

Trends in Political Participation



Over the last fifty years in the UK, some aspects of participation in formal politics have decreased, such as political party membership. But new forms of participation, such as online activism, have emerged, which may become increasingly important, especially for younger people. This POSTnote discusses trends in political participation, with a focus on new forms, drivers of these trends and how UK democratic institutions are responding.

Background

Political participation can refer to a wide range of activities through which people seek to influence the decision-making processes that shape their lives.^{1,2,3} It can aim to influence public, private and third sector organisations.^{4,5} It includes:

- **Formal participation** in official forums and processes. This includes the election of representatives, as well as direct involvement, for example in referendums, political parties and attending public meetings.^{6,7,8}
- **Informal participation** sits outside official settings and includes a range of 'bottom-up' activities.^{9,10,11} For example, online activism such as signing a petition, purchasing or boycotting products for political reasons, and discussing politics with friends and family.^{12,13,14}

There is considerable overlap and interaction between these two types. Informal political participation can operate within or alongside formal political institutions and become institutionalised over time. For example, unofficial online petitioning has been gradually integrated into formal UK e-petitioning systems.^{15,16} Statistics suggest that participation in key aspects of UK formal politics has been declining over the past 50 years, such as voter turnout in general elections and political party membership (Box 1).^{17,18} There is concern

Overview

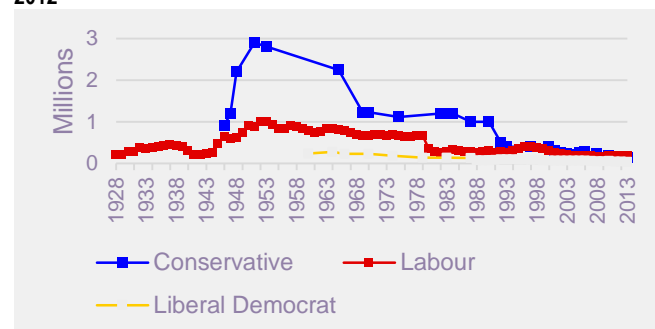
- Political participation includes involvement in formal politics, such as voting in elections, and informal activities, such as activism and political consumerism.
- Participation in key aspects of formal UK politics has declined over the past 50 years. Drivers of disengagement include mistrust of politicians, and concerns that the system is unrepresentative and lacks relevance.
- Young people are increasingly likely to participate in new forms of informal politics, often based on single issues and facilitated by the internet.
- Democratic institutions may be able to harness interest in informal political participation as a way of increasing engagement in formal processes.
- Challenges remain around how to engage people who are not involved in any formal or informal political process.

that disengagement from formal politics affects some sections of society more than others.¹⁹ However, it is unclear whether this means that some people are becoming politically 'disconnected' overall, or whether they instead are engaging in informal forms of participation.^{20,21,22}

This POSTnote explores:

- drivers of changing forms of participation
- new informal political practices
- the responses of formal democratic institutions
- the likely future impact on UK democracy.

Figure 1. Graph showing political party membership from 1928 to 2012²³



Box 1. Two indicators of engagement with UK formal politics

Two key indicators of engagement with formal politics in the UK are voter turnout at general elections and membership of political parties:

- **General election voter turnout:** There has been an overall decline in voter turnout for general elections in the UK since the 1950s: from a high of 83.9% in 1950 to a low of 59.4% in 2001.²⁴ Turnout has been increasing slightly since (61.4% in 2005, 65.1% in 2010, 66.2% in 2015) ([Commons Briefing Paper CBP7186](#)).
- **Membership of political parties:** There has been an overall decline in party membership since the 1950s, and the UK now has one of the lowest rates in Europe ([SN05125](#)). This fall has not been uniform over time or between parties however (see Figure 1). Data from the 2015 NatCen British Social Attitudes survey suggest that the number of people who identify 'very' or 'fairly strongly' with a party has also declined: from 46% in 1987 to 37% in 2014.²⁵

Drivers of changing forms of participation

Social, economic, technological and political factors all shape patterns of participation in formal and informal political activities.²⁶ This section considers key interconnected factors that may have a role in reducing levels of formal engagement and increasing the prominence of new informal types.

