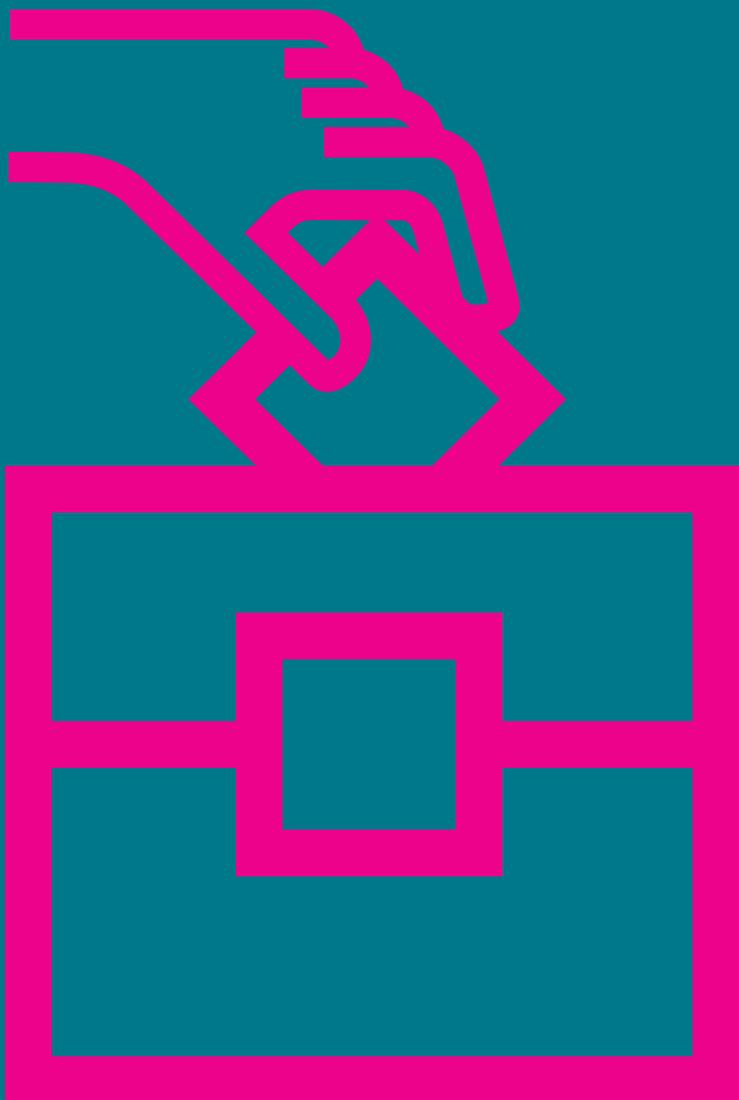


What People Want To See In Parties Today

*By Dr Kate Dommert
and Dr Luke Temple,
University of Sheffield*



STRUCTURE

This report is structured in three parts, after a brief introduction and overview of methods we present initial data about how people think about parties. This section outlines the negative terms in which parties are viewed.

The second section unpicks people's views of parties by looking at four aspects of party conduct in turn. Specifically, we examine views of party representation, participation, competence and mind-set.

In the final section we consider what these findings mean for parties, identifying 7 key principles that characterise citizens' desires. This section also considers the implications of these ideas for parties and poses a series of questions for parties interested in responding to the ideas in this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Political parties are a vital part of contemporary democracies, but they are often viewed in negative terms.

Whether in government or opposition, big or small, old or new, parties are almost uniformly described as unrepresentative, corrupt, untrustworthy organisations. For anyone invested in the political system these views are of concern.

In this report, we take a step back from current events in party politics to consider how parties are viewed.

Asking the public what they think about political parties, we find significant evidence of discontent, but we also find patterns in what people want.

PRINCIPLES

Teasing apart how parties are viewed, we identify 7 principles that people look for in political parties.

1. TRANSPARENCY

This report shows that people want to understand what parties do, how decisions are made, and what influence they can have. Any party looking to meet public demands should therefore consider how transparent they are.

2. COMMUNICATION

This report shows that people want honest and accountable parties that communicate with the people. They want to know when something has gone wrong, and they want parties to explain and take responsibility when something doesn't work out as planned.

3. RELIABILITY

This report shows that people want to see parties that outline an agenda and stick to it, enacting their manifesto promises and sticking to pledges. They do not want parties that are self-interested, or that are dogmatic and uncompromising. This means that parties need to be reliable, and that when they do need to change, there needs to be a clear explanation for why change is necessary.

4. PRINCIPLES

This report shows that people want to see parties that have principles. This does not mean that parties should be highly partisan or dogmatic, rather they should have a clear idea of what they want to achieve. People want parties that are guided by their principles when making policies or decisions, using these ideas to filter the different voices and influences that can affect the decision made.

5. INCLUSIVITY

This report shows that people want parties to include a range of different voices and ideas. Rather than just listening to members or supporters, people want parties to listen to experts, opponents and the wider public as a whole. By listening to and incorporating different ideas in a transparent way, parties can better satisfy public desires.

6. ACCESSIBILITY

This report shows that people want a range of ways to engage with parties, but that they don't want parties to entirely open up. Certain activities should continue to be the preserve of members and leaders, but for less intensive activities (such as political discussion and issue-campaigning) citizens want a wider range of people to be able to get involved. In opening up it is, however, important for parties to be honest and transparent about the power that people will receive, as people want to feel that their participation will have an impact.

7. INTEGRITY

This report shows that people want parties that act with integrity; being honest, ethical and dignified. Rather than focusing on the competition of party politics and the partisan behaviour this can promote, people want parties that have moral codes and principles that underpin how they work. Parties should therefore consider developing codes of conduct that outline principles for how they work and behave. They should also develop and enforce clear disciplinary procedures, making it transparent what is done if these codes are violated.

We argue that these principles should be considered by anyone interested in or currently involved in political parties. However, in setting out these principles, we do not argue that parties simply need to give people what they want. On the contrary, we recognise that people's opinions can often be difficult to realise and acknowledge that parties may already be doing many of the things that people say they want to see. For these reasons, we argue that parties may want to react to the findings of this report in three ways. They may want to:

a) Make changes to bring their party more in line with public desires;

b) Promote the ways in which they already enact public desires; or

c) Challenge people's ideas and offer an alternative set of benchmarks against which they feel they should be being judged.

Discussing these alternatives, we offer an agenda for parties keen to change their standing with the public. Whilst the political calendar rarely provides space to consider these kinds of issues, we argue it is vital for parties (whether local or national) to step back and think about how they are viewed.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties are an essential part of representative politics, but public opinion research has consistently shown that parties are not viewed positively. This presents parties with a real challenge – how to revive their image and address citizens' concerns?

This report is aimed primarily at people within political parties. We are interested in helping politicians, party staff and party activists understand how they are viewed. These views matter because they influence people's likelihood of engaging with parties, but they also affect how key decisions and governing actions taken by parties are judged. If all parties are seen to be unreliable, untrustworthy and opportunistic, then people are likely to be less willing to accept the decisions that parties take in their name. All parties, regardless of their ideological objectives can therefore benefit from understanding how they appear in the eyes of the public.

In this report, we examine public attitudes to determine how parties are viewed, and what it is that people feel is wrong. We present new data that looks specifically at views of party representation, participation, governance and mind-set. Whilst we do not claim to identify a single reform that will improve how parties are viewed, we argue that there are many areas – particularly around how parties behave – where people share ideas that could guide change. We identify 7 key principles that people want to see parties promote (Box 1).

These findings suggest that parties are unlikely to change how they are viewed by simply altering their structures or procedures. Therefore, creating a supporters' network or opening up the leadership selection process won't be enough. What is required is a more fundamental rethink about how parties operate and the way they connect to citizens and the state.

Box 1

The 7 principles desired in parties:

1. Transparency
2. Communication
3. Reliability
4. Principles
5. Inclusivity
6. Accessibility
7. Integrity



In studying public perceptions of parties and how people would like parties to behave it is important to emphasise that we do not argue that parties should simply be giving people more of what they want. Past work has shown that trying to satisfy public opinion can be a fool's errand as people's views often do not match up to what is actually happening in practice.

There can be a big gap between what the public say is happening, and what parties believe they are doing. Indeed, it may be the case that parties themselves are already doing what the public say they desire, but that this isn't being perceived. These possibilities mean that parties can benefit from thinking about why the way they understand themselves to behave is not shared with the public. This suggests that when thinking about public opinion parties may want to do three things. They may want to think about whether they need to:

a) Make changes to bring their party more in line with public desires;

b) Promote the ways in which they already enact public desires; or

c) Challenge people's ideas and offer an alternative set of benchmarks against which they feel they should be being judged.

These different courses of action inspire alternative responses to our findings. They suggest that some parties might want to pursue programmes of reform, some may want to improve how they communicate what they do to the public, whilst others might want to try and lead debate on how parties should behave. Whichever course of action is pursued, parties need to remain aware of the difficulties they face in changing public perceptions.

We should not imagine the public as a homogenous group; public opinion is highly diverse and people's views vary dramatically. It is therefore unlikely that parties will ever be able to satisfy everybody. Nevertheless, we argue that our 7 principles were supported with startling regularity. Men and women, young adults and pensioners, the unemployed and those in full-time work, and partisans and non-voters at various times voiced support for these ideas. Whilst not providing a silver bullet, we argue that these principles should be considered by parties who want to counter their negative image.

METHODS

This report is based on the findings of a 2-year research project funded by the ESRC and conducted by academics at the University of Sheffield. It draws on nationally representative survey data and the findings of 3 deliberative workshops facilitated by the charity Involve.

In discussing the fate of political parties, this report examines parties in general terms. In the UK and beyond parties come in a range of different forms, exhibiting different membership structures, leadership models, organisational practices and cultures. Rather than focusing on the views of one party over another by, for example, looking just at the Conservative Party or Labour, we focus instead on people's views of parties in general. This approach means that we focus on what is desired from all parties. We therefore don't focus on how people want specific parties to change, attempting to avoid the tendency to pick up preferences that are coloured by partisan allegiance (as people often say that a party they support works well, whilst parties they do not support need to be radically changed). By prompting people to think about parties in general when collecting our data we attempt to highlight ideas relevant to all parties.

