service, and introducing legislation to create exemptions from requirements for continued service in professions such as Barristers and GPs, makes clear that, like jury duty, public servants are required fundamentally to focus on public duties. Banning politicians from taking on paid work relating to previous political roles for five years after leaving office is also sensible. However, there needs to be a total ban on paid lobbying and all lobbying by foreign citizens and entities. We cannot be beholden to the interests of hostile countries who buy access to our representatives. In that regard, we ought to ban membership by politicians of any group affiliated with an overseas country. Dual national politicians would be able to retain their non-British citizenship but would not be able to be affiliated with any advocacy group affiliated with overseas interests. Moreover, we ought to ban all gifts and in-kind benefits, rather than having MPs declare them. While the thought of politicians paying for refreshments at events sounds administratively onerous, it is far less so than having to track the influence of pernicious entities through reciprocal relationships.

Recent reports that Elon Musk wishes to expand the influence he derives from wealth, ownership of X and as part of Donald Trump's inner circle by donating $100 million to Reform[48] has cemented the proposals' importance despite their being developed in 2023. Musk subsequently called for Reform leader Nigel Farage to be replaced due his unwillingness to support jailed anti-immigration figurehead Tommy Robinson's release and

party membership.[49] It is clear that there is no limit to the extremes to which international billionaires like Musk (a migrant and supporter of the immigration Robinson opposes) are willing to go to secure their interests at everyone else's expense. There is no justification for one person (especially one who is neither citizen nor resident), one company, or even a small group, to be able to exert such control over Britain's political system.

To address the scandal of expenses, there ought to be a total ban on allowances for second houses, with overnight accommodation provided in the vicinity of Parliament during parliamentary sessions. There ought to be formalised and designated offices with centrally

funded and approved office staff in both constituencies and around Parliament. There should be no need for expenses beyond travel and refreshments during visits, which should be booked and reimbursed by a central office.

Labour is right to introduce the independent Integrity and Ethics Commission to scrutinise any Ministerial appointment, open investigations into misconduct and breaches of Ministerial code and set binding sanctions for breaches of the Ministerial Code, but it needs to be much more robust and independent than plans suggest.[50] We then need to introduce a UK-wide version of Wales' forthcoming legislation to ban political deception.[51] This was backed by the Government there following a campaign by the pressure group Compassion in Politics,[52] with a recent letter organised by the group and signed by more than 40 politicians, academics and civil society figures speaking to the urgent need for similar action across the UK.[53] The basic regulations above exist in almost every other profession.

Finally, politician and public servant pay ought to be tied directly to the UK median salary. Pay ought to be capped at a maximum of 200% of the median salary, which stood in 2024 at £37,430 across the UK.[54] Tying pay to the median provides politicians with incentive to advance the interests of the vast majority of workers whose pay is currently inadequate by engaging in redistributive measures. This is consistent with incrementalism in the Equality Principle outlined in *Act Now*,[29] with pay at the upper end of the income distribution addressed through progressive taxation.

Beyond individual politicians, the way in which political parties are funded needs to be reformed. Our two main parties are returning to a position in which they are funded by the same group of extremely wealthy donors who use their donations to extract political influence. We need to ban all donations to political parties by individuals and private companies. All individual funding should come from individual membership fees of a maximum of £6 per month, which is affordable to the vast majority of society. Trade Union members would automatically become members of parties to which their unions are affiliated, with their political fund donations being available as membership contributions. Beyond this, there ought to be partial public funding for policy development within parties through an expansion of Policy Development Grants to £5m, since it is policy development, rather than party political campaigning and messaging, that is in the public interest.

These are reforms that prioritise the interests of citizens over the interests of outlying wealth.

5. Public opinion

We tested our proposals in a series of surveys conducted between November 2023-January 2024 using methods we have deployed previously.[55,56] We began by identifying and working with opponents – haters – of democratic reform in red wall constituencies to co-produce narratives to persuade people like them to support the policies. 'Red Wall' constituencies are those in the North and Midlands of England and parts of Wales with generally older, poorer residents that were traditionally Labour voting but switched to, or came close to switching to,

the Conservatives. They played an important role in the outcome of the 2019 General Election and voters in those areas therefore received significant attention from political parties.[57–59] The co-produced narratives were:

Narrative 1: Absolute Gains: As everyone knows there are always plenty of improvements that can be made across Britain to help all have a better life regardless of location. We need a system that holds MPs to account for their actions to focus them on doing what is best for Britain as a whole. Electoral reform to a more proportional system is important to make a real change in the political system. First-past-the-post has driven the UK to a 'middle of the road' system that leaves no chance for parties who want to make a real change on either side of the political spectrum. Proportional representation seems to work well in many other countries across the world and adopting it would mean we could vote for our preferred party rather than 'wasting' a vote to keep certain parties out. This would mean that all politicians would have to improve our country to be elected.

