

Politics

Disengaged and disconnected? Trends in attitudes towards politics

Concerns about the levels of political engagement amongst voters in Britain have often been expressed in the wake of much lower turnouts at recent general elections. Soon after coming to power the Coalition said it wanted to restore our faith in politics. Has it succeeded?

Political spectators, not activists

While most are not normally active in politics, many do follow what is happening.

- Less than half have engaged in a political action other than voting or signing a petition.
 - But nearly two-thirds (65%) follow political news on a daily basis.
 - And half say they sometimes talk about politics to family and friends.
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Growth in disconnection not reversed

Long-term trends towards greater voter disconnection have not been reversed during the Coalition's time in office, though our interest in politics is undiminished.

- Only 17% trust governments most of the time, just as only 16% did in 2009, but far less than the 38% who did in 1986.
 - Fifty-seven per cent believe they have a duty to vote, in line with the 58% who did so in 2009, but down from 76% in 1987.
 - Thirty-two per cent say they have "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of interest in politics, similar levels to 1986, when 29% expressed this view.
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Principle of coalition government has become unpopular

Support for the principle of coalition government has fallen heavily since 2010, but this has not generated greater concern about the health of Britain's democracy.

- Only 29% now prefer coalition to single party government, down from 45% before the Coalition was formed.
 - But 57% appear to think that democracy works at least reasonably well in Britain, little changed from a decade ago.
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Introduction

We have become accustomed in recent years to the expression of concerns about low turnout, voter apathy, and people's lack of trust in or respect for politicians (see for example, Dunleavy et al. (2010), House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (2014), Whittam Smith, 2014)). The reason for this worry is not hard to find. Turnout in UK general elections declined during the second half of the 20th century and has been lower still since the turn of the millennium. Previous British Social Attitudes surveys have shown that this apparent voter apathy appears to be part of a broader disconnection with politics, with, for example, fewer people accepting that they have a duty to vote and fewer feeling any sense of attachment to a political party (Curtice and Butt, 2010; Lee and Young, 2013). These trends have been particularly apparent among younger people.

Not that all the evidence has pointed towards inexorable decline. In our 30th British Social Attitudes report, for example, we found signs of a possible reversal of the decline in civic duty, and a small increase in levels of political interest (Lee and Young, 2013). A 65% turnout at the 2010 election represented a marked improvement on the 59% recorded in 2001. More recently, the Scottish Independence Referendum suggested a more enthusiastic level of participation in the democratic process is possible when voters are presented with a straight choice on a subject about which many feel passionately and nearly all believe is important. Turnout in that ballot reached 85%, higher than in any previous nationwide ballot in Scotland held since the advent of the mass franchise (Electoral Commission, 2014).

Nevertheless political disengagement was one of the issues that David Cameron and Nick Clegg promised to address when they joined forces in May 2010, not least through a seemingly ambitious programme of constitutional reform. The Coalition's Programme for Government, which outlined the agreement between the two parties stated, "The Government believes that our political system is broken. We urgently need fundamental political reform" (Cabinet Office, 2010: 26). Meanwhile in a speech he gave shortly after becoming Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg described the Coalition's programme as "the most significant programme of empowerment by a British government since the great reforms of the 19th Century" and claimed that it would "persuade you to put your faith in politics once again" (Clegg, 2010).

Some of that programme, eventually, saw the light of day, including:

- introducing fixed term parliaments (removing the Prime Minister's power to call a general election at the time of his or her choosing);
- introducing a bill to give voters the right to 'recall' their MP if he or she has been found to have broken parliamentary rules or has committed an imprisonable offence;
- and de-centralising power through measures such as locally elected mayors and extending the powers of local councils.

A referendum on changing the electoral system in general elections to the Alternative Vote was also held in 2011, although this resulted in a vote for no change. Meanwhile, others of the Coalition's proposed political reforms have not been implemented, most notably introducing an elected House of Lords. Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile assessing whether there is any evidence that the government has met its broader aspirations to restore our 'faith in politics'.

We address two main questions. First, we ask how politically 'engaged or disengaged' people are in Britain. We examine membership of different parties and groups, participation in political and social action, and 'everyday' informal engagement in politics via, for example, discussions with friends and neighbours, all of them behaviours that indicate some kind of involvement with politics in Britain today. Second, we ask whether the public is 'connected or disconnected' with politics, by examining attitudes towards politics in Britain nowadays. Do people think democracy works well in Britain? Are the government and MPs trusted by those they represent? And do the electorate feel they have a say in how the government operates?

Most of our data come from a set of questions included on the most recent British Social Attitudes survey (2014) as part of an International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (see <http://www.issp.org/>) module on 'Citizenship'. In addition, we report on a few questions that are asked as part of the extensive 'background' information that we routinely collect about our respondents. Our main focus is on the data for 2014, but where appropriate we also compare these results with those obtained the last time the ISSP questions were asked, in 2004. As most of these questions were not asked in the intervening years, we are not always able to pinpoint precisely when any changes have occurred, or to relate them to a particular event or development within that ten-year period. However, we can still consider the broader question of whether the levels of engagement and connection with politics in 2014 are different from those found a decade ago, and thus whether there is any reason to suspect that the Coalition might have presided over a switch to a more engaged and connected Britain.