To gather our data we conducted a survey comprised of 34 questions. These questions were designed to explore public attitudes towards parties, asking about general views of parties and then more specifically about views of party representation, participation and governance. We asked questions both about how people saw parties to be behaving now, and about how they would like to see parties work, helping us to identify areas where parties weren't seen to be living up to public desires. The survey, administered via YouGov, gathered valid responses from 1,497 people between the 17th and 21st of November 2017. This data is weighted in accordance with YouGov measures to extrapolate a national representative sample from respondents. In reporting findings, we present descriptive statistics that offer insight into public views.

In order to offer more detailed insight into the public's views of parties we conducted 3 deliberative workshops. Deliberative workshops were held in Sheffield in January and February 2018. They had different compositions, with one composed of people with no former engagement with political parties, a second group composed of party activists and campaigners, and a final group composed of a 50/50 split of non-engaged people and activists. In total 68 people participated in these groups, with each session being roughly similar in size. Participants were sat together in tables of 4 to 5 people and led through a set of common tasks. The tasks themselves varied in style. At times participants were asked to write down and then explain their own views to the people at their table. At other times participants at each table were asked to work together on a common task. Workshops also included a briefing from an expert that was designed to provoke discussion about participants' pre-existing ideas. These workshops produced a range of written and audio material that was analysed using NVivo – a piece of textual analysis software. The researchers used NVivo to identify recurring themes in people's comments – helping to identify the 7 principles identified in this report.

“We asked questions both about how people saw parties to be behaving now, and about how they would like to see parties work, helping us to identify areas where parties weren't seen to be living up to public desires.”

Section 1: What do people actually think about parties?

TAKE HOME POINTS:

1. The public view parties in highly negative terms.

2. People are dissatisfied with parties because they see them to lack integrity, to be overly focused on elections and to prioritise partisan goals over people's needs.

3. The majority of people haven't given up on parties and think it is possible for them to be reformed.

Previous studies of attitudes towards parties offer a bleak picture of how these organisations are viewed. In our own study, we found attitudes that were similarly negative. Using survey data and quick-fire activities in workshops, we found that not only are people unlikely to speak positively about parties, but that even those who are politically engaged have negative views. In our workshops, we asked participants to write down three words or short phrases that they felt best described political parties. Nearly everyone – whether they are involved in a party or not – chose negative words. The top 10 listed words are shown in Table 1.

To understand what might be wrong, we used our survey to collect more data on people's views. We asked to what extent people were satisfied with parties, and then asked a follow up question where people could explain their ideas. We found that 23% were very or fairly satisfied with parties, and that 77% were fairly or very dissatisfied.

Looking at the explanations that people gave for their answers, it is notable that most people did not differentiate between parties and politicians. These two ideas were closely related, suggesting that the behaviour of individual politicians can have important implications for how parties as a whole are viewed. Looking at the top three types of reason that people gave for being dissatisfied with parties we found concerns that relate to integrity, electoralism and focus on partisan rather than public interests.

First, by far the most prominent type of explanation for dissatisfaction concerned parties' integrity. Numerous comments were made that cited poor party conduct, including:

- “They are not always truthful”
- “They only reform or apologise when they are caught”
- “Too many stories of incompetent and/or inappropriate actions”
- “They're all like corrupted”
- “Bunch of liars”
- “They won't give a real answer”

There was also a belief that parties were self-interested and self-serving, an idea that overlapped with a second prominent theme connected to parties' electoralism. Coded as a separate set of ideas, a high proportion of responses therefore gave explanations such as:

- “Political parties say they will do this and that but it's only so they will get elected, more honesty in what they can really do would give me more satisfaction”
- “Their main aim in life is to win elections at all costs”
- “They never do what they say they will”
- “They promise lots to win the vote and then do not stick to the promises when in government. They bicker amongst each other, do not support the leader of the party and MPs put their own ambition above most other things”
- “They all promise things but nothing happens. The country remains the same, nothing improves”

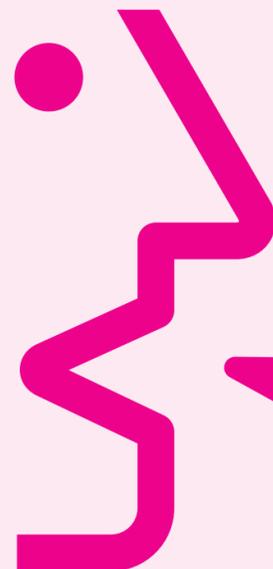
The number of comments about parties' failing to keep their election promises was particularly striking, suggesting that parties' electoral focus and subsequent behaviour prompts significant public dissatisfaction.

Finally, other explanations for dissatisfaction cited a belief that politicians were disconnected from the interests of ordinary people and instead pushed partisan agendas. Echoing the ideas above, it was therefore argued that:

- “Politicians don't live in the real world”
- “Too many MPs serve their own agenda and do not do enough to help their constituents”
- “They create the impression that they only think of themselves rather than the voters!”
- “They hold up progress by constantly being obstructive, automatically taking the opposite view just because of party political reasons”
- “Political parties appear to be more interested in point scoring over rivals, not improving the lot of the masses”
- “They all put party before country”

Different explanations were therefore offered, but there is clear overlap between these ideas, suggesting that there are common practices that people would like parties to display. In addition to these three top codes other explanations for dissatisfaction were expressed, these referenced: the first-past-the-post electoral system; the system of party finance; the accountability of politicians, a lack of choice between parties; and opposition towards specific parties.

TABLE 1
Top 10 words written by participants



1. Unrepresentative (13)
2. Undemocratic (7)
3. Self-interested (6)
4. Divided (5)
5. (to not) Listen (5)
6. Power (5)
7. Corrupt (4)
8. Self-serving (4)
9. Tribal (4)
10. Dominated (4)

23%
were very or fairly satisfied with parties

77%
were fairly or very dissatisfied.

Like previous studies, we therefore found it easy to find negative views, but what was not clear is whether people think it is possible for parties to change. To consider this idea, we asked: 'Which of the following statements best describes your opinion of political parties in Britain?'. Figure 2 shows people's responses from our survey data.

A sizeable number of people are sceptical of parties and don't think they can be reformed. However, these findings also show that whilst parties aren't always viewed positively, for many people they can and should be reformed. Cumulatively 71% of people felt that parties needed minor or major reform, whilst 26% felt that reforming parties was pointless. This suggests that people think there could be changes made to parties.

To look at the kind of change people want to see, in the next section we take four aspects of party behaviour in turn and ask: 'how are parties currently viewed' and 'how would people like to see parties behave'? Asking these questions, we cast light on public views that relate to:

1. How parties represent

2. The participatory opportunities parties offer

3. How parties govern

4. Parties' mind-set and behaviour

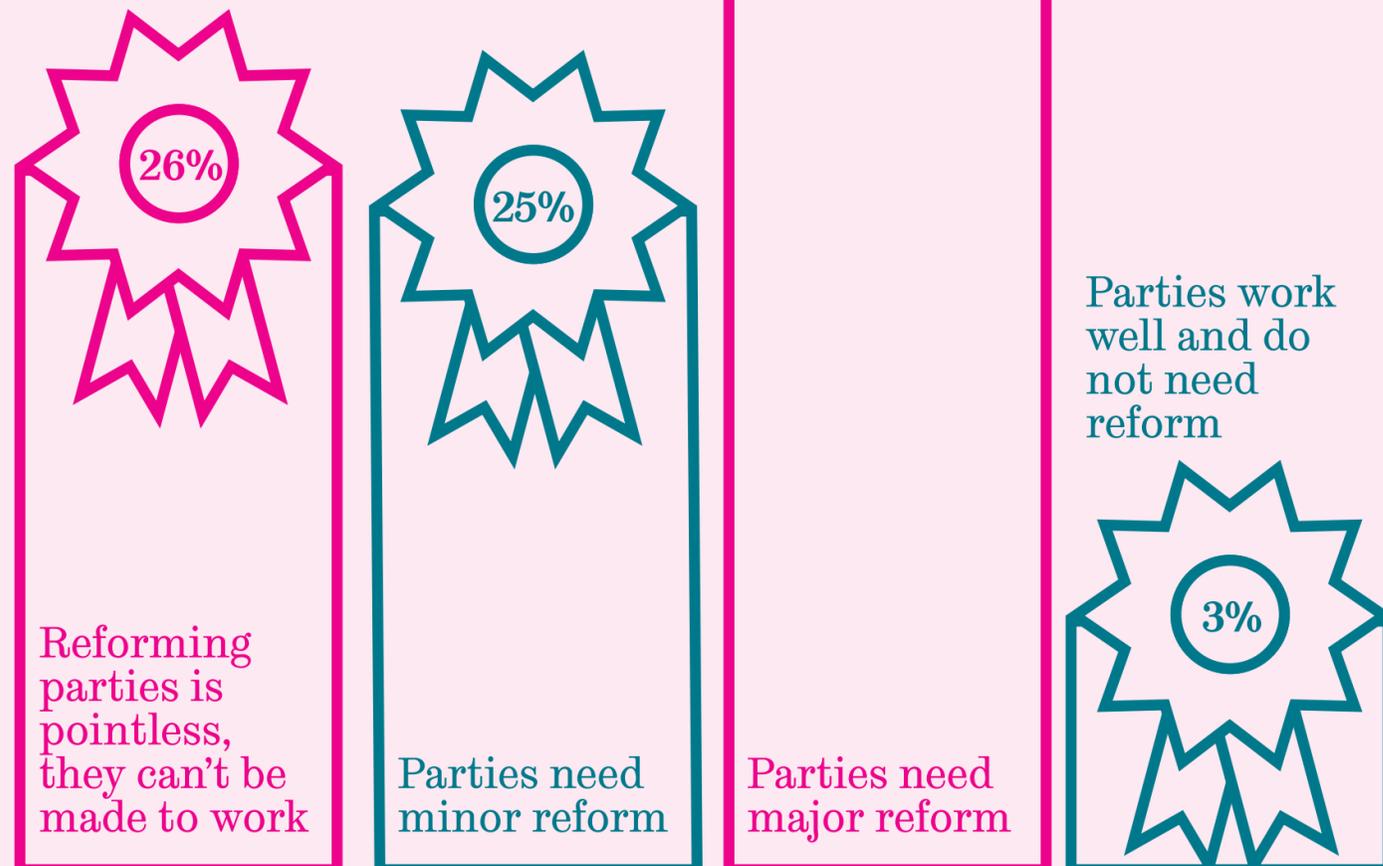
At times these issues overlap and so they should not be seen as separate, but they do highlight different aspects of party activity, making it useful to examine them in turn.

Section 2: So how are parties viewed?