Drivers of disengagement from formal politics*Mistrust and anti-political sentiment*

In the 2014 Eurobarometer survey, only about a third of the UK population reported that they tend to trust their national Government or Parliament, a figure broadly in line with other EU countries.²⁷ The NatCen British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey suggests that trust is declining, with the number of people reporting that they 'almost never' trust government trebling from about 10% when it was first asked in 1986, to 30% in 2013.²⁸ Young people are particularly distrustful of politicians and governments.^{29,30,31} This includes distrust in the intentions of governments and their ability to deliver promised policy outcomes, as well as the perceived influence of private corporations.^{32,33,34}

Research suggests that factors increasing mistrust and anti-political sentiment may include:

- Scandals, such as the 2009 MPs expenses crisis.³⁵
- Negative media representation of politics, which politicians may endorse to gain political advantage.^{36,37}
- The public holding unrealistic expectations of standards of behaviour in public life and levels of public services, shaped by unrealistic commitments made by politicians during election campaigns.^{38,39}
- A perceived lack of accountability arising from the transfer of some decision-making powers away from UK elected officials. This includes organisations that are intended to be insulated from political control to help rebuild trust (such as arm's length bodies) as well as to supranational bodies (for example the EU).⁴⁰

Lack of representativeness and perceived relevance

Research carried out by the Hansard Society in 2015 found that most people (58%) think that the democratic system does not address the interests of themselves or their family very well or at all.⁴¹ This may be in part because of public perception that many politicians are career politicians with little experience or understanding of life outside party

politics.⁴² It may also be because the makeup of the UK Parliament is not reflective of the wider population in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age and social class.^{43,44,45} People belonging to groups that are under-represented are more likely to report feeling that they have little influence over the formal political system and that it is detached from their lives.^{46,47,48} They are also less likely to participate in formal politics. For example, the 2014 Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee report on voter engagement in the UK found that young people, certain Black and Minority Ethnic groups, disabled people and people from lower socio-economic groups were far less likely to be registered to vote and turn out at elections than others.⁴⁹ The 2010 Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation emphasised the need for a more representative Commons to enhance its effectiveness and credibility.⁵⁰ Some progress has been made and after the 2015 general election, there are more women in the House of Commons than ever before (29%).⁵¹ Some of Parliament's traditions and customs (including the language used) have also been found to influence some citizens' perceptions that it lacks relevance to their lives.⁵²

Drivers of engagement with informal politics*Changing political identities*

Traditionally, the role of the citizen in Western democracies has been perceived as a series of civic duties, including the duty to vote, but this conception appears to be declining.^{53,54} For example, the 2015 BSA report noted that in 2013 57% of respondents considered that they had a duty to vote compared with 76% in 1987.⁵⁵ However, rather than considering citizens to be either engaged in formal politics or apathetic, many academics and political commentators have argued that the way that people understand politics and how they choose to express themselves politically is changing.^{56,57} Factors affecting this include increasing internet access, levels of university education, the rise of consumerism, and a preference for individual, rather than collective, decision-making and action.^{58,59,60} This may be leading people to participate in politics in new ways, for example, in connection to a specific issue or place, or by targeting actions to effect change on private and third sector organisations rather than the state (Box 2).^{61,62}

Box 2. Broad types of political identities in the UK

Political scientists have classified citizens into broad categories based on their attitudes towards politics.⁶³ A study that tested this classification using Home Office Citizenship Survey data found that:

- About 39% of respondents were **non-participants**, who did not actively partake in any political activity. They were more likely to be elderly, separated or widowed than the general population.
- About 37% were **everyday makers**, who tended not to be interested in party politics, but were active in their local communities. They were more likely to be young, female and non-married than the general population.
- About 15% were **expert citizens**, who used their knowledge and networks to influence corporate or political elites around specific issues. They were more likely to be male, wealthy, middle class and well-educated than the general population.
- About 8% were **political activists**, who were active within formal politics. They had similar characteristics to expert citizens.⁶⁴

New informal political practices

Informal political expression, such as through the arts, demonstrations and boycotts has a long history. New informal political practices tend to build on these forms, but are frequently enabled or mediated by the internet and social media.^{65,66,67} This has reduced the cost of organising and participating in protest and decreased the need for activists to be physically together in order to act together.⁶⁸ Informal participation is often focused around single issues and personal identities, rather than on party politics or traditional ideological groups. Younger people are more likely to take part in informal activities than previous generations, but without necessarily considering their participation to be political.^{69,70} It is difficult to assess the impact of informal activities on decision-making processes in the public, private or third sector, in part because many are relatively recent, and there is a lack of data. The impact of informal politics is also difficult to quantify because activities are aimed at enabling expressions of dissatisfaction with formal politics, rather than seeking clear and specific political change.⁷¹ Two examples that may become increasingly important in the next decade are outlined below.

