

Can't, won't and what's the point? Explaining the UK public's muted response to austerity



Since 2010, the government has undertaken extensive spending cuts, subsequently linked with rising poverty, food bank use, and serious health issues. [Kate Harrison](#) identifies key factors that explain why the public's response to austerity has been relatively muted.

Since 2010, successive governments have instigated round after round of spending cuts, reducing or closing many public services. However, the government's 2020 budget, followed by the spending necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis, appear to have brought an end to cuts, at least in the short term. Many, though, now faced with unemployment, are being forced to turn to government support such as Universal Credit. They have been met by a benefits system depleted by long-term underinvestment and face the reality of living on [£94 per week](#), or less. Many who previously were shielded from austerity's worst effects must now face the reality of it.

Under austerity, the UK has seen cuts to spending [disproportionately](#) spread across the country, with deprived areas typically facing the highest cuts to services. Over the last decade, child poverty [has risen](#), foodbank referrals have [more than doubled](#) and health inequalities [have widened](#). Those who are most in need have borne the brunt of the cuts: people with the most severe disabilities have faced a burden of cuts [19 times higher](#) than the rest of the population.

Despite this, the public response to austerity has been relatively muted, with a spate of protests in the initial years of the coalition government and relatively little political activism since. [My research](#) looks at why there hasn't been a stronger public response to these measures. Some argue that Brexit could have been a [protest vote](#) against the cuts and their consequences for many people. The evidence on this is so far limited, but it is still worth noting that if austerity did play a role in the UK's vote to leave the EU, this is an indirect and nonspecific way of protesting the cuts. As such, it is important to understand why people are not taking more conventional approaches to opposing austerity.

Across many forms of political participation, including voting and protesting, it is [typically](#) those with low wealth, income, and education who are least likely to take part. Given that it is these groups who are suffering the most under austerity, without their voices being heard the political establishment are given no reason to change their policies. This maintenance of the status quo then allows the most powerful members of society to [preserve their position](#) of privilege.

The key question is therefore why are more people not expressing opposition to austerity? Research [suggests](#) that people need time, money and civic skills to participate. However, when there is an economic shock like the financial crisis of 2008, there can be a spike in protest behaviour as people express their grievances, such as a demonstrating against rising unemployment.

This theory of grievances as motivation for protest can explain the early protests the UK saw, such as Occupy London and student protests against rising tuition fees. Nevertheless, what this doesn't explain is why these protests didn't continue, as austerity deepened and public services were reduced or closed. This suggests the picture is more complex.

Building on the two theories mentioned above, I propose a four-fold explanation for the relatively low levels of political activity seen in response to austerity. The starting point will be the argument that resources like time and money are needed for political participation. Under austerity, those from disadvantaged and [minority groups](#) have lost out the most, meaning that those who already had the least time, money, and resilience have fewer resources now than they did before. As such, participating in politics is even less accessible for those with disabilities, on benefits, and low incomes than it was before the cuts began.

But what about those more fortunate, who had more resources and haven't lost out in the same way? The theory of grievances suggests that those who have experienced an economic or political struggle will engage in political participation. For those whose experience of austerity has been less extreme and less personal, there is little cause for mobilisation. Indeed, following the introduction of harsh austerity measures in Spain, the participants in the wave of strikes and demonstrations that took place were disproportionately those affected. For the population as a whole, political engagement actually [declined](#), on average, after the introduction of cuts.

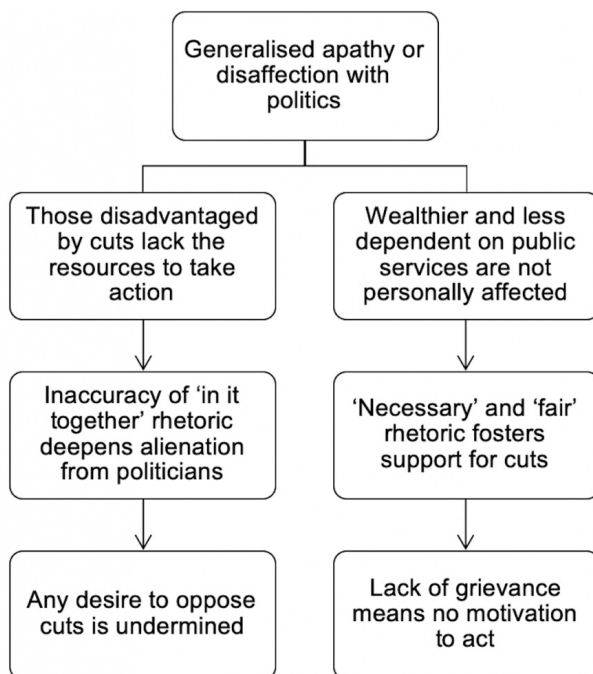
There are two further factors that are important to consider for a more nuanced understanding of low political participation. Firstly, the government chose to talk about the cuts in a way that made them seem both necessary and unavoidable. They made arguments [such as](#) 'we are not doing this because we want to, driven by theory or ideology. We are doing this because we have to'. Despite some arguing that austerity is, in fact, [an ideological choice](#) and not the only solution, the British public [largely accepted](#) the narrative that there is no alternative. This may have led to a sense that participation is futile, because the lack of a viable alternative means that political action is unlikely to result in change.

Also, for those most affected by the cuts, the government's choice to evoke a 'blitz spirit' narrative of '[sticking together as a country](#)' is likely to have come across as insensitive, if not insulting. The highly unequal way that cuts have been implemented is likely to exacerbate distrust in politicians who try to claim that we are in it together.

The final consideration in understanding the impact of austerity is the broader picture of participation. There is [evidence](#) that trust in politicians has been declining while discontent with democracy grows. The distrust in politicians and lack of political efficacy fostered by the government's austerity narrative is therefore likely to exacerbate more general recent trends of declining political participation.

In combination, these factors will typically lead to lack of political participation through two possible avenues, shown in the figure below. Generalised dissatisfaction with politics forms a backdrop for all, undermining participation even before austerity began. For those significantly affected by austerity, opportunities to engage in politics are diminished by the loss of resources to participate caused by spending cuts. The 'in it together' rhetoric then fosters alienation from the government, further exacerbating the disinclination to participate.

Figure 1: Theoretical model to illustrate low political participation in response to austerity.



Meanwhile, for those on higher incomes and less dependent on public services, the low personal impact of austerity produces no significant grievance to communicate, resulting in little motivation to act. Additionally, the rhetoric of austerity as necessary and unavoidable fosters the belief that nothing would change if they were to act. While general participation levels are already falling, more provocation is needed for political participation.

This theory demonstrates the complex ways in which people can become silenced by austerity, which is deeply problematic because those who are most dependent upon the state face the most challenges in engaging with politics. Those on low incomes, with disabilities or otherwise marginalised have lost out the most and, with their influence further diminished, are only likely to lose out more.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *Representation*.

About the Author



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