FIGURE 2

Prospects for party reform

Which of the following statements best describes your opinion of political parties in Britain:



REPRESENTATION:

What do people think about how parties represent?

TAKE HOME POINTS:

1. People are quick to criticise political parties' failure to 'represent' adequately.

2. However, people simultaneously support multiple - contradictory - styles of representation.

IMPLICATIONS:

Parties will be unable to satisfy everyone when it comes to how they represent.

There is no single way of understanding what it means 'to represent'. Whilst some parties can be highly responsive to citizen ideals and focus on identifying, giving voice to, and implementing the views of (a segment of) the public, others can pay little regard to popular demands and instead promote an ideological, partisan agenda designed with little input from the public. Parties can therefore represent in very different ways. These differences are interesting because it is not clear if parties are seen to be living up to people's representative desires.

When asked to write down words associated with parties, representation emerged as an important aspect of how parties were viewed by workshop participants. Indeed, 'unrepresentative' was the most common description of political parties. Throughout the workshops participants routinely made comments such as: "I don't think they represent the people very well... I don't think they do it effectively". Particularly, people expressed the view that parties did not act in the public interest but rather represented in a self-interested manner. Comments were made such as:

“

"They represent their own interests, London interests, business interests, but what about everybody else? The actual people who live in the country, normal people?"

"The party comes first, even if their electorate in their constituency ask for something...they follow what the party says"

"I don't think they are actually representing the people, especially MPs, a lot of the time [they] aren't having feedback with people in their constituencies, but are presenting their own views in Parliament"

”

These views echo the findings above, but suggest that there is something specific about how parties represent that leads people to be dissatisfied. Using workshop discussions, we attempted to identify what it was that people wanted, giving participants extensive time to discuss what needed to change. However, people were unable to reach a consensus about what was wrong or agree on how parties should behave. In part, this was because people understood the problem of representation very differently. To give some examples, participants said:

“

"At all different levels, women, people of different backgrounds...they are not representative of us"

"I want my MP to fight for my city, to stand up for me. If the party is saying you need to...support something down South, I want my MP to say hang on a minute, what about back up North"

Parties should be *"Representing their constituents... there is just an individual representing their community and doing what is best for them"*

"They are meant to channel views. Fundamentally, parties are there to represent, parties are supposed to be people's way of expressing their views, for all of us, to give us a voice"

"They are there to represent us"/ "Well, to represent the values of a certain section of society, as no political party represents all the views of all sections of society... they never have done"

”

People expressed the view that parties did not act in the public interest but rather represented in a self-interested manner.

People therefore focused on parties' failure to represent different types of people, sets of ideas or places, concentrating on different aspects of representation. Because there was no single view of what is wrong with parties today, participants found it hard to find or imagine any one solution. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that individuals were drawn to competing ideas of representation; voicing support for one style of representation at one point only to endorse an entirely different view with their next breath. People therefore did not have a clear, widely accepted view of how party representation should change.

To consider this further we used our survey to look at a set of established ideas about how parties represent. Academics have highlighted three styles of representation known as partisan, delegate and trustee:

- Partisan: Following their own ideological (partisan) interests**

- Delegate: Following public opinion**

- Trustee: Following what they believe is in the public interest**

We used this framework to explore how people would ideally like parties to represent, asking respondents what political parties should think about when making decisions. We found that people felt that all of these styles of representation should be thought about by parties. Whilst the partisan option was slightly less popular, around four-fifths of respondents agreed that parties should consider all these styles of representation.

This suggests that people recognise the appeal of different kinds of representation. We found similar, simultaneous support for different ideas when people had more time to think about their views in the workshops.

We also found that people recognised the difficulties of pursuing just one representative style:

“...I thought how do they get to represent communities, I mean it is a really really hard problem, I think it is unrealistic to think one could or should be represented on every time issue”

“If people [representatives] have a very strong opinion about something are we saying they should ignore their own opinions or what they know about an issue?”/ “They should do what they are told by the voters to do”/ “... We appoint someone to represent us...and therefore I think there are times when they should sacrifice what they actually think”

“I think they should represent all their constituents”/... “Represent all the constituents”/ “It is hard, isn't it, it is impossible to represent everybody because some people disagree with you”/ “They should still represent”

“If representing the needs of the people becomes contradictory to the manifesto promises then are your party members prepared to change the manifesto to fit in with what the people are telling you?”

”

In none of the discussions were participants able to agree upon an ideal form of representation and, as these comments show, participants often saw problems with pursuing one set of ideas.

SUMMARY

There isn't a clear roadmap for how parties should represent in terms of the style of representation. Whilst people are unhappy, they do, given time and space for discussion, recognise the value of different styles of representation.

Thinking about the three ways that parties may want to respond to public opinion data, our findings make it difficult for parties to identify a programme of reform, or to communicate better how they are already meeting public desires as there is no clear benchmark for what people want to see. There may be more scope for parties to lead debate about what should be expected when it comes to representation. Indeed, parties could articulate their need to represent in a variety of different ways and highlight the challenges of trying to satisfy everyone's demands at once. This approach was taken by Richard Graham MP who attempted to outline the challenge of representing people's views on Brexit (see below).

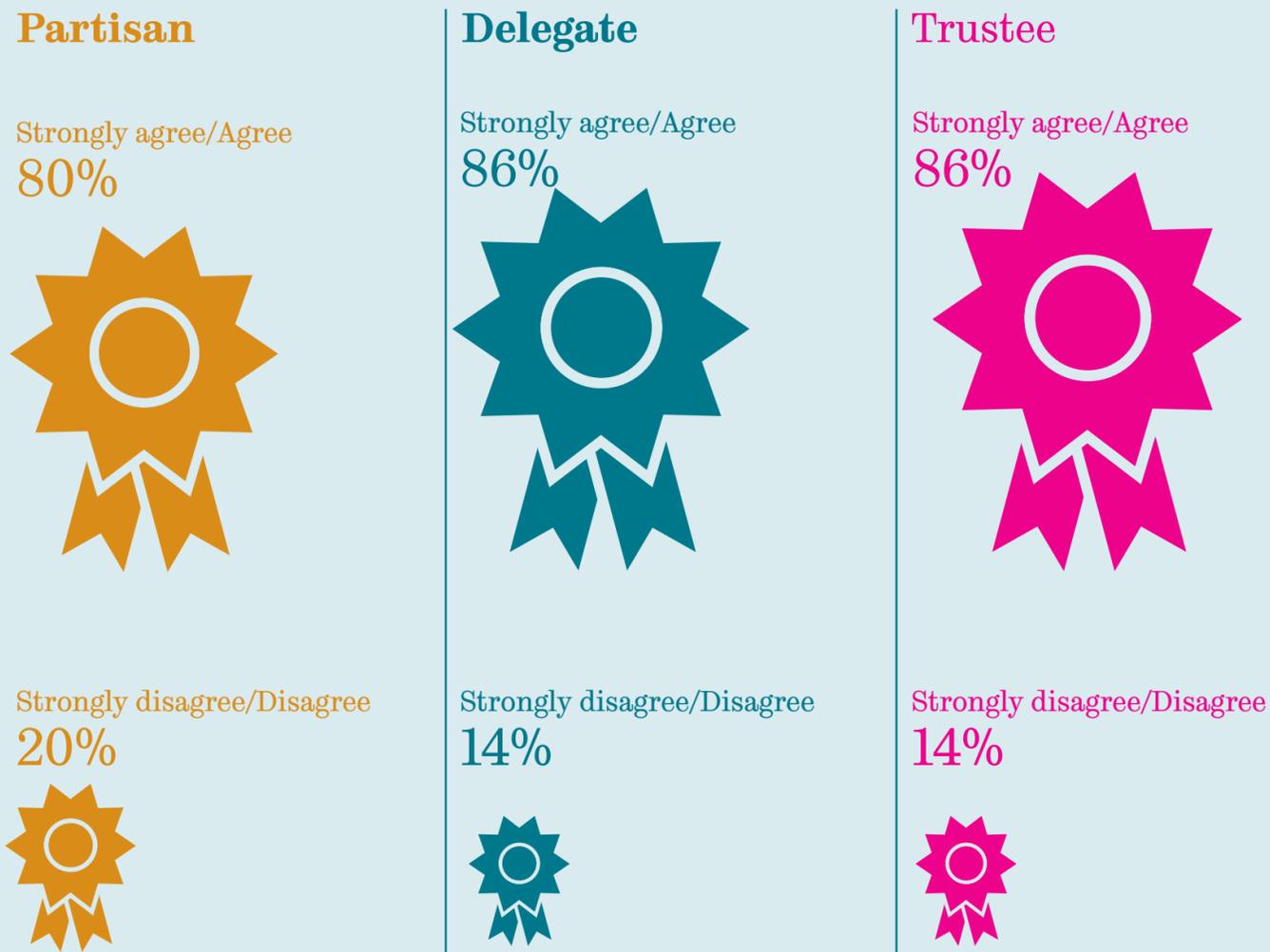
 **Richard Graham**
@RichardGrahamUK

Thank you to constituents who've contacted me to: stop Brexit, Brexit tomorrow, stage a 2nd Referendum, not betray Brexit, support every Lords amendment, get rid of the Lords, sack the PM, sack the PM & remember who I represent. It's possible I may not satisfy you all

11:51am – 12 Jun 2018

Whilst ironically done, this kind of public response shows that parties could take a more proactive role in highlighting the challenges of representation. It also suggests that parties may want to make a vocal case for their representative approach, offering a more transparent account of how and why they behave as they do.

FIGURE 3
Preferences for parties' style of representation



“parties could articulate their need to represent in a variety of different ways and highlight the challenges of trying to satisfy everyone's demands at once.”

PARTICIPATION:

What do people think about how parties provide opportunities to participate?

TAKE HOME POINTS:

1. Most people like the idea that there should be more opportunities to get involved.
2. However, very few people plan to get involved themselves in the future.
3. People are often disappointed by the impact of their participation.
4. People think there should be a range of ways to get involved in a party that require different types of party affiliation for different activities.

IMPLICATIONS:

New channels for participation alone aren't enough; parties need to think about the impact people can have when they participate.

A lot of attention has been focused on how to improve parties by offering new ways for people to get involved. This reflects the belief that citizens have certain desires when it comes to participation, reflecting one workshop participant's comment that: "Some parties have better structures within them to try and find what matters to people". However, when examining people's views of participation in parties, we found that creating new opportunities is not enough, as the public have nuanced desires for how people should be able to get involved.