Narrative 2: Relative Gains: The current system favours incumbents committed to the same old lousy policies. Voters are being screwed by a pro corporation centre who have massive, unchecked influence in both major parties. Most voters are left to struggle with cost-of-living-crisis and austerity cuts, while MPs are being funded to get extra mortgages on second homes and to put family members in jobs as researchers. A lot of MPs are corrupt. We need to force MPs to represent ordinary people, rather than the 1% they currently represent, in order to get out of the stagnation we have been by stuck in from two parties that have got fat and lazy on corporate money supported by a friendly media. We need to take this power away from them by removing a voting system that keeps them in place regardless of performance. Making votes count would give power to voters and parties that put the interests of ordinary people first, increasing the wealth of ordinary people in the process.

Narrative 3: Security: Both the Tories and Labour have been taken over by a vocal, extremist minority that has caused insecurity and instability. As we have seen in recent times, the lack of accountability for MPs means that they can hold second jobs and represent special interests, such as foreign organisations, without being voted out. Making the number of MPs reflect the number of votes across the country is successful in many secure countries with strong democratic traditions. If every vote counts and every politician is at threat of being voted out, we would have power to reduce the amount and power of special and foreign interests and the possibility of spying by hostile powers. Although it's easy to think that more complex voting systems are confusing and might be less stable, we have to remember that the current system is unstable and creates insecurity for all of us. Only a proportional system can give the security we need by getting rid of conflicts of interest.

Narrative 4: Reducing apathy: Trust in government, like many other institutions, is at an all-time low. In recent years, good ideas have not been rewarded with seats in Parliament and this is not democratic. Many of us do not even bother to vote as the incumbent MP seems almost certain to win in many seats. If proportional representation were introduced, there would be more reason for disenfranchised voters to vote for their favoured choice of representative and have voices heard in Parliament. There is another advantage in that Labour or Conservative candidates are often parachuted in to constituencies with which they have no history or local knowledge meaning their actual character is overlooked in favour of party ties. A local candidate who understands and represents disenfranchised voices has much better odds of winning under a more proportional system. This will reduce disenfranchisement and improve trust in government overall, which is crucial to sustaining our democracy.

We then surveyed public opinion of the reforms as well as the narratives between 20-26 January 2024 with two groups of adult UK voters: 851 residents with postcodes within the 'Red Wall' and 1,052 participants across Britain. Participants were asked to rate the reforms out of 100. They were then shown a randomised adversarially co-produced narrative and asked to rate its persuasiveness out of 100 and then to rate the policy again out of 100.

We found an average level of support for democratic reform of 74.7% in the Red Wall, with 69.2% among Conservative and 81.1% among Labour 2019 voters. Nationally, approval was 77.9%, with 58.1% among those intending to vote Conservative, 78.9% among those intending to vote Labour and 70.8% among those who didn't know who they would vote for or who didn't intend to vote. This represents an extremely high level of support for the reforms.

The arguments that were most persuasive among the two groups are different. Narrative 2, which focused on the role of democratic reform on producing politics that redistributes wealth and resources from the rich to us as ordinary citizens, received 77.4% approval among voters in the Red Wall. Nationally, narrative 1, which is grounded in improving outcomes for all members of society, received 80.2% approval. Support for arguments grounded in security and apathy were lower. For policy 'haters' In the Red Wall, there were considerable increases of 8.1 points in level of support following being presented with narratives. This suggests that scope for redistributive arguments to persuade is significant. Nationally, where support was higher at baseline, the increase was 3.0 points.