Online activism

Online activism refers to the increasing use of the internet to create, organise and participate in protest and influence political decision-making, generally around specific issues and without a centralised structure.^{72,73} It encompasses a wide range of activities that can support participation in traditional political activities (such as protest marches), or be entirely online.^{74,75,76} For example around 2.5 million people are members of 38 Degrees, a UK campaigning organisation, which uses the web to allow members to discuss and vote to decide which issues to campaign on.⁷⁷ There is debate about the extent to which participation in some forms of online activism, such as simply signing a petition, represents significant engagement.⁷⁸ More extreme forms of participation can require high levels of technical expertise and be illegal. This includes 'hactivism' – breaking into a computer system for a socially motivated purpose – which has become more prominent recently (Box 3).⁷⁹

Political consumerism

Political consumerism refers to consumers making choices about what products they purchase based on their ethical or political assessment of business and government practice.^{80,81} It includes the long-standing practice of 'boycotting' or refusing to buy a product or shop at a particular outlet, and the more recent trend towards 'buycotting' or deliberately purchasing a product.⁸² According to the BSA survey, about 36% of people had deliberately boycotted or boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons in 2014, about the same as in 2004 (38%).⁸³ Other studies, which separate the two, suggest that buycotting is more common than boycotting products in the UK and that it is increasing, in part because many large campaign groups have moved away from the use of boycotts as a campaign tool and towards supporting accreditation schemes like Fairtrade.^{84,85}

Box 3. Hactivism

Hactivism can involve defacing websites, information theft and 'virtual sit-ins' where protesters simultaneously access a targeted website to create disruption.⁸⁶ Some of these activities are illegal.⁸⁷ For example, the prominent hacktivist movement 'Anonymous' formed in 2006 has acted in support of a number of issues, including the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring uprising.⁸⁸ Participants do not share a clear ideology, but typically are opposed to what they see as authoritarian regimes, censorship and capitalism.⁸⁹

Response of formal democratic institutions

The UK's formal democratic institutions – the UK Parliament, the devolved institutions and local authorities – are changing in response to these trends, in an effort to retain their legitimacy and relevance.⁹⁰ There has been a wide variety of initiatives in response to these trends, such as opening up non-personal data to increase the accountability and transparency of government ([POSTnote 472](#)), citizenship education programmes in schools, and expanding outreach and public engagement activities.^{91,92,93} It also includes changes to electoral registration and proposals to lower the voting age to 16 for Scottish Parliament and Scottish local government elections.⁹⁴ Another recent approach is the use of design methods to enable the public to engage better with the democratic process, such as the Good Law Project to improve legislation and make it more understandable, and the use of civic board games in the planning process.⁹⁵ Three other key responses, which may become increasingly important in the next decade, are outlined below.

E-democracy

E-democracy involves using communications technologies to increase or enhance citizen engagement in democratic processes ([POSTnote 321](#)). For example, technology has increased the availability of public-sector data, the use of public consultations,⁹⁶ and public access to and speed of communication with decision-makers.⁹⁷ Recent developments include voting advice software, which can help users to match their views on certain political issues to overall party positions (such as Verto and Vote Match) or to facilitate tactical voting by enabling people to swap their votes (such as Swap my Vote). E-petitioning has also become an increasingly important part of formal political processes in a number of EU member states and at the EU level.^{98,99} For example, the previous UK Government introduced an e-petition scheme whereby petitions securing 100,000 signatures or more would be put forward for debate in the House of Commons ([Commons Library Note SN06450](#)). This will be replaced in the 2015 Parliament by a new system, jointly managed by the House of Commons and the Government and backed by the establishment of a Petitions Committee, which will hear petitioners' concerns and scrutinise the Government's response.^{100,101}

Some academics have suggested that the prevalence of social media and online news has provided citizens with more power to regulate the behaviour of politicians post-election.^{102,103} E-democracy has the potential to increase mass direct citizen involvement in decision-making through

new forums, but overall effective institutional take-up of new technology as a means of meaningfully improving democratic decision-making has been slow.¹⁰⁴ In 2015, the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy reported the findings of its investigation into how digital technology could be used to improve UK parliamentary democracy (Box 4).¹⁰⁵

Box 4. Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy

The Speaker's Commission considered the potential for new digital technologies to improve dialogue between citizens and Parliament and make it more effective at scrutiny and representing citizens.¹⁰⁶

The Commission heard from a wide a range of people using a range of methods, including online. It outlined several key targets:

- The House of Commons elected in 2015 should create immediately a new 'Cyber Chamber' to enable digital public discussion forums to inform debates held in Westminster Hall.
- By 2016, all published information and broadcast footage produced by Parliament should be freely available online in formats suitable for re-use and without unreasonable copyright restrictions.
- By 2020, the House of Commons should ensure that everyone can understand what it does; Parliament should be fully interactive and digital; and secure online voting should be an option for all voters.