A growing academic literature has captured the rise of 'multi-speed parties' that offer new, more flexible avenues for participation, including 'supporter' schemes or online activism. This kind of initiative reflects a belief – mirrored in our survey – that people want more ways to get involved.

We asked: 'Some people say that there should be more opportunities for ordinary people to get involved in political parties. Others say that there are already enough opportunities to get involved. On the following scale – where 1 means there should be more opportunities for people to be involved and 4 means there are enough opportunities to be involved already – where would you place yourself?' We collapsed answer 1 and 2, and 3 and 4 to show the balance of preferences. We see that 41% said there were already enough opportunities to get involved whilst 59% believed there should be more chances to get involved.

"We found that creating new opportunities is not enough, as the public have nuanced desires for how people should be able to get involved."

The idea that people want new opportunities to get involved could suggest that schemes such as supporters networks or online web-portals will boost participation, but when we asked people about their own intentions to engage, we found little evidence of a desire to follow through. Specifically, we presented people with a range of different activities (i.e. being a member, supporter, donating, campaigning, etc.) and asked them about their own past, present, and future engagement.

As found in other studies, only a small number of people currently engaged in these different ways, but most strikingly, we found that for nearly every activity, around three-quarters of respondents couldn't imagine getting involved in that way in the future. Whilst people are attracted to the idea of more opportunities to participate, they appear unlikely to use these opportunities themselves.

Workshop discussion revealed different explanations for this trend. There was some evidence that people encounter practical barriers that stop them from getting involved (such as having caring responsibilities). But there was more evidence for the idea that people simply didn't see the point.

FIGURE 4

Desires for more participatory opportunities

There should be more opportunities for people to get involved in political parties
59%

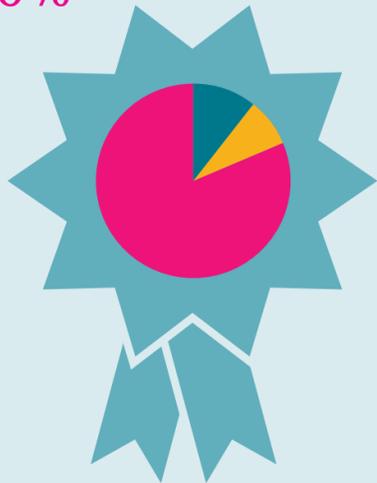
There are already enough opportunities to get involved in political parties
41%



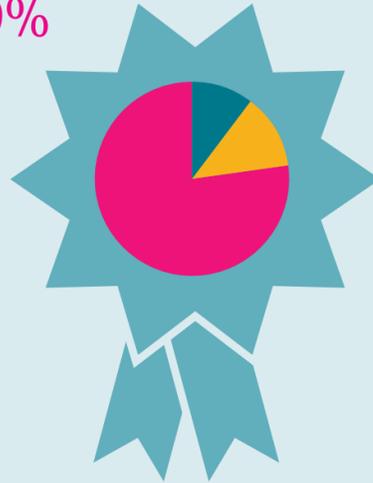
FIGURE 5

Current and Future Intentions for political engagement.

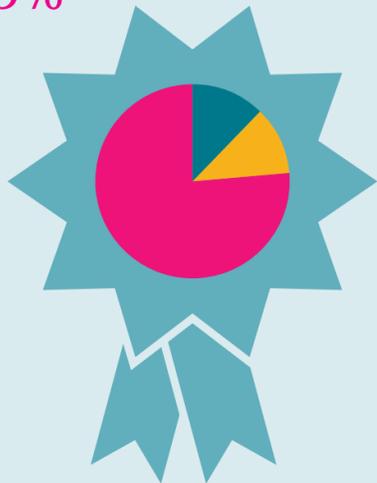
Donate money to a party
80%



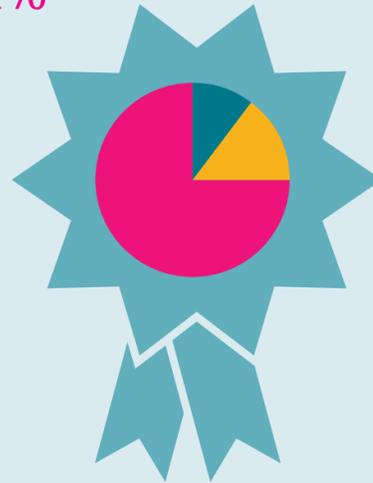
Campaign for a party at election time
79%



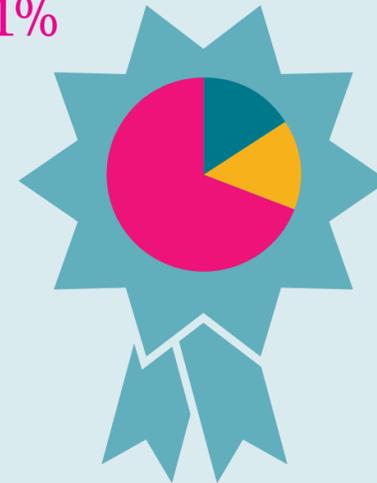
Party member
75%



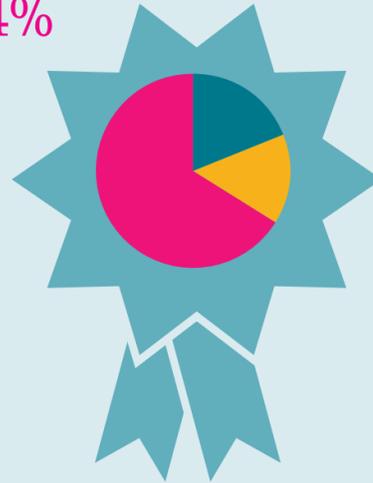
Registered party supporter
74%



Show support for a party offline
71%



Show support for a party online
64%



■ I have done this (now or in the past)

■ I haven't done this but I would consider it

■ I've not done this and can't imagine doing so in the future

Previous public opinion research has found that perceptions of efficacy or the feeling that 'what you do matters' can influence engagement. In the workshops and survey we found considerable evidence that people did not see engagement to be worth the time and effort as they felt they had little impact on what parties did.

Simply put, many people don't feel that getting involved makes a difference. This suggests that parties need to think about how to design new initiatives to boost a feeling of efficacy, or they need to better communicate the impact that participation can have within parties. It is not therefore enough for parties to provide new ways for people to get involved. Instead, there needs to be sustained thought given to the amount and type of power that people have and an effort to establish expectations so that people know what to expect from an existing or new initiative.

For instance, in our survey data, whilst 80% thought that when people like themselves get involved in political parties they should have an impact, only 20% thought that they actually can have an impact. Workshop attendees also made comments such as:

“I think the reason a lot of people don't get involved is that you don't feel that actually what you're doing is making any difference or any impact”

“I suppose, again, it comes back to making people believe that they actually have influence, so a lot of people won't turn up to something because they just don't think it will make any difference, so it is trying to work out, or come up with something that would engage people enough to make them think that they are getting some value out of it. I'm not sure what the answer is”

“Yeah, you have to trust that change is coming via your involvement”/ “And if you don't get that change then maybe you fall off again, and in many ways that is why people got disillusioned with party politics”

“I mean, why even join a party if your vote doesn't matter”

”

80%

thought that when people like themselves get involved in political parties they should have an impact.

20%

thought that they can actually have an impact.

WHEN PEOPLE DO GET INVOLVED, WHAT DO THEY WANT?

Looking at many parties today, there have already been efforts to 'open up' party structures. This approach has a clear logic (reflected above), but it raises questions about what people think they should be able to do, and how involved they need to become in order to do different activities.

To look at this idea, we identified different types of activities people can do in parties that ranged from engaging in political discussion and debate to making party policy. We then asked people what they should be required to do in order to engage in that activity. We expected people would support minimal barriers to getting involved in any activity. However, we found interesting differences in what people felt was necessary for different activities.

Looking at the findings in Figure 6, we found that for low intensity activities such as political discussion and issue campaigning there was support for low affiliation (i.e. not having to do anything at all to get involved, or only having to sign up to receive information). When it comes to higher intensity activities such as leadership selection or policymaking, however, respondents said that people should have to formally affiliate to a party as a member or supporter. Perhaps most surprisingly, there was even support for certain activities being done by elites, with 17% of people feeling that policy should be made by party leaders and not ordinary people.

This suggests that when it comes to opening up there isn't a simple principle governing all activities – rather parties need to think about what kind of affiliation is appropriate for different activities and events. Workshop discussions also demonstrated the belief that parties needed to offer a range of different ways for people to get involved. Whilst many people argued that membership was vital, others suggested that membership needed to be accompanied by other ways of becoming involved:

"You can't expect everybody to be a member for whatever reason, whether it is financial or they have too many other issues going on that they never become a member".

It was felt that parties needed to recognise that some people wanted to engage in less intensive, time consuming ways and that, for many people, membership was a big step that came about by doing smaller acts of engagement.

From a pragmatic perspective, it was therefore seen to be desirable to have parties that offered different ways of getting involved. And yet, given the concerns about efficacy voiced above, it is vital that clear expectations are set so that people understand what powers different avenues of engagement provide, and what impact they will be able to have on what a party does.