Are we engaged or disengaged?

We start by assessing the extent to which British people are engaged in politics. We define 'engagement' as any behaviour that involves people either in the political process or in wider political activity. This engagement could comprise formal activities such as voting in elections, or less formal actions such as signing a petition or attending a demonstration. We also consider the extent to which politics features in people's everyday lives, through conversations with others and watching or reading political news. While day-to-day conversation or following the news might be regarded as a relatively low level form of 'engagement', it nonetheless provides an indication of how far removed (or otherwise) the public is from politics in Britain today. Even if people are not engaged in political activity, if they are

still interested enough to talk about politics with their friends and family, then it is difficult to argue that they are wholly disengaged from the political process, and might in the right circumstances perhaps be tempted or persuaded to do something more active.

Voting and political activity

Post-war Britain flocked to the polls. In 1950, no less than 84% voted in that year's general election. But that is now a distant memory. In the three general elections that so far have been held in this century, turnout has been lower than at any time since 1922, falling well below the 70% mark. It remains to be seen how the 2015 election will fit into this trend.

However, voting is far from being the only possible way of getting involved in politics. Some have suggested that younger generations in particular have become more involved in other forms of political activity and engagement even when they might prove disinclined to take a trip to the polling station (Norris, 2002; Sloam, 2014). For example, people may be members of particular groups, such as trade unions or voluntary associations, that campaign on particular issues about which they care. Or they might take action more directly on such issues – by, for example, signing petitions or joining demonstrations.

For a variety of different kinds of groups, the ISSP module asked respondents whether they were currently members and “actively participate”, were members but “don't participate”, or whether they “used to belong” or “never belonged”. As Table 1 shows, in most cases membership is low, and “active” membership even lower. Membership of political parties is particularly low – just 9% of our sample claim to belong to a political party, though in truth even this figure is an exaggeration. The parties' own membership figures suggest that no more than 1% now belong, even though there have recently been increases in the membership of the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Green Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (Keen, 2015). Some of our respondents were probably claiming psychological rather than paid membership. In any event, only 1% say they are active members. Active membership of trade unions and voluntary associations is higher but this is still very clearly something in which only a minority of the public are engaged: 5% actively belong to a trade union, while 12% say the same about a voluntary association. Participation is much higher (26%) in sports or leisure groups than in any organisation that might be thought to have a political purpose. None of this however is new, except that fewer now claim to be a member of a religious organisation than did ten years ago – an unsurprising finding given the decline in attendance at religious services in recent years (Lee, 2012).

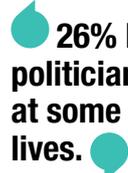
Table 1. Belonging to groups and associations, 2004 and 2014*

	2004	2014
Political party	%	%
Belong, actively participate	1	1
Belong, don't participate	9	7
A trade union, business or professional association	%	%
Belong, actively participate	5	5
Belong, don't participate	17	16
Another voluntary association	%	%
Belong, actively participate	12	12
Belong, don't participate	5	4
A church or other religious organisation	%	%
Belong, actively participate	16	12
Belong, don't participate	18	12
A sports, leisure or cultural group	%	%
Belong, actively participate	23	26
Belong, don't participate	6	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	1580

*The full question text is shown in the appendix; proportions that do not belong are not shown in the table, but are included in the base.

However, group membership is arguably a relatively formal way of getting involved in politics compared with undertaking particular actions such as signing a petition, demonstrating or boycotting goods, actions that can be undertaken without signing up for a formal membership. We therefore also asked respondents to tell us how frequently they had done various “different forms of political and social action”. As Table 2 shows, the most commonly reported form of action in our list is “signed a petition”; no less than 67% say they have done this either “in the past year” or “in the more distant past”. Signing a petition, however, demands little in terms of time and commitment. Other kinds of political activity are much less common, albeit more common than getting involved in party politics. For example, 26% have contacted a politician or civil servant at some point in their lives, and at least 15% report having attended a political meeting or rally. Meanwhile, although the rise of social media and new technologies open up new and perhaps more easily accessible ways of getting involved, just 14% of us say we have expressed political views online.

Although signing a petition is the most common form of political activity, in fact rather fewer people say they have signed one in our most recent survey than did so in 2004; the 67% figure for 2014 compares with 73% in 2004. This is perhaps surprising given the recent expansion in online petitions (although it is possible that, for some respondents, the reference to “signed” in the question encouraged them to think of physically signing a paper petition

 **26% have contacted a politician or civil servant at some point in their lives.**

rather than adding their name to a virtual one). Otherwise, there has been relatively little change in reported levels of participation. So while there is nothing here to indicate that there has been a decline in political activity, equally there is no indication that, amongst the public as a whole at least, the decline in turnout is being accompanied by greater involvement in other forms of political action.