Levels of support for democratic reform were compared with levels of support for policies on health and social care and public utilities that involve nationalisation and redistribution. Individuals were grouped by party, then by whether they were above or below median levels of support within their party. Figures 1 and 2 suggest that in both the Red Wall and nationally, the more individuals support reform to health and social care (HSC) and public utilities (PU), the more they support democratic reform.
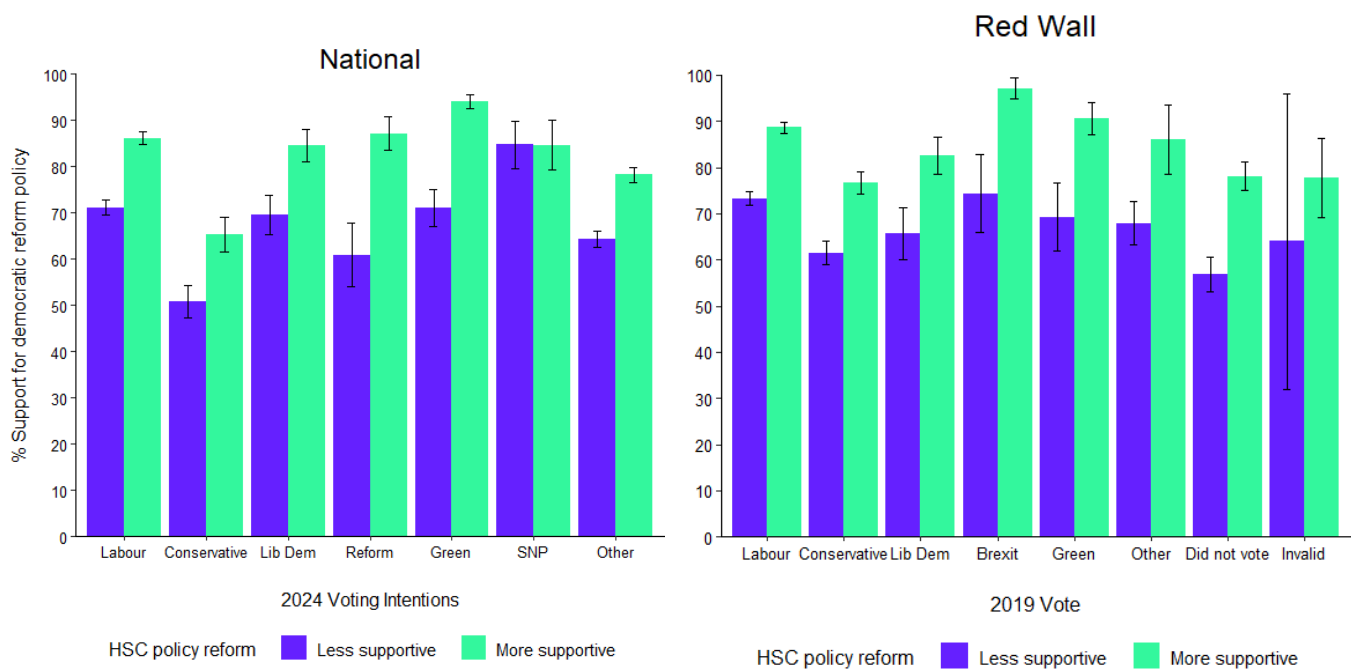
Figure 1. Levels of support for democratic reform by those who had above or below median support for health and social care policy among their 2024 General Election voting intention group (for national respondents) and by past 2019 voting group (for Red Wall).

Figure 2. Levels of support for democratic reform by those who had above or below median support for public utilities policy among their 2024 General Election voting intention group (for national respondents) and by past 2019 voting group (for Red Wall).

The evidence suggests that demonstrating the salience of democratic reform to people's material interests significantly increases support. This is true in the case of those who subsequently reduced their levels of support, since those voters – an extreme minority – may see their interests directly affected by a more democratic system.

Although the sample size is small, haters' rated absolute gains narratives as twice as persuasive by mean and four times as popular by median. Haters were less likely to report being at risk of destitution or being dissatisfied with their income than democratic reform 'lovers'. It makes sense, *prima facie*, for the former to be more persuaded by narratives that suggest that all gain and the latter to see more value in narratives that suggest redistribution to those with fewer resources. This helps to confirm the need for narratives that speak to material interests. We cannot pretend, however, that those interests can always be protected absolutely. Those who can afford to pay more, should pay more to rebuild Britain and there ought to be confidence that increasing tax on wealth is in the national interest and has democratic support.[10]

This provides further evidence that people's public policy preferences are influenced more by material circumstances and the prospective impact of policies on outcomes than by abstract values. In other words, consequences matter to people. These findings suggest policymakers should shape narratives that highlight people's material interests, identify how the policy promotes those interests and invoke abstract values as narrative devices.