SUMMARY

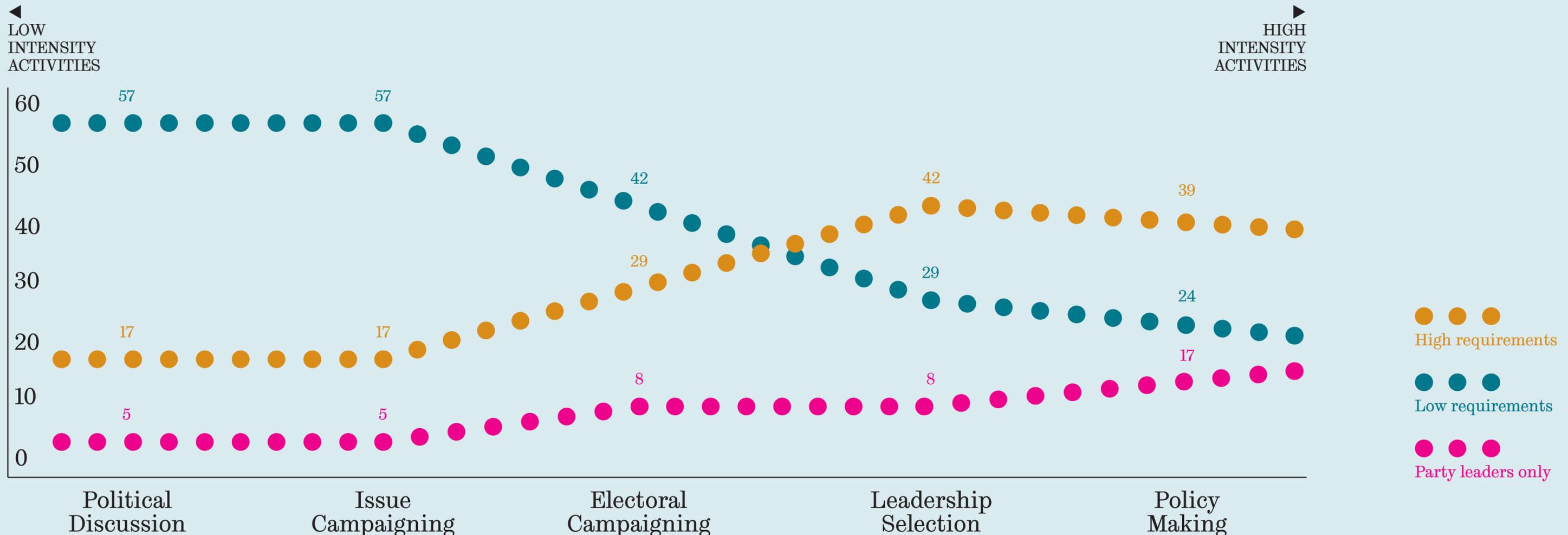
In general people don't themselves engage, but they think that parties should provide more opportunities to get involved. Many people don't envision taking these opportunities up, but there are signs that parties are likely to be viewed more favourably if they make it clear what impact engagement can have. Parties therefore need to think not just about the mechanisms they adopt, but about what people are able to do through these mechanisms that they feel to be worthwhile.

In addition, we have shown that whilst people feel that parties should offer a wider range of opportunities to engage, they also think that not all opportunities should be open to everyone. There is support for the idea of membership, and a feeling that members should retain certain rights not available to others. But people also want to see other ways of getting involved, specifically when it comes to activities such as political discussion and debate and issue-based campaigning, where less formal affiliations are desired.

These findings suggest that parties must think carefully about how to respond to people's views on participation. For parties with relatively conventional engagement structures (such as just having a membership) there appear to be incentives to create new ways of getting involved that mirror the preferences outlined here. For parties that already have 'multi-speed' structures our findings suggest that there is a need to publicise the alternative ways of getting involved and communicate the impact that different kinds of engagement can have. Finally, for parties more sceptical of participatory reform there is instead a need to challenge the idea of party engagement, perhaps instead emphasising a need for parties to listen to all of the people, rather than just those who choose to get involved. When it comes to participation it therefore appears there is a desire for more inclusivity, but that there are important caveats attached to this demand.

FIGURE 6

Requirements for different party activities



COMPETENCE:

What do people think about how parties govern?

TAKE HOME POINTS:

1. More people judge parties by thinking about how they run the country as opposed to how they represent people.
2. People think parties are currently failing to deliver their promises and deliver good policy outcomes for the country.
3. People want parties that govern in the interests of the nation, yet recognise that the national interest is deeply contested.

IMPLICATIONS:

Parties should promote their own distinct vision of the national interest.

Parties should avoid making promises they cannot keep, and should feedback on results – explicitly linking outcomes to manifesto promises and explaining why policies may need to change.

In thinking about how the public view parties, a body of research has looked at the importance of parties - and politicians and government - simply being seen to 'get on with the job'. The logic goes that in many modern societies, the big ideological battles are over, and what is left are policy goals that most people agree on, such as keeping the economy growing, providing good quality of education and keeping crime down.

People therefore tend to support parties they see to be competent and able to deliver. These ideas are often used to explain voting behaviour. What matters, the argument goes, is not what ideological messages parties present, but whether they act competently and in the national interest. Thinking about these ideas, it is interesting to ask how the public view parties' governing behaviour, and what they would like to see. We find that parties' governing behaviour is a key influence on how parties are viewed, but that the benchmarks of success are often highly contested, making it challenging for parties to please everyone.

PARTY COMPETENCE – HOW ARE PARTIES JUDGED?

Thinking about people's views of party governance, we used the survey to tease apart people's views. First, we were interested in testing the idea that people focus on governing more than representation when they judge parties. We asked how much attention people gave to how well parties 'run the country' and how well they 'represent the voters' when they judge parties, offering them a scale to indicate the balance they placed on these ideas. Looking at the results in Figure 7 people most commonly said that they thought more about how well parties run the country (46%), with a slightly smaller number saying they thought about both issues equally (41%). A minority of people said they focused primarily on issues of representation (13%). Parties were judged far more on governance than representation.

We then asked how well parties actually did run the country and represent those who voted for them and found that people didn't think that parties were doing a good job on either front. For both options an average of 68% felt that parties were doing badly. Parties are not seen to be performing as representatives or governors, but given the importance placed on running the country, this governance failure is more important for parties to consider.

FIGURE 7
When judging political parties I...

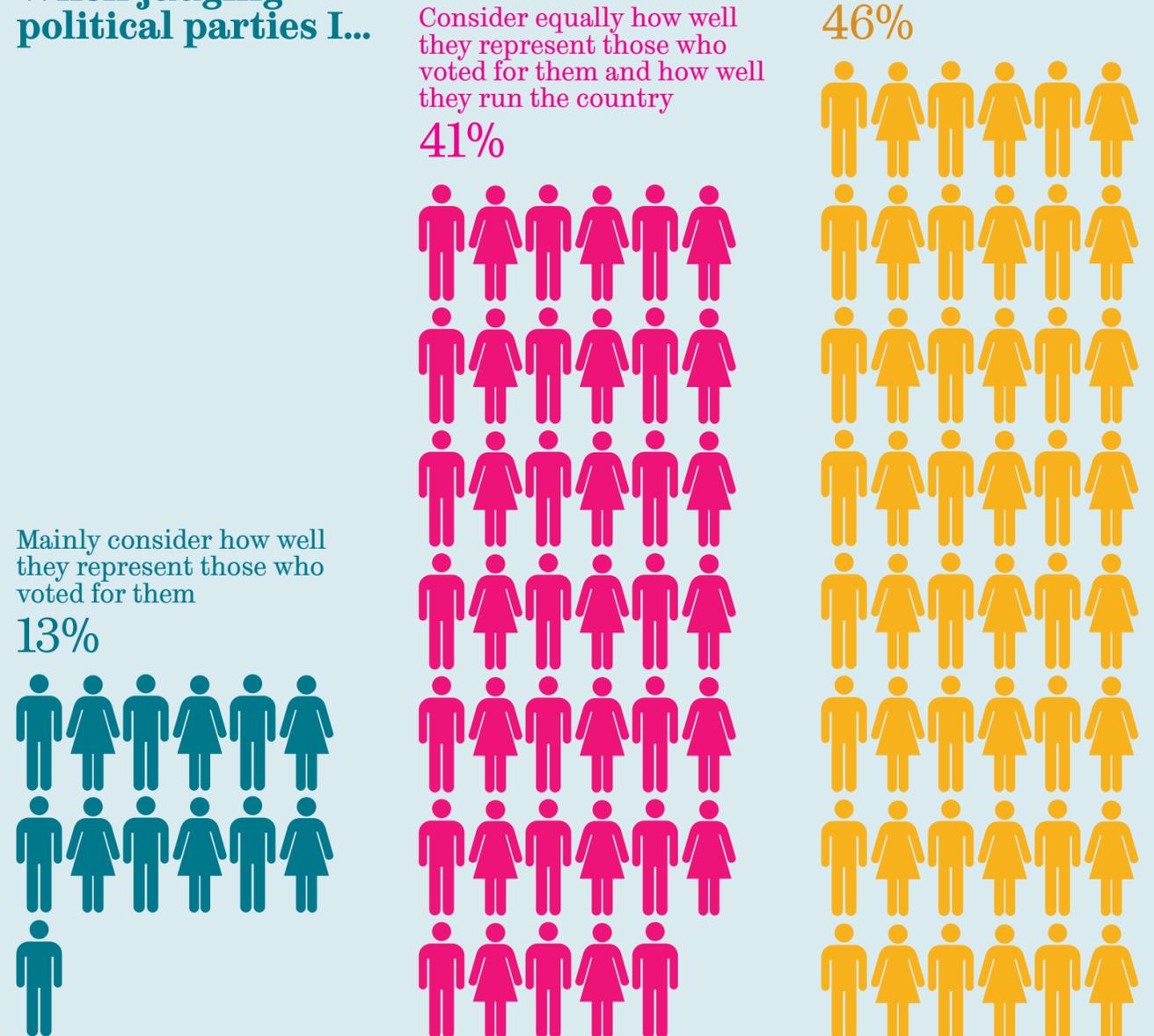
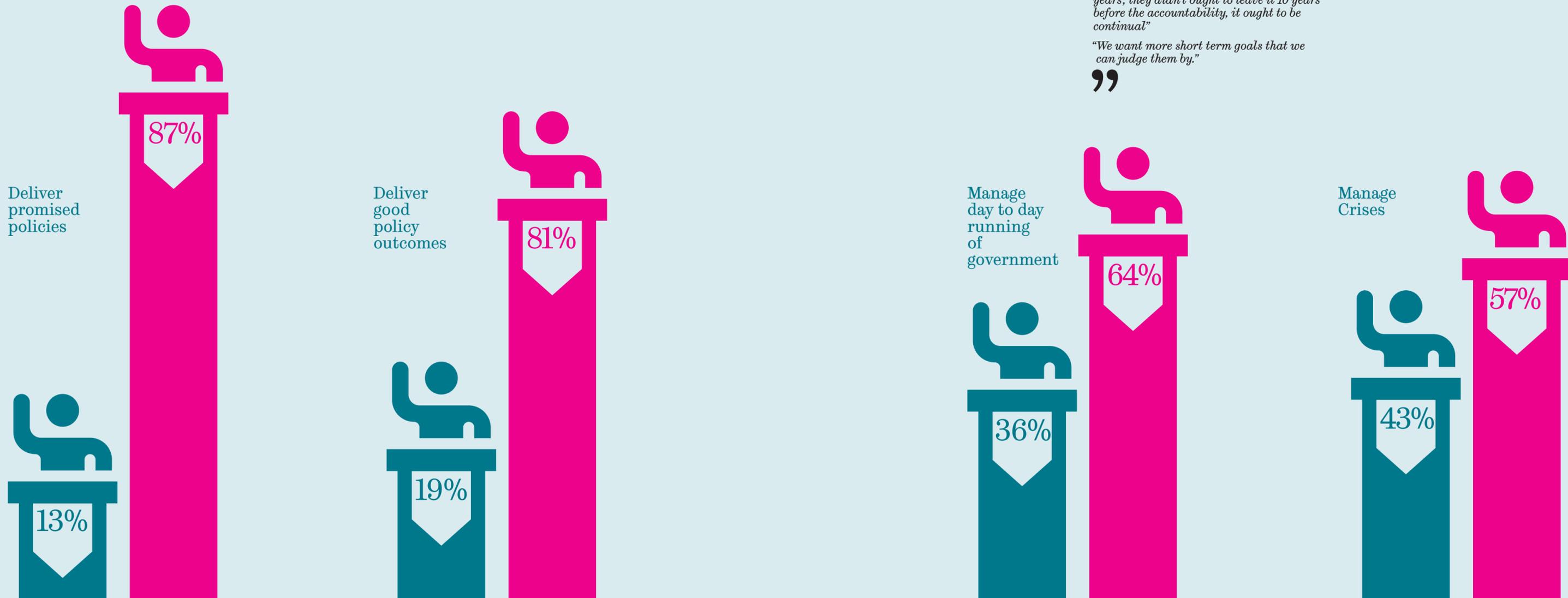