Table 2. Forms of political and social action, 2004 and 2014

	2004	2014
Have done in the past year or in the more distant past	%	%
have signed a petition	73	67
have boycotted, or deliberately bought, certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	38	36
have donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity	30	31
have contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or a civil servant to express your views	23	26
have taken part in a demonstration	14	17
have attended a political meeting or rally	14	15
have expressed political views on the internet+	n/a	14
have contacted or appeared in the media to express your views	10	12
	<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>853</i>
		<i>1580</i>

+ A question about joining internet forums was included in the 2004 survey, eliciting a response of 3%. The difference in question wording is such that we can't compare this result with the 2014 figure.

n/a = not asked

Everyday engagement

We have seen then that levels of election turnout have declined since the mid-20th century (albeit it does not yet appear to be in a terminal spiral), party membership is low, and that there is scant evidence that these ways of getting involved in party politics have been replaced by other forms of political activity, particularly where this involves anything more taxing than signing a petition. But do these relatively low levels of engagement mean that politics does not feature in most people's day to day lives?

Seemingly not. As many as 50% of the British public say they "often" or "sometimes" discuss politics with friends, relatives or fellow workers (see Table 3). This suggests that there is, perhaps, a substantial body of people who engage on a regular basis in political debate even though they may rarely get involved in political activity, if indeed they do so at all. Moreover, the proportion saying that they "often" or "sometimes" discuss politics is five percentage points higher now than a decade earlier. In short, while only a minority of us appear to be willing to become political activists, quite a few of us are 'political spectators'.

50% of the British public "often" or "sometimes" discuss politics with friends, relatives or fellow workers.

Table 3. When you get together with your friends, relatives or fellow workers, how often do you discuss politics? 2004 and 2014

	2004	2014
	%	%
Often	8	9
Sometimes	36	41
Rarely	36	30
Never	19	18
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	1580

Moreover, over eight in ten (83%) of us keep up with political news at least once a week, either through newspapers, TV, radio or online (Table 4). Sixty-five per cent of us use at least one of these methods to access political news on a daily basis, while a further 18% do so at least once a week. Only 7% say that they “never” access political news via any of these routes. Again, this indicates that low-level, everyday engagement with what is going on in politics apparently exceeds the level of involvement in any more substantial political activity.

Table 4. Frequency of accessing political news and information, 2014

	Newspaper	Television	Radio	Internet	Access political news via any of these means
Frequency	%	%	%	%	%
Daily	21	29	18	20	65
Weekly	26	34	20	21	18
Less than 1 day a week	22	18	17	16	7
Never	28	16	41	40	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1580	1580	1580	1580	1580

*Questions regarding the use of specific media types (newspaper, television, radio and internet) were asked as separate questions. The question about accessing political news via any of these means was asked separately, with all of the specific types of media listed within one question. Full questions are listed in the appendix.

The most popular medium for accessing political news is TV, with nearly two-thirds (64%) watching political news on that medium on a “daily” or “weekly” basis. Given TV’s continued predominance, it is perhaps no surprise that there has been so much controversy about who should participate in any televised leader debates that are held in advance of the 2015 general election. Meanwhile, although 40% of us now use the internet to get political news or information on at least a weekly basis, this remains lower than the 46% that continue to read the political content of a newspaper at least once a week. So although much has been made of sharp falls in newspaper circulation (Greenslade, 2014), it appears that many people are still likely to use

 **The most popular medium for accessing political news is TV.** 

newspapers as one of the ways in which they follow the 2015 general election.

We appear then to have a tale of two halves. When it comes to formal party political activities such as voting and joining a party, engagement has either been in decline over the longer term or is at relatively low levels. However, a higher proportion are involved in everyday things like talking about politics with friends and following the news, and we seem to be at least as involved in these activities now as we were a decade ago. Few of us may be ‘activists’ but it seems that many of us are ‘spectators’.

Are we connected or disconnected?

Attempts to explain the apparent decline in engagement with politics in Britain, at least so far as voting is concerned, commonly draw on the idea that we are becoming increasingly politically ‘disconnected’ – that we have lost faith in the political system, we feel that politics has nothing to do with or offer ‘people like us’, we do not trust our politicians and that, as a result, we have lost the interest and sense of duty required to motivate us to show up and vote (Curtice, 2011). In other words, underpinning these changes in behaviour are believed to be major shifts in attitudes towards politics in Britain. But how much of this is actually supported by evidence? In this half of the paper, we examine various attitudinal measures of political ‘connectedness’, from political interest, through to duty to vote.

Political interest

Declining voter turnout in UK general elections may be taken to imply that we are losing interest in politics. But is this actually the case? British Social Attitudes has asked people how much interest they have in politics on a regular basis since 1986, asking:

***How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics
... a great deal, quite a lot, some, not very much, or, none at all?***

Table 5 shows that the figures for 2013, the last year in which the question was asked, were remarkably similar to the figures for 1986. In 1986, 60% had at least “some” interest, while in 2013 the figure was 63%. The figures for most years in between have also been much the same. General election turnouts may have declined over the last three decades, but the explanation does not appear to be that people are simply less interested in politics.

