

Britain is facing a crisis of democracy but the main parties cannot respond

By Democratic Audit UK

*Who is at fault for Britain's democratic crisis? While political parties seek to be the solution to this malaise, they are in actual fact the major driver of the problem, argues **Adam Lent**. Unfortunately, politicians are disincentived to adopt the kind of relationship with voters that would address their dissatisfaction, meaning that the problem is a long way from finding an adequate solution.*



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Britain is in the early stages of a crisis of democracy. Westminster has been shielded from the full consequences of voter disaffection by the fact that the anger has remained unfocused and unorganised for many years. But this is changing. The independence referendum and now a resurgent SNP is giving voice to anti-Westminster feeling in Scotland. In England, it is finding its voice through UKIP.

A [survey](#) conducted last year by YouGov and Southampton University makes clear the scale of the disaffection. Almost 2,000 respondents were asked whether they agreed with the following statement:

'politics is dominated by self-seeking politicians protecting the interests of the already rich and powerful in our society'.

72% agreed and 8% disagreed. The largest proportion strongly agreed at 42%.

It is worth digesting that slowly: almost *half* of Britain's citizens believe *strongly* that politics in their country does not serve their interests but those of a powerful political and economic class.

The main parties have great difficulty responding to such sentiments for two reasons.

Misinterpreting Voter Anger

Firstly, the politicians and activists that make up parties have very strong beliefs about what is right and wrong for the UK, so they tend to interpret voter anger on their own terms. They also believe that, like them, voters are worked up about topical issues. So it is very easy to find party aligned commentators and activists blaming disaffection on inequality, austerity, low wages, immigration, the NHS, Europe, high benefits, low benefits, taxes, the alienated middle class, the alienated working class, regional imbalances and a whole host of other pet topics.

But take a closer look at that YouGov survey and something remarkable emerges: *everyone* feels the same about politics whatever their party allegiance, their age, their gender, their social class or where they are from. There are some differences but given the scale of disaffection across the board these are barely significant. Higher social classes are less inclined to agree that politicians are self-interested lick spittles of the rich and powerful but that's still 68% of them compared to 78% for lower social classes. Northerners may be more cynical about Westminster than Londoners but only by 77% to 65%.

The evidence that the anger is about the nature of politics rather than policies is supported by the findings from the [Audit of Political Engagement](#) run by the Hansard Society. The Audit's researchers [conducted fourteen in-depth discussions](#) with 153 citizens across the UK. Their findings were clear. When asked to come up with reforms that would address disaffection only 58 out of 450 total suggestions related to policy outcomes such as immigration, Europe or the NHS. The overwhelming majority of reform suggestions "focused on issues of process in terms of how politics is conducted, who should be involved and who should be more influential and who less influential."

This is not to say that issues such as immigration, welfare and cuts are not important to voters – we know from other surveys they are. But the evidence shows that addressing these issues is not the key to resolving voter anger towards Westminster.

Parties are the Problem

The second reason parties and politicians find it so difficult to respond is because the types of changes required to address disaffection puts at risk their capacity to deliver the policies they so value.

The Audit of Political Engagement research found that the most popular reforms fell into three categories accounting for almost 60% of all suggestions: greater accountability and transparency; better information and less spin; giving citizens more say.

Plenty of [other research](#) reinforces these findings. Essentially voters themselves suggest that they want more honesty from their politicians about their performance, a greater direct say over what their elected representatives do and a greater capacity to hold them to account when they fail to deliver.

This implies some significant degree of shift away from our highly representative approach to democracy based on strong party discipline to one with a larger element of direct democracy where voters can challenge and shape MPs' decisions between elections.

This is not something most MPs or their activist supporters want to contemplate because it would potentially jeopardise the party mission to which they have committed themselves. Conservative MPs may well be required to halt NHS reform under such a system. Labour MPs could have no choice but to press ahead with harsh cuts to welfare benefits. And if they didn't deliver on those demands they might find themselves subject to an accountability process like recall. All rather awkward and disruptive.

Recent by-elections have sent yet another shock wave through Westminster. Already, all sorts of analysis and recommendations are flying around which bear little relation to what the research tells us voters are really angry about and what they actually want. The truth is this is primarily a crisis of representative democracy. The first of the main parties to recognise and respond to this fact will be the first party to survive and maybe even flourish in the face of the voters' angry mood. The problem is that this seems to be a very hard thing for any of the established parties to do. In the meantime, expect the foundations of politics to keep shifting increasingly uneasily.

Note: this post originally appeared on the [RSA blog](#) and can be found [here](#). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. The author is crowd-funding for a new book that will explore this and similar subjects entitled 'Small is Powerful: Why the era of big government, big business and big culture is over (and why it's a good thing)'. [Click here](#) to pre-order it and to contribute to its crowd-funding campaign.

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