FIGURE 8

Views of parties' governing performance

Parties do this well

Parties don't do this well



PROMISES, PROMISES.

Recognising that parties' governing performance is considered poor, what remains unclear is precisely which part of parties' activities is not living up to desires. To generate more insight, we asked survey respondents how well they felt that parties delivered their promises, delivered good policy outcomes, managed the day-to-day running of government and managed crises.

Figure 8 shows that dissatisfaction is high across the board, but that parties are seen to perform worst when it comes to delivering promises and best when it comes to managing crises. In workshops the thinking behind these responses became clear. When talking about parties as governors people argued that there was a:

“Lack of honesty, delivering on their manifesto”/ “Lack of taking responsibility for bad decisions, we don't see enough resignations when people are unsuccessful at what they do.”

In particular, there was a feeling that parties promised anything to win power and didn't deliver on their manifesto pledges. In discussions participants therefore made comments such as:

“Sometimes at election time, it's just, we'll do this, we'll do this, we'll do this”/ “It's pie in the sky isn't it”

“Part of the problem is that they ...are only thinking about getting our vote, about getting into power”

“And more accountability, for what happens if they don't do that”/ “Yeah, if you're elected on that manifesto”/ “What happens if they don't deliver... penalties!”/ “10 years, you can't get re-elected”/ “There would be nobody in there”/ “The promise that we must cut our carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, well that is years away, they need realistic targets”/ “They need to do more short term targets so that you can judge them”/ “Well, deliverable, achievable”/ “Yeah, SMART targets”/ “For 5, 10 years perhaps” / “There have got to be more markers along the way”/ “But who punishes them though if they don't deliver, the only punishment is not getting elected isn't it?”

“Nobody holds them to account”... “There ought to be penalties, they say, or whatever political party we will do this in ten years, they didn't ought to leave it 10 years before the accountability, it ought to be continual”

“We want more short term goals that we can judge them by.”

As these comments reveal, there was a perception that parties mislead the electorate and, once in office, could not be trusted to deliver their promises. They were also seen to suffer minimal consequences because, by the time of the next election “Most people have forgotten” and therefore didn't vote them out. From this perspective, people desired parties that were trustworthy, reliable and that stuck to their promises; feeling that these were essential characteristics given people's inability to hold parties to account between elections. When parties did change position people also wanted them to explain why they had changed, offering accounts of why a promise could not be delivered and what would be done instead. Greater transparency and accountability therefore featured prominently in participants' ideas.

LOOKING AFTER THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Turning to the kind of governing agenda people wanted parties to advance, the data we collected showed a strong attraction to the idea of parties governing in 'the national interest'. Participants regularly made comments such as:

“

"I think once you're in government whoever got you there, you need to be making sure that everyone's needs are met"/ "You need to represent everybody" / "Yeah"/ "Not just the ones who voted for you"

"They should represent their whole community including those who voted against them because they are our representatives"

"The national government, they should work in everyone's interests"

"Parties should pursue a "sort of, the utilitarian principle, the greatest good for the greatest number of people"

”

Historically, parties have advanced specific agendas, where they promote the ideas or beliefs of a segment of society. Although parties can present their specific agenda as in the national interest, we were interested in how people viewed these alternatives. To test this, we used a trade-off survey question to ask respondents whether they felt it was more important to have parties that governed in the interests of the whole nation, even if this means there is not much difference between different parties, or to have parties that govern in the interests of specific groups and have different agendas, even if this means they do not focus on the national interest. The results of this trade-off question are clear – over four fifths chose the national interest.

Clearly the idea of a 'national interest' resonates powerfully. But in our workshops there was considerable complexity and nuance about what this actually meant.

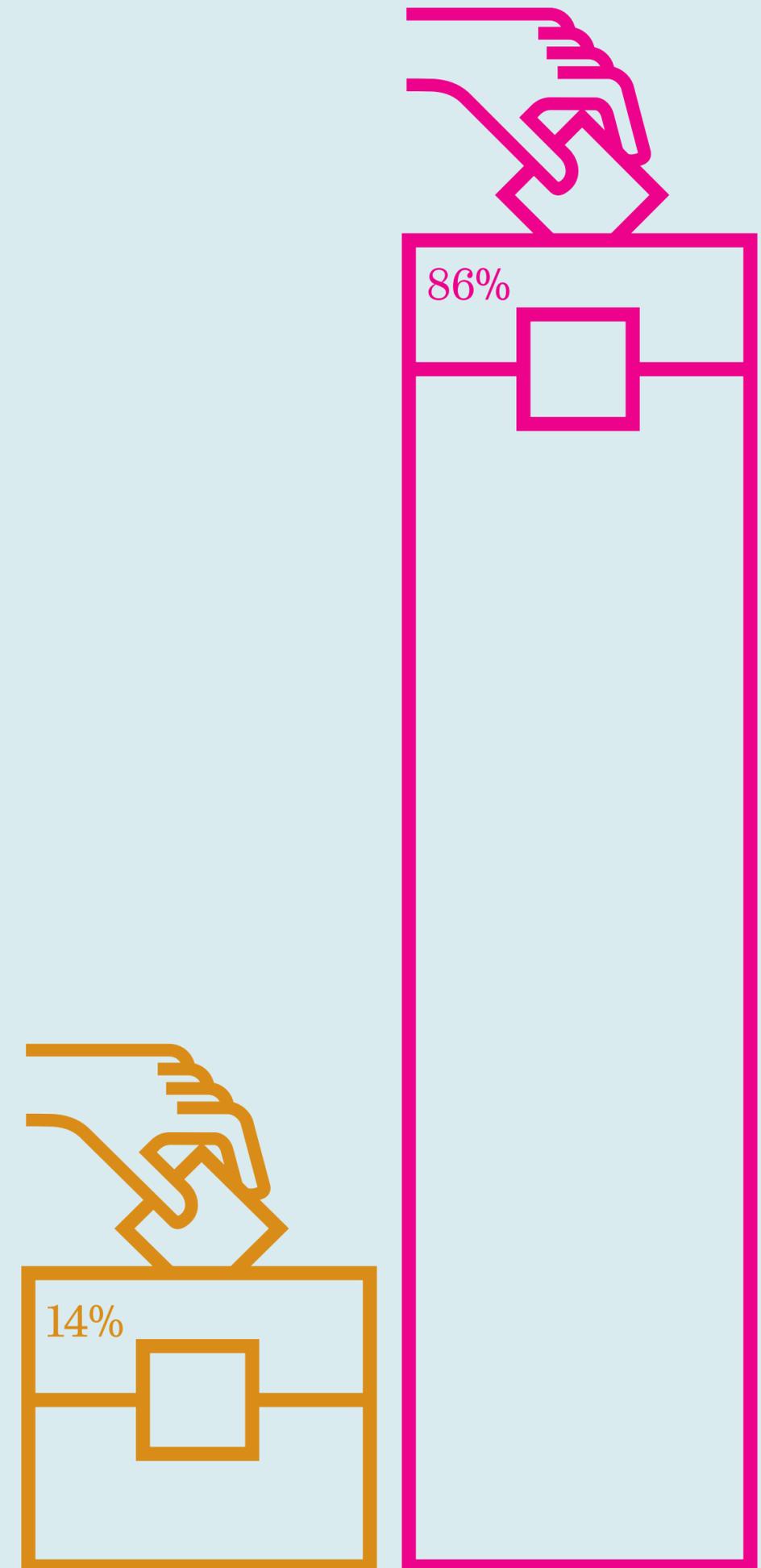
FIGURE 9

Trade-off— The national interest or specific interest

■ It is more important for parties to govern in the interests of the whole nation, even if this means there is not much difference between different parties

■ It is more important for parties to govern in the interests of specific groups and have different agendas, even if this means they do not focus on the national interest

People want parties that stick to their promises, deliver good outcomes and act in the national interest.



In one workshop activity we asked participants to prioritise the things parties should focus on when governing. The idea of the national interest was often placed towards or at the top of their list. However, many discussions quickly turned critical of just how useful the idea of the national interest was:

“

“Brexit is the clearest example of how you can't define the national interest. The country has split right down the middle, and the parties have split right down the middle as to which direction is in the national interest and they are polar opposite directions and it just a term you can't define”

“The national interest will mean different things to different people, so does the national interest even exist, in such a divided society”

“Well that is such a nebulous concept, the national interest, what is that?”/ “It is much loved by politicians, it is just a cover, it's meaningless”

”

After such discussions groups often concluded that the national interest was a difficult idea, and that its meaning was not self-evident. This did not mean that people wanted to give up this idea – rather they wanted to see parties being clearer about their own distinctive conception of the national interest. They didn't want parties that all looked the same and pursued the same goals, participants argued that parties needed to:

“

“Persuade the whole country that this is the best way, this is for the good of everybody”

And to be *“standing up and saying ‘we are going to [do] this because...and this will benefit X, Y and Z, keep it simple’/ “And not media hyped”*

”

People desired parties that put forward reliable, distinctive manifesto promises that promoted a specific conception of the national interest. The ways in which the national interest was determined could vary in accordance with different styles of representation; with some promoting partisan visions, others promoting what the public say they want, and others using their own judgement to determine national needs. People therefore voiced support for a more traditional view of parties as originally described by the theorist and MP Edmund Burke in 1770 as ‘a body of men [and women] united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed’.