In this respect, British Social Attitudes’ findings appear to run counter to the Hansard Society’s Audit of Political Engagement series, which, until its most recent survey, had appeared to show that political interest had declined (Hansard Society, 2012; 2014). However, the drop in political interest they recorded in 2011 (which was replicated in 2012) coincided with a change in polling company, while a reversal

of that drop in 2013 followed a switch back to the original company.¹ The difference between the fluctuation in the Hansard series and the relatively stable level of political interest recorded by British Social Attitudes since 1986 highlights the value of maintaining a consistent approach when attempting to track changes in attitudes over time.

Table 5. Interest in politics, selected years 1986-2013

	1986	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2012	2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Great deal/quite a lot	29	32	31	31	34	35	35	32
Some	31	31	33	35	34	31	32	32
Not much/none at all	39	36	37	34	32	34	33	37
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1548	1445	3620	3287	1077	2215	1103	1063

55% are “very” or “fairly” interested in politics.

Evidence from a slightly different question asked in 2014, as part of the ISSP ‘Citizenship’ module, which asked people “How interested would you say you personally are in politics?” also indicates that a relatively large section of the British population has at least some level of interest in politics. In response to this question as many as 55% say they are “very” or “fairly” interested, while just 14% state they are “not at all interested”². Again there is no evidence of a decline in political interest in comparison to a decade earlier – if anything, slightly more say they are at least “fairly” interested in 2014 (55%) than did in 2004 (49%).

Neither is there any evidence that people’s confidence in their understanding of politics has waned over the last decade. Over half (55%) agree that they have “a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing Britain” (an increase of five percentage points on a decade earlier). Only 15% of people actively disagree that they have “a pretty good understanding”, down five percentage points since 2004 (See Appendix, Table A1).

Perceived influence over politics

Whether or not people are interested in or understand politics may be irrelevant if they feel that they cannot influence it. Perhaps people are less likely to vote now compared with two decades ago because they feel that voting does not make any difference to the issues that matter to them. Indeed, a version of this argument has been put forward recently by the comedian Russell Brand, who has gained considerable attention by arguing that voting is a waste of time because all political parties are in league with international corporate interests (Brand, 2014).

Our data suggest that there is indeed quite a high level of scepticism among the British public about their ability to influence political decision-making (Table 6). Forty-four per cent agree that “people like

1. The 2010 survey was conducted by IPSOS MORI, the 2011-2012 surveys by TNS, and the 2013 survey by IPSOS MORI again.

2. Full figures are: “Very interested” 11%, “Fairly interested” 44%, “Not very interested” 29%, “Not at all interested” 14%, “Can’t choose” or not answered 2%

44% agree that “people like me don’t have any say about what government does.”

me don’t have any say about what the government does” while just over half (53%) agree that “I don’t think the government cares much what people like me think”. However, we do not seem to be any more likely to be disillusioned in this respect than we were a decade ago – in fact, the proportion who agree that people like them do not have any say about what government does has actually declined by eight percentage points since 2004, while the proportion who feel the government does not much care what “people like me think” remains largely unchanged.³

Table 6. Views about perceived influence on politics, 2004 and 2014

	2004	2014
People like me don’t have any say about what the government does	%	%
Agree	52	44
Neither agree nor disagree	19	24
Disagree	25	28
I don’t think the government cares much what people like me think	%	%
Agree	57	53
Neither agree nor disagree	17	20
Disagree	22	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	1580

Much the same picture emerged when we asked people whether they felt they might attempt to influence a political decision, such as a proposed unjust or harmful law, more directly, and if so whether they thought their efforts would gain much traction with parliament. The questions were as follows:

Suppose a law were being considered by parliament that you considered to be unjust or harmful...

If such a case arose, how likely is it that you, acting alone or together with others, would be able to try to do something about it?

If you made such an effort, how likely is it that parliament would give serious attention to your demands?

Although most (52%) say they would be unlikely to try and take action, two in five (40%) claim they would be “very” or “fairly” likely to do so (Table 7). However, only 16% believe that it is likely that, if they did make such an effort, parliament would give serious attention to their demands. These findings are also broadly similar to those recorded in 2004. Again, the British public appears rather doubtful of its ability to influence important political decisions, albeit no more so than it was ten years ago.

Table 7. Suppose a law were being considered by parliament that you considered to be unjust or harmful... 2004 and 2014

	2004	2014
If such a case arose, how likely is it that you, acting alone or together with others, would be able to try to do something about it?	%	%
...Very/fairly likely	37	40
...Very/fairly unlikely	57	52
...Don't know	5	7
If you made such an effort, how likely is it that parliament would give serious attention to your demands?	%	%
...Very/fairly likely	17	16
...Very/fairly unlikely	77	75
...Don't know	5	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	1580

Democracy

Does people's scepticism about their ability to influence political decisions reflect a general cynicism about the functioning of British democracy? Do we agree with Russell Brand's assessment that our current system of parliamentary democracy is flawed? To assess this, we can look at the responses to the following three questions:

How well does democracy work in Britain today?