6. Conclusion: Voters want a democracy that delivers

Although there is a fear of getting bogged down in constitutional reform that does not immediately deliver on voters' day-to-day priorities, there are significant lessons to draw both from New Labour's reforms and the last 14 years of Conservative governance. The first is that it is essential to pursue ambitious reforms when opportunities present themselves and where momentum exists. The Government has a further four guaranteed years in power, but it took 25 years to complete the removal of hereditary peers from the House of Lords initiated by their New Labour forebears in 1999.[60] The risk, having completed that process, is that the second chamber now remains vulnerable to political patronage through lifetime appointments and bloated with an ageing group of Lords who often barely attend in return for an unfair and unaffordable per diem.[61] Early in David Cameron's premiership, there was a further attempt to reform the Lords which was, perhaps predictably, scuppered by backbench Conservatives.[62] No further attempt was made. Instead, the Conservatives fundamentally embedded a systemic advantage they already held by appointing a large number of additional Conservative life peers[63] and by placing loyalists in senior positions in influential public bodies like the BBC.[64] The reason they did this is that Conservatives very clearly understand the importance of systems and bureaucracy in achieving policy goals.

The greatest mistake the new Labour Government could make is to think that constitutional reform is simply a distraction from securing change that will win the next election. Instead, it is a means of ensuring that change is even possible, and that rolling back of progress is made substantially more difficult than it was following New Labour's exit in 2010. Not only is it instrumentally important, it is also a means of securing better government in the longer term that encourages the union of UK nations to remain together. Reforming the system of donations to ensure that no small group can dominate the policy process, as Elon Musk may well do, is essential.

This report sets out a plan to fix politics by making politics work for us. It is common sense to say that our politicians should be responsive to the interests of the vast majority of the public, rather than private conversations[65] with friends and business partners. The inequalities in

Britain both within and between regions would be tackled at root by the reforms we set out. And as the Government's slide in popularity has demonstrated, tackling those inequalities is central to the Government's own interests.

There are good reasons to make politicians more accountable to voters and to the consequences of their decisions and the reforms we propose are significant steps forward. For a progressive government, this should not be seen as a threat to bold policy. When we compare Britain and its performance with those in Scandinavia, we see that outcomes there are better, even when parties of the right and far right are in power. This is at least in part because their political systems ensure that ordinary citizens are of a higher priority in their day-to-day thinking.

Our surveys show that there are high levels of support for democratic reform across the country, with higher levels within Red Wall constituencies. Our findings support IPPR's claim that arguments for democratic reform need to be focused on outcomes, not abstract values. The findings of this report provide pathways to understanding efficacy of arguments on specific outcomes. Importantly, those who support archetypal progressive policy on health and social care and public utilities are more likely to support democratic reform. Tying together reform to those policy areas is essential to concentrating support for democratic reform and electoral reform in particular. The nuance, though, is that voters outside the Red Wall may be more anxious about articulations of those policies in terms of their potential impact on their financial security in terms of income tax increases. 2019 Conservative voters in the Red Wall express support for redistributive measures, but those intending to vote Conservative nationally express opposition overall.

The narratives developed offer tailored resources for the two contexts and, with adequate bullet-point description of policy, can serve as means of engaging voters who may not always see the relationship between the way our decisions are reached and the outcome of those decisions. As the process of honing support for Brexit demonstrated, concern for the latter can, though, be converted into concern for the former through effective campaigning.

Democracy is not inevitable, but nor is decline and disillusionment. Common sense change is essential to secure a democracy that delivers and to win votes in the process.

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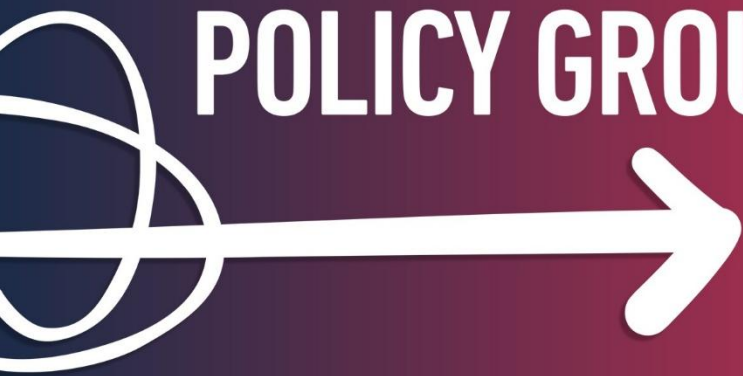27. Gay O. Voting Systems: The Jenkins Report [Internet]. London: House of Commons Library; 1998 Dec [cited 2024 Jan 6]. Report No.: 98/112. Available from: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/RP98-112/RP98-112.pdf

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