SUMMARY

Governing behaviour is an important influence on how parties are viewed. The survey suggests that people's desires here are relatively straight-forward – people want parties that stick to their promises, deliver good outcomes and act in the national interest. In practice, however, workshop discussions have shown that delivering these outcomes is complex. Whilst parties can make efforts to deliver their manifesto pledges and provide feedback and explanations on what has and hasn't been done, it is less clear what a good outcome is or what the national interest means.

This ambiguity means it will be hard to satisfy people's desires. However, parties do have different options for how to respond. If pursuing reform, parties could place more emphasis on their own vision of the national interest and consider reforms such as binding manifesto promises. If seeking to promote the ways in which they already advance these ideals parties could direct more attention to how they communicate with citizens about their governing objectives and practices, placing greater emphasis on realising the national interest and delivering on their goals. Alternatively, they could deflect attention away from these ideas and instead re-frame parties' governing objectives as more technocratic in nature – trying to alter public expectations of how parties in government should behave. What appears common is that because of the contested markers of success used to judge them, parties are unlikely to be able to satisfy everyone.

MIND-SET:

What do people think about parties' mind-set?

TAKE HOME POINTS:

1. People see parties to be self-interested and electorally motivated
2. People dislike partisanship and the party whip
3. People don't think parties listen to them, or respond to their demands
4. People want open and accountable parties that are honest and adaptive (meaning parties can change their minds; they just need to communicate why).

IMPLICATIONS

Parties need to consider their behaviour and be aware of a public desire for transparency, honesty and accountability

People desired parties that put forward reliable, distinctive manifesto promises.

A final explanation for what people want from parties cuts across the ideas above to focus on the idea of a party's mind-set. Throughout the workshop people voiced negative opinions of political parties. Aside from what parties do (in terms of representation, participation and governance), there are issues with the mind-set with which they operate. Workshop participants therefore argued that what needed changing was "the ethos of the ...political parties", with another noting:

“Unless you are open, honest, trustworthy then however you engage with people, it is not going to make any difference unless you change the fundamental principles of how you operate”

” This idea of an 'ethos' or the character or culture of parties was picked up time and time again, suggesting that people want parties to alter the way they behave.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PARTIES?

In diagnosing the apparent problem with parties' current behaviour three issues recurred throughout our workshop data that echo the open text survey responses discussed above. Specifically, we found that parties (and the politicians that compose them) were seen to be self-interested, partisan and to not listen.

First, parties were commonly viewed to be self-interested, especially when it came to securing electoral power. Mirroring the findings of other surveys, when we asked to what extent people agreed with the idea that 'parties are more interested in winning elections than in governing afterwards', 77% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Workshops helped to unpack this idea and showed that participants felt parties and MPs "just want what is best for them", arguing that "the majority are in it for what they can get out of it" and "they are only really bothered about themselves". These attributes meant that parties were often seen as untrustworthy, evident in comments such as: "I get the sense that, before an election, for example, they are trying to pull the wool over our eyes a bit". It was felt that "when they come to your doorstep, they'll do anything for you", but that these promises were unreliable.

These views affected perceptions of party objectives, with participants arguing that parties "don't necessarily have the public interest at heart when they are trying to get into power" – driving a belief that parties currently do not promote the good of the nation, but focus instead on their own needs. Indeed, comments were made such as:

“By nature they are just looking to boost their popularity for the next election, over what the actual benefit is to the country, or what the right thing is to do. They just want what is best for them”

Parties are focused on "tactical electoral consideration, in order to maintain their current state of power than to actually make a positive difference a lot of the time"

” Parties' mind-set was therefore seen to undermine their ability to deliver what the public desire.

A second, dominant theme was the detrimental effect of the party whip and partisan attitudes. Whilst historically a key part of politics, partisan identities were seen to create parties that were "too tribalistic" and "dogmatic", with participants arguing that currently: "The party comes first, even if the electorate in their constituency ask for something... they follow what the party says". For many people, this meant that "The party system is fundamentally anti-democratic because it demands loyalty", with whipping in particular meaning that "Once you put an MP into the system, the party decides what happens...democracy stops".

Partisanship was also seen to create parties that did not listen, that bickered unnecessarily and that missed opportunities for collaboration. Participants therefore argued that party behaviour was all "About point scoring [rather] than necessarily having proper discussions with other parties over what is the best thing to happen". Others noted: "It feels like.... sometimes it's just, we're Labour we've got to disagree with what the Lib Dems say... we can't find any ground.... I know they have different opinions, but sometimes it feels just like having arguments for arguments sake" – reflecting our survey finding that 86% agreed or strongly agreed that parties 'spend too much time bickering with each other'. This idea of a closed group mentality meant that many people felt that parties were internally focused and had "A shield mentality, they never engage, and they never ever say that they got something wrong". Other argued that "Parties are arrogant and they don't listen to people's concerns and ignore people who might have more knowledge and experience of the actual issues". Given the desire for parties that integrate a range of different views (when it comes to representation) and that communicate and explain good (and bad) outcomes when they govern, these traits were seen to be particularly problematic.

SO WHAT MIND-SET DO PEOPLE WANT TO SEE?

Instead of self-interested, partisan, closed parties, participants therefore wanted parties that were honest, had an open ethos and drew in the ideas and interests of a range of different actors. Instead of promoting their own narrow electoral self-interest, people wanted to see parties that were more honest and reliable. It was argued: "If they were a bit more honest we can believe and trust them". Another noted:

“Honesty “is the fundamental thing, because you need to believe your politicians”/ “You need to believe they are representing what they are supposed to be representing and saying what they're doing”

”

There were accordingly calls for parties to keep their promises. People acknowledged that this might mean that parties didn't make as many compelling promises or claims, but instead spoke to people about what they could realistically expect to deliver. People therefore argued that parties needed to "Be honest with people as well. It might be bad news, but at least people will know what to expect".

When it came to partisan politics, workshops revealed that instead of bickering and partisan politics, people felt that parties "Have got to reach out to people who don't share [their views] and see if we can somehow bring them round to, not parroting your way of thinking, I don't mean that, I just...[laughter]...what I mean is, not brainwashing people, but trying to share your point of view and maybe bringing them on board". This meant that parties were seen to need to pursue "Proper discussions with other parties over what is the best thing to happen". Many participants shared this view, as clear in one discussion:

“If you're not speaking to people with different interests to you, then you are not going to be forming the strongest argument to take forward in your party to then take forward and argue in Parliament”/ “People don't have to agree on the things, they can agree to disagree, so it is being diverse”/ “And it is disagreement that drives policy forward as well”/ “Yeah”/ “It drives debate, it drives recognition of different points of view”/ “Yeah, it helps refine”/ “It's incredibly important, I think if you are just reaching out to the same kind of person time and time again, you're in a party that is going nowhere”

”

Parties that not only listened to people with other political perspectives but also to "Experts from a wide range of different points of view" were particularly valued as this approach was seen to allow parties to form "The strongest argument to take forward in your party to then take forward and argue in Parliament". As such moving beyond partisan, dogmatic behaviour was seen to allow parties to listen and reflect on what different groups of people wanted. Importantly, given the desire for parties that promote a vision of the national interest, this listening process would not mean that parties uncritically adopted different people's views (causing them to become inconsistent and changeable), but rather meant that parties would listen to and consider different perspectives to revise and refine their pre-existing views, and they would communicate to the public how this process was done.

Taken together, these changes would represent a dramatic shift in how parties behave that cuts across not only how they relate to the people and engage different groups, but also to how they govern and wield power. They suggest that rather than having to change one aspect of how parties represent, govern or offer opportunities to participate, these organisations need to rethink their mind-set and conduct, creating a more inclusive, open and transparent ethos that is open to different views.

77%

agreed that parties are more interested in winning elections than in governing afterwards.

“Partisanship was also seen to create parties that did not listen, that bickered unnecessarily and that missed opportunities for collaboration.”

Amplifying these findings, participants in the workshop were asked to write down words associated with their ideal party, the top 10 responses strikingly focus on behavioural traits.

In particular, people emphasised the importance of transparency, democracy and accountability. The motivations for these ideas were connected to a wish to understand how parties came to hold their positions and make certain decisions, and how people's own contributions influenced outcomes. Comments along these lines therefore included:

“

I want “to know the real reasons they are doing things...why they don't seem to be behaving in the way I think they should be”

“I'd like to see what they say, what they do, that they're accountable. Then you can measure somehow what they've achieved and how they've achieved it”

When parties are transparent *“more people can feel like they understand and are involved. That they can get a grip on it, that it doesn't feel like this thing that they are totally disconnected from”*

”

Combining these desires with the above discussion of a listening, non-partisan and un-self-interested party, the desire for a more open, honest, inclusive party becomes clear.

SUMMARY

Whilst it is common to think about citizens' desires for party representation, participation or governance, it is less common to pay attention to parties' mind-set, but we argue that people have clear desires for how parties should behave. Rather than wanting a highly partisan system focused on elections, people want parties that are “visible” and have a “culture of engaging” with people from different perspectives. They want parties that are more honest, transparent and communicative, making it clear why they should get involved and what impact they can have, but also clarifying what parties can achieve, and why they sometimes fail to deliver. Instead of indicating the need for a new mechanism or initiative, we argue that there is a need for parties to think about their mind-set and behaviour. To return to the comment of one participant, the fate of parties:

“

“Comes down to the kind of fundamental kind of principles that we talked about first, that unless you are open, honest, trustworthy then however you engage with people, it is not going to make any difference unless you change the fundamental principles of how you operate”

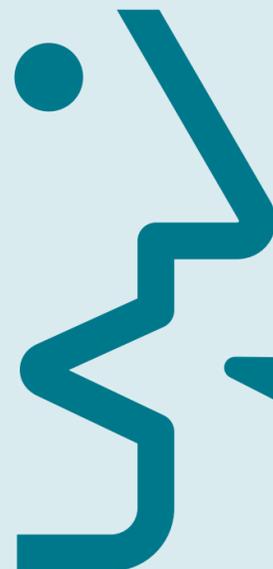
”

From this perspective parties could benefit greatly from focusing on how they behave and are perceived by the public. This may result in programmes of reform designed to promote these values; an emphasis on how parties are already promoting these ideas, or even an attempt to challenge the importance of these particular traits.