And what about 10 years ago? How well did democracy work in Britain then?

And how about 10 years from now? How well do you think democracy will work in Britain then?

In each case, respondents were asked to reply by choosing a number between 0 and 10, where 0 indicates "very poorly" and 10 "very well". So far as democracy "today" is concerned, a majority, 57%, make a positive response, that is they give an answer (between 6 and 10) above the midpoint (5) of the scale (see the top section of Table 8). However, there is no great strength of feeling about this matter: almost no-one uses the extreme values on the scale (i.e. 0 or 10), while sizeable minorities choose the mid-point (18%), or say they cannot choose (10%).

People do not appear to think that the state of our democracy is worse now than it was a decade ago.

Meanwhile, although people do not appear to think that the state of our democracy is worse now than it was a decade ago – assessments of how well it worked ten years ago are very similar to those for "today" – they do appear to be more doubtful about democracy's future prospects. Just 47% give a positive response to that question (that is they give the likely future functioning of our democracy a score of 6 or more out of 10) – ten points lower than the reading for "today". However, we cannot infer from this that most people are now particularly pessimistic about the future of democracy – the 47% whose responses indicate that they expect it

to function reasonably well a decade from now still far outweigh the 22% who give a definitely negative response to this question (a score of between 0 and 4 out of 10). Moreover, the pattern of responses to this question are much the same now as they were in 2004 – as indeed is also true of the other two questions. While we may not be wildly enthusiastic about how well our democracy works, most of us do not yet appear to think it is broken, and we are certainly no more negative about it now than we were ten years ago.

Table 8. Views about democracy in Britain, 2004 and 2014

How well democracy works in Britain...	2004	2014
...today	%	%
0-4 (Below mid-point incl. "Very poorly")	17	15
5 (mid-point)	18	18
6-10 (Above mid-point incl. "Very well")	55	57
Can't Choose	10	10
... 10 years ago	%	%
0-4 (Below mid-point incl. "Very poorly")	16	14
5 (mid-point)	15	15
6-10 (Above mid-point incl. "Very well")	53	55
Can't Choose	16	16
... 10 years from now	%	%
0-4 (Below mid-point incl. "Very poorly")	23	22
5 (mid-point)	14	14
6-10 (Above mid-point incl. "Very well")	43	47
Can't Choose	20	18
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	1580

However, there is one feature of our current democracy about which we are apparently rather less enthusiastic about now than we were before 2010: coalition government. Since 1983, British Social Attitudes has asked people on a number of occasions whether they prefer single party government or two or more parties in coalition. The question reads as follows:

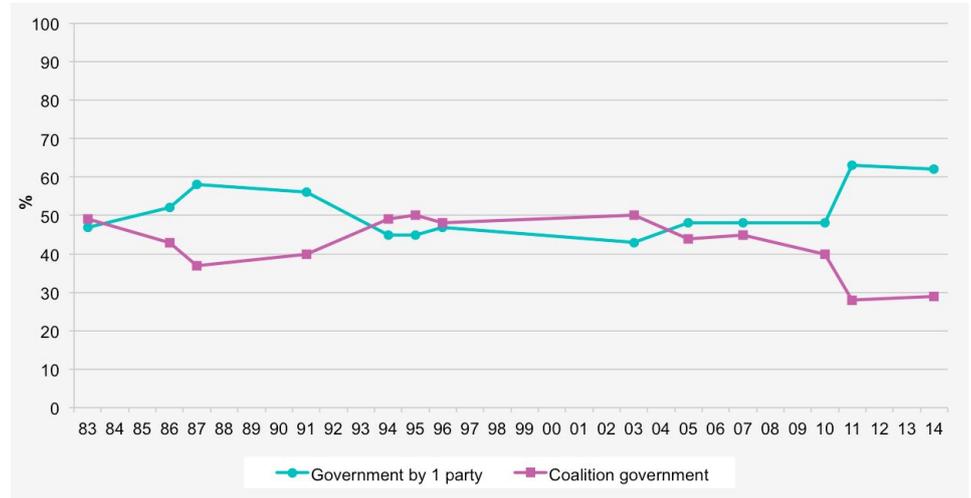
***Which do you think would generally be better for Britain nowadays ...
...to have a government at Westminster formed by one political party on its own,
or, to have a government at Westminster formed by two political parties together - in coalition?***

As Figure 1 shows, for most of the time between the first British Social Attitudes survey in 1983 and the formation of the Coalition in 2010, support for single party government and for coalition was typically finely balanced; only in the late eighties and early nineties did support for single party government temporarily pull ahead. However, it seems that it did not take much experience of seeing the current Coalition in action to undermine support for the idea

29% prefer coalition to single party government.

in principle. At 40% support was already a little lower in 2010 (immediately after the Coalition was formed) than it had been three years earlier (45%). But between 2010 and 2011 the proportion who preferred coalition plummeted to just 28%, an all-time low, and in our most recent survey it still stands at just 29%. In contrast, as many as 62% now say they favour single party government.