Direct and deliberative democracy

Direct and deliberative democracy refers to opportunities for citizens to be directly involved in decision-making or in deliberative processes on specific issues.^{107,108} In the UK, direct approaches through referendums have been used at various levels: UK-wide (for example on the Parliamentary voting system in 2011), national (for example on Scottish independence in 2014), and local (such as for elected mayors).¹⁰⁹ Deliberative approaches in the UK include public engagement in foresight programmes and technology assessment ([POSTnote 332](#)) and citizen juries and assemblies ([Lords Library Note 2015/008](#); [SN07143](#)).¹¹⁰ They can be used to inform decision-making or enable collective dialogue between groups of citizens and leaders with a view to achieving a consensus. These approaches can be enabled by e-democracy. For example, the European project 'D-cent' is assessing whether enabling citizens to propose and edit legislation helps to improve its overall legitimacy and performance.¹¹¹

Research suggests that direct and deliberative processes have become important parts of the UK's democratic landscape over the last twenty years and that this is likely to continue.¹¹² Nonetheless, there is broad agreement that the UK is unlikely to shift away from a democracy based on elected representatives. Rather, citizens are likely to be offered more opportunities to participate directly in discussing and debating policy options, with final decisions taken by elected representatives or unelected officials.¹¹³

Political devolution and decentralisation

The UK is one of the most centralised countries of its size in the developed world and in recent decades all UK parties have made commitments to decentralise power.^{114,115,116} Transfer of decision making powers or budgets includes:

- **Devolution to the national level.** For example, much recent discussion has been focused on Scotland

following the 2014 independence referendum and Smith Commission¹¹⁷ ([SN06987](#)).

- **Decentralisation to local and regional areas.** For example, directly elected mayors for combined authorities ([SN07029](#)), and Neighbourhood Plans ([SN05838](#)).

Academics and think tanks have argued that devolution and decentralisation can re-engage citizens in formal politics, by moving decision-making closer to the individuals it affects and making lines of accountability clearer.^{118,119,120} It also opens up opportunities for deliberative forms of participation, such as citizen's assemblies, which are difficult to scale to the national level.¹²¹ Nonetheless, although devolution and decentralisation appear likely to continue, other academics and independent organisations have argued that the process is happening in a piecemeal fashion and that the impact of decentralisation on political participation is mixed.^{122,123,124} Research by the Hansard Society in 2015 found that only 20% of people felt that they had at least some influence over local decision-making, lower than at any time over the last decade.¹²⁵ Further, desire to be involved at the local level (38%) was about the same as desire to be involved at the national level (37%).¹²⁶

Future impact on UK democracy

It is unclear whether recent or pending reforms of democratic institutions in the UK are sufficient to address the underlying drivers of disengagement from formal politics.^{127,128,129} At the same time, there is some evidence that the importance of informal politics will increase because they are substituting rather than complementing formal processes and young people are likely to continue to participate informally as they grow older.^{130,131} This could lead to a continuing shift away from engagement with formal politics; however, several academic studies have argued that some forms of informal participation, such as arts, culture and sports-based participation, can develop social cohesion or increase citizens' understanding of formal politics as well as their confidence to access and create change through formal processes.^{132,133} These factors are associated with increased formal political participation and so there may be opportunities for democratic institutions to harness interest in informal politics to build engagement with formal processes.^{134,135,136,137}

However, over a third of the population (see Box 2) are estimated to be disengaged from all informal and formal politics. Some evidence suggests that effective citizenship education may be an important part of the process of becoming an engaged voter.^{138,139,140} Nonetheless, challenges remain to democratic institutions to find ways of understanding the views and experiences of people who consider themselves politically aware and interested, but who are disengaged because they do not perceive any means to effect the change that they want to see within the current system.^{141,142}

For references, please see online version.

Endnotes

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