Section 3: What does this mean for parties?

FIGURE 10

Top 10 ideal party words



1. **Transparent** (14)
2. **Representative** (13)
3. **Democratic** (10)
4. **Accountable** (9)
5. **Honest** (9)
6. **Listening** (9)
7. **Policies** (7)
8. **Local** (6)
9. **Diverse** (5)
10. **Inclusive** (5)

At the outset of the report, we argued that citizens' desires for parties are diverse, and that parties are unlikely to be able to satisfy all demands. Moreover, we argued that people's views and preferences are complex and often make it hard to work out what to change. Having reviewed people's views of party representation, participation, governance and mind-set, it is clear that there isn't a simple solution, but that there are certain aspects of party conduct that parties could fruitfully consider and potentially reform.

In considering these findings we argue that parties shouldn't rush to give the people what they want, but that they have three different responses to public views. They can:

a) Make changes to bring their party more in line with public desires

b) Promote the ways in which they already enact public desires, or

c) Challenge people's ideas and offer an alternative set of benchmarks against which they feel they should be being judged.

When it comes to representation, there is little that can be done. Views of how parties should represent don't offer a path for reform or improved communication as there is no clear consensus for what people want to see. This means that if changing or promoting a certain set of practices parties are likely to upset as many people as they will please. What parties can, however, do, is think about bringing the views of a diverse range of people (ranging from experts to supporters of other parties) into policy and decision making processes, and then explaining how they are making decisions based on the input of different groups. By spreading greater awareness of the challenges of representation, parties could attempt to challenge the negative tone of debate around how they represent and create clearer expectations for how representation occurs.

In terms of participation, we have argued that there is an incentive for parties that have conventional membership structures to open up, but that any programme of reform will need to consider what is required for different kinds of party activity, and how people's expectations for impact will be met. We have also suggested that parties that already have a multi-speed structure may want to promote available opportunities and, again, make it clear what impact citizens can have. Others more sceptical of participation may want to change the tenor of this debate by focusing not on participation with parties, but on their efforts to listen to all the people (not only those who choose to get involved). Whichever strategy is adopted, we argue that there is value in understanding the nuance in citizens' views, and the overwhelming desire to see the impact of getting involved.

Governing clearly matters to how parties are viewed, and parties are not seen to be performing well when it comes to delivering their promises, good policy outcomes, or focusing on the long-term national interest. For parties interested in reform, this suggests that initiatives such as creating binding manifesto pledges may be of interest, or there may be value in changing how the party articulates its governing aims (moving to focus more on the national interest). For parties that don't wish to reform, our findings suggest a need to articulate governing activities with reference to a distinctive vision of the national interest, but also to emphasise the consistency of party ideas and instances where parties deliver on promises. For others seeking to challenge these ideas, there may be value in promoting a more technocratic conception of party governance, challenging the idea that parties should have principled visions and instead portraying party actions as guided by expert evidence and independent advice.

Finally, across all aspects of party activity, we have shown that people want parties to rethink how they behave. Rather than offering self-interested, highly partisan, dogmatic identities that lead to tribalism and a closed mentality, people want parties to have more integrity. For parties interested in reform, this could inspire the creation of codes of conduct, and clear procedures for disciplining party members who violate these ideas. It could also inspire efforts to improve transparency, with greater communication about party decision making and the rationale behind the actions parties take. For parties that believe they already possess these ideas, more could be done to promote the way in which these traits are advanced as, at present, the public profess to see few examples of these ideas in action. For those who wish to challenge these ideas, an alternative set of behavioural traits would need to be defined and articulated, providing a different set of standards against which parties should be judged.

IN SUMMARY, WHAT IS IT THAT CITIZENS WANT?

In characterising citizens' desires for parties, we amalgamate these ideas to identify 7 principles. We argue that in seeking to reform, communicate or challenge public opinion parties can usefully consider people's desire for parties that demonstrate:

1. TRANSPARENCY

This report shows that people want to understand what parties do, how decisions are made, and what influence they can have. Any party looking to meet public demands should therefore consider how transparent they are.

2. COMMUNICATION

This report shows that people want honest and accountable parties that communicate with the people. They want to know when something has gone wrong, and they want parties to explain and take responsibility when something doesn't work out as planned.

3. RELIABILITY

This report shows that people want to see parties that outline an agenda and stick to it, enacting their manifesto promises and sticking to pledges. They do not want parties that are self-interested, or that are dogmatic and uncompromising. This means that parties need to be reliable, and that when they do need to change, there needs to be a clear explanation for why change is necessary.

4. PRINCIPLES

This report shows that people want to see parties that have principles. This does not mean that parties should be highly partisan or dogmatic, rather they should have a clear idea of what they want to achieve. People want parties that are guided by their principles when making policies or decisions, using these ideas to filter the different voices and influences that can affect the decision made.

5. INCLUSIVITY

This report shows that people want parties to include a range of different voices and ideas. Rather than just listening to members or supporters, people want parties to listen to experts, opponents and the wider public as a whole. By listening to and incorporating different ideas in a transparent way, parties can better satisfy public desires.

6. ACCESSIBILITY

This report shows that people want a range of ways to engage with parties, but that they don't want parties to entirely open up. Certain activities should continue to be the preserve of members and leaders, but for less intensive activities (such as political discussion and issue-campaigning) citizens want a wider range of people to be able to get involved. In opening up it is, however, important for parties to be honest and transparent about the power that people will receive, as people want to feel that their participation will have an impact.

7. INTEGRITY

This report shows that people want parties that act with integrity; being honest, ethical and dignified. Rather than focusing on the competition of party politics and the partisan behaviour this can promote, people want parties that have moral codes and principles that underpin how they work. Parties should therefore consider developing codes of conduct that outline principles for how they work and behave. They should also develop and enforce clear disciplinary procedures, making it transparent what is done if these codes are violated.

By focusing on these principles, parties can begin to identify possible reforms, highlight areas of current practice that exemplify these ideals and develop alternative benchmarks against which they feel they should be judged.

“Rather than offering self-interested, highly partisan, dogmatic identities that lead to tribalism and a closed mentality, people want parties to have more integrity.”

In thinking through these alternative responses, it can be useful for parties to examine their different processes in turn, asking a range of questions about current practices and ideas. If, for example, thinking about a party's existing policymaking process, these principles could form the basis of exploratory questions such as:

Applying these principles to a party's policy making process

Transparency – How transparent is your policy making process? Do people inside and outside of the party know how a policy is made (or could find out if they so desired)? Are people able to find out about the policy making process in general, or about the origins of particular ideas? Do you think transparency in policy-making is a good thing?

Communication – Does your party communicate with citizens? Do you offer feedback on what you have achieved and what impact people had? What happens if a particular policy is not implemented, do you communicate why? It is possible for people to find out why you made certain decisions? Can you design processes that allow people to communicate with you over time?

Reliability – How consistent are your policies? How will you translate policy pledges into governing outcomes? How much do your policies and principles change and how do you explain these shifts? Are there certain principles or ideas that your party would refuse to change? Are people aware of this?

“Much of how the public understand politics is affected not by what parties themselves do, but by how their behaviour is reported in the press”

Principles – What principles are guiding your policies? Are these clearly communicated in relation to specific policies, or to policies in general? Is it clear how your principles help you to mediate between different views and suggestions? Do you think your party should promote a clear set of principles?

Inclusive – Who is involved in your policy making process? Do you include experts, political opponents, the general public and members? (If not, why are only some groups included)? What influence do these individual have, and how is this communicated? Do you want to open up your policy making structures to different groups?

Accessible – What is required to make policy in your party? Do people need to be members? What rights and responsibilities do different people have when it comes to policymaking? How do people know what impact their contribution makes to party policy? How is this communicated? Do you want your policy making process to be accessible to more people?

Integrity – How does your party behave? Do you have codes of conduct for expected behaviour? Do people know how they are expected to behave when they get involved in policy making? What happens if someone violates these behavioural codes? Do you communicate the principles that guide party behaviour? How is this done? Do you think that party behaviour is important?

By asking questions such as these parties can scrutinise whether their activities are aligned with public opinion, helping them to think about how they are viewed and how they may want to respond to people's stated desires.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN BEYOND PARTIES THEMSELVES?

In this report we have shown that there are a number of changes that parties could make, below we present changes to the wider political system that could bring about positive change. These include:

1. CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Throughout our data collection we found evidence that people wanted more information about how parties worked and how they could get engaged. By investing in citizenship education, vital competencies could be promoted to help shape people's expectations and understanding of what parties do and how they can get involved.

2. ELECTORAL REFORM

Many of the dislikes associated with parties can be traced to the need to win power in a first-past-the-post system. The focus on marginal seats and select groups of voters incentivises parties to concentrate on elections and make promises designed to win appeal – often amongst very specific groups. Electoral reform could change the dynamics of competition and could allow parties to behave in a different way.

3. MEDIA REFORM

Much of how the public understand politics is affected not by what parties themselves do, but by how their behaviour is reported in the press. The tendency to sensationalise politics and give limited coverage to political events and ideas is not conducive to the kind of communicative, informative environment that people would like to see. This signals that media reform may be needed, and suggests that parties themselves might want to use new media avenues that allow them to share more information about what it is that they do.

CONCLUSION

In this report, we have examined the challenge facing parties. As widely disliked organisations seen to be essential to contemporary democracy, parties are often under pressure to reform.

But whilst some parties have been quick to roll out new initiatives (such as supporters' networks) or try new ideas (such as open primaries), there has been less attention devoted to what it is that people actually want from parties, and where they would like to see reform.

This report has shown that there isn't a single (or simple) solution, but that parties can usefully think about 7 principles that the public wished parties displayed when they consider how to respond. By thinking about these principles we argue that parties can review their current processes to decide whether there is a case for reform, a need for improved communication, or a shift in the focus of existing debate.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dr Kate Dommett is Senior Lecturer in the Public Understanding of Politics at the University of Sheffield. She is also Director of the Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics. Her research looks at public perceptions, political parties, digital campaigning and digital activism.

k.dommett@sheffield.ac.uk,
Twitter: @KateDommett

Dr Luke Temple is a Teaching Associate in Political Geography at the University of Sheffield. His research looks at political and electoral geography, democratic theory and democratization, political participation, and patterns of digital engagement.

L.temple@sheffield.ac.uk,
Twitter : @la_temple.