Figure 1. Preference for single party or coalition government, 1983-2014



The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Table A2 in the appendix to this paper

Apparently any hopes that the Liberal Democrats might have had that voters would come to accept coalitions once they saw one in action have been dashed by the experience of the last five years. However, we need to be aware that voters’ reactions to this question are to some degree affected by which party they support. As Table 9 shows, even before the Coalition was formed, Conservative and Labour supporters were less keen on the idea of coalition than the Liberal Democrats – after all experience gave both sets of supporters reason to believe that their party had every prospect of being able to form a single party government. Nevertheless, in both cases around two in five still backed the idea of coalition. However, as soon as the Coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats had been formed, Labour supporters in particular became much less keen on the idea, with just 27% backing coalition. For many of them, it seems, the idea had become tainted because of its association with their political opponents.

Table 9. Support for coalition government by party identification, 2007, 2010 and 2014

% favouring coalition government	2007	2010	2014	Change 07-14	Change 10-14
Conservative	38	41	25	-13	-16
Labour	43	27	28	-16	0
Liberal Democrat	53	59	50	-3	-9
None	47	42	33	-14	-9

The unweighted bases for Table 9 can be found in Table A3 in the appendix to this paper

Liberal Democrat supporters have largely retained their faith in the idea of coalition.

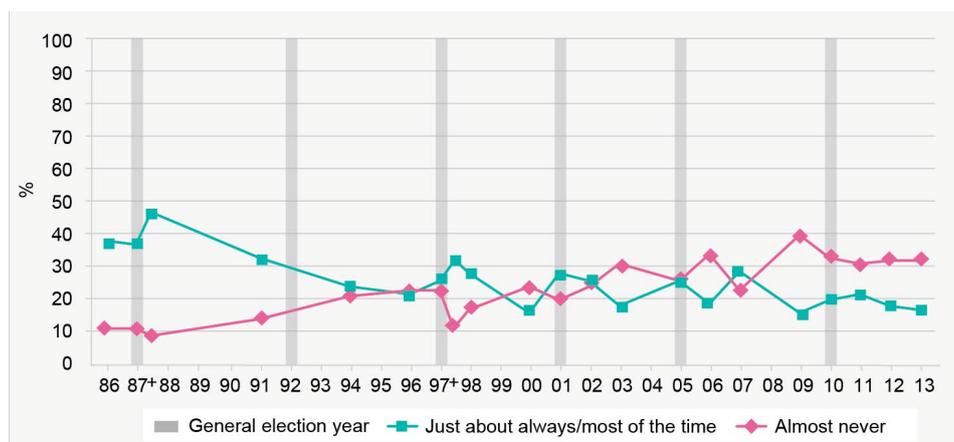
Four years on, Liberal Democrat supporters have largely retained their faith in the idea,⁴ but Conservative supporters are now much cooler about it. Only a quarter (25%) now think it is a good idea. Perhaps for them the constraints and tensions of being in coalition have come to seem greater than the immediate benefit it delivered in terms of enabling their party to regain power. But if so, they are not alone in having formed that view, for those with no particular partisan axe to grind are now less keen on coalition too. It is perhaps above all the decline in the support (from 42% in 2010 to 33% now) amongst those who do not support any particular party that suggests that, partisan considerations aside, the experience is not widely thought to have been a great success.

Trust

Declining trust in government and politicians is another recurrent theme among those seeking to explain declining turnout in general elections. Here there has indeed been a big shift in attitudes during the last three decades. On numerous occasions since 1986, British Social Attitudes has asked:

How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?

In 2013, the last year for which data are available, just one in six (17%) said that they trusted governments either “just about always” or “most of the time” (see Figure 2). The figure is typical of that obtained in most non-election years since the turn of the century - but is less than half that recorded in 1986 (38%). Conversely, nearly one third (32%) of people said in 2013 that they “almost never” trust the government. While that figure is down on the 40% who expressed that view in 2009, at the height of the MPs expenses scandal, it is nonetheless higher than it had been at any time before 2003. In short, while we have always been somewhat reluctant to invest our faith in politicians, we have been markedly less willing to do so during the last decade or so. However, it is important to note that the most popular answer to this question in 2013, was that people trusted government “only some of the time”, a view held by 51% of people. Figure 2 does not include data for those answering “only some of the time” but these data can be found in Table A4 in the appendix to this paper.

Figure 2. Trust in government, 1986-2013

+Source: the second readings for 1987 and 1997 are from the British Election Study. These readings, along with those in 2001, 2005 and 2010 were taken shortly after an election had been held.

The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Table A4 in the appendix to this paper.

Meanwhile, a substantial section of the public questions the personal motivations of their politicians. Nearly half (46%) agree that “most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally”, while only 20% disagree. Moreover, on this issue the public’s view of politicians has deteriorated since this question was last asked a decade ago. Then the proportion agreeing with the proposition was five percentage points lower at 41% (See Appendix, Table A5).

So when it comes to the question of trust, it seems that we are more politically disconnected than we were three decades ago. True, the decline in trust predated the advent of the Coalition, but there is also little evidence that the political reforms enacted by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition have done anything to reverse the long-term trend. The best that can be said is that levels of trust have not fallen yet further.

Strength of party political support

Political parties have long been regarded by democratic theorists as an important conduit that helps connect the governed and the government. Voters with a strong sense of party identification are more likely both to turn out and vote and to accept the rules and mores of the nation’s electoral process (Crewe et al., 1977). However, much like levels of trust, the proportion of voters who strongly identified with a political party (if indeed they identified with a political party at all) was in decline long before the Coalition came to power. As Table 10 shows, the proportion that said they identified “very” or “fairly” strongly with a party fell from 46% in 1987 to 36% by 2010, while, conversely, the proportion that said they did not support a party at all more or less doubled from 8% to 17%.⁵ Four years later those figures are much the same; 37% claim they “very” or “fairly” strongly identify with a party, while nearly one in five (19%) say they

do not have an affinity with any party. Once again the Coalition's tenure has not been marked by any evidence of a reversal of the long-term trend.

Table 10. Trends in strength of party identification, election years between 1987 and 2010, and 2014

	1987	1997	2001	2005	2010	2014	Change 87-14
Strength of party identification	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Very strong	11	9	7	7	7	8	-3
Fairly strong	35	28	29	28	29	29	-6
Not very strong	40	47	49	46	41	44	+4
None	8	10	12	13	17	19	+12
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2766	3620	3287	2766	3294	2636	

Duty to vote

There is no more important influence on people's likelihood of voting than whether or not they feel they have a duty to do so (Curtice and Butt, 2010). It is thus significant that this too appears to have eroded over the long-term. As part of British Social Attitudes we ask our respondents:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view about general elections? In a general election...

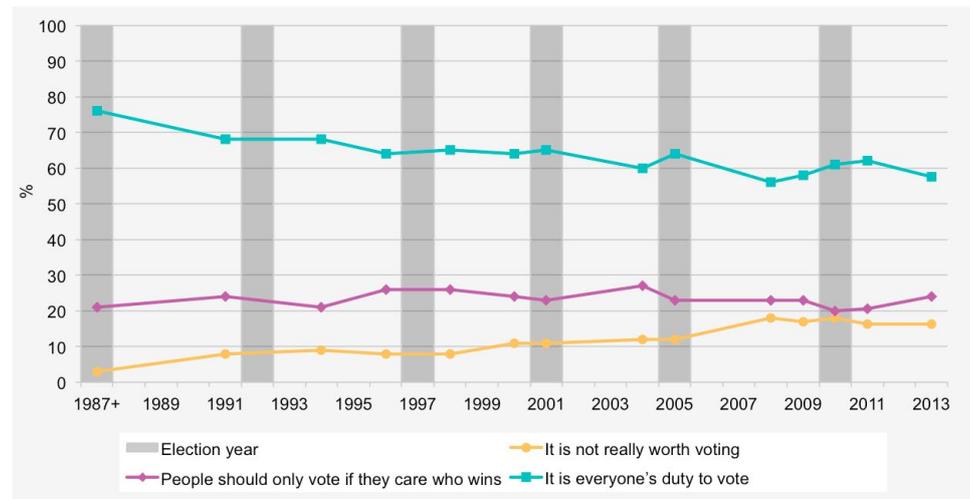
It's not really worth voting

People should only vote if they care who wins

It's everyone's duty to vote

Most people still accept that they have a duty to vote.

Most people still accept that they have a duty to vote. In 2013 (the last time this question was asked) 57% did so. But as Figure 3 shows, this is well down on the 76% who felt that way in 1987, or even the 68% who did in 1994. Signs in 2010 and 2011 that perhaps the trend was beginning to be reversed were not confirmed by the more recent 2013 results. Once again, it appears that the Coalition has been unable to reverse an apparent longer-term trend towards a growing disconnect between voters and the political process.

Figure 3. Duty to vote, 1987 - 2013

+ Source: British Election Study

The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in Table A6 in the appendix to this paper

So in some respects, namely trusting politicians, supporting political parties strongly, and accepting a duty to vote, we do now appear to be less connected than we once were. However, neither trend started during the Coalition's tenure and none has continued further since 2010. Nevertheless, the Deputy Prime Minister's hopes that the Coalition would persuade us to put 'our faith in politics once again' - do not appear to have been realised. Meanwhile, the government has certainly not persuaded us of the merits of coalition government itself. Still, so far at least the experience does not seem to have undermined our faith in Britain's democracy more broadly or our willingness to take an interest in what politicians do.

Conclusions

It is hardly surprising that politicians should have seemingly been preoccupied in recent years with the 'health' of our democracy. After all, their right to govern depends on the verdict of the ballot box, so they inevitably become concerned if we think that none of them is worth our vote. Equally, their hopes of being able to govern effectively depend in part on our willingness to follow their lead, and that seems less likely to happen if we do not trust what they say and do. So if, as is the case, voters have become less likely to vote and less likely to put their trust in them, politicians are almost bound to become concerned.

But arguably a healthy democracy is also one where citizens keep an eye on what their politicians are doing. And in that respect at least, Britain's democracy still appears to be reasonably healthy. Most of us follow political developments by one means or another, while around half us share our views about what has been happening on at least an occasional basis. True, only a minority have a strong interest in politics, but that minority is no smaller than it was nearly 30 years ago. We may not be heavily involved, but that does not mean we are apathetic about what is done in our name.

Where perhaps there is real reason for concern is that many of us are not convinced that politicians would take any notice even if we were to turn our interest in politics into action. There appears to be a widespread perception that government is uncaring and unresponsive, and that politicians themselves are on the make. This is not a new mood, but it is perhaps one that will have to be addressed if the next government is going to be any more successful than the Coalition has been at persuading us to put our 'faith in politics' – and to get involved.

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Appendix

Question wording for Table 1

The full question text for the questions reported in Table 1 is as follows:

People sometimes belong to different kinds of groups or associations. For each type of group, please indicate whether you: belong and actively participate; belong but don't actively participate; used to belong but do not any more; or have never belonged to it.

A political party

A trade union, business or professional association

A church or other religious organisation

A sports, leisure or cultural group

Another voluntary association

Question wording for Table 4

The full texts for the questions reported in Table 4 are as follows:

Questions relating to use of specific types of media to access political news

On average, how often do you....

...read the political content of a newspaper

...watch political news on television

...listen to political news on the radio

...use the Internet to get political news or information

Question relating to use of media in general to access political news

How often do you use the media, including television, newspapers, radio and the internet to get political news or information?

Party political identification questions

The British Social Attitudes questions to ascertain party identification are as follows. First, all respondents are asked:

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?

Those who do not name a party in response are then asked:

Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?

Those who still do not name a party are then asked:

If there were a general election tomorrow, which political party do you think you would be most likely to support?

Finally, all those who named a party at any of these questions are asked about the strength of their support or allegiance:

Would you call yourself very strong (party), fairly strong, or not very strong?

Tables

Table A1. Self-assessed understanding of political issues, 2004 and 2014

	2004	2014
I feel I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing Britain	%	%
Agree	50	55
Neither agree nor disagree	25	24
Disagree	20	15
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	1580

The data for Figure 1 are as follows:

Table A2. Preference for single party or coalition government, 1983-2014

	83	86	87	91	94	95	96	03	05
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Single party	47	52	58	56	45	45	47	43	48
Coalition	49	43	37	40	49	50	48	50	44
Don't know	4	4	3	3	6	4	5	6	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1548	1410	1445	1137	1227	1180	1160	1075
	07	10	11	14					
	%	%	%	%					
Single party	48	48	63	62					
Coalition	45	40	28	29					
Don't know	7	11	9	8					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	992	1081	2215	971					

Table A3. Unweighted bases for Table 9: Support for coalition by party identification, 2007, 2010 and 2014

	2007	2010	2014
Conservative	268	299	271
Labour	340	315	260
Liberal Democrat	96	138	48
None	157	185	158

The data for Figure 2 are as follows:

Table A4. Trust in government, 1986-2013

	86	87	87+	91	94	96	97	97+	98
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always / most of the time	38	37	47	33	24	22	26	32	28
Only some of the time	46	49	43	50	53	53	48	53	52
Almost never	11	11	9	14	21	23	23	12	17
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1548	1410	3413	1445	1137	1180	1355	3615	2071
	00	01	02	03	05	06	07	09	10
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always / most of the time	16	28	26	18	26	19	29	16	20
Only some of the time	58	50	47	49	47	46	45	42	45
Almost never	24	20	24	31	26	34	23	40	33
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2293	1099	2287	3299	3167	1077	992	1143	1081
	11	12	13						
	%	%	%						
Just about always / most of the time	22	18	17						
Only some of the time	45	49	51						
Almost never	31	32	32						
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2215	1103	1063						

+Source: the second readings for 1987 and 1997 are from the British Election Study. These readings, along with those in 2001, 2005 and 2010 were taken shortly after an election had been held

Table A5. Attitudes to politicians' motivations, 2004 and 2014

	2004	2014
Most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally	%	%
Agree	41	46
Neither agree nor disagree	31	29
Disagree	24	20
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	1580

The data for Figure 3 are as follows:

Table A6. Duty to vote, 1987-2013

	87+	91	94	96	98	00	01	04	05
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
It is not really worth voting	3	8	9	8	8	11	11	12	12
People should only vote if they care who wins	21	24	21	26	26	24	23	27	23
It is every-one's duty to vote	76	68	68	64	65	64	65	60	64
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3413	1224	970	989	1654	2008	2795	2609	1732
	08	09	10	11	13				
	%	%	%	%	%				
It is not really worth voting	18	17	18	16	16				
People should only vote if they care who wins	23	23	20	21	24				
It is every-one's duty to vote	56	58	61	62	57				
<i>Unweighted base</i>	990	1017	921	1909	904				

+ Source: British Election Study

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