No Democratic Reform, No Change

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Turning the tide of public disillusionment and distrust enough to secure a second term is a massive challenge for Starmer’s party, but it is also one being undertaken within a political system that works against achieving those ends. Both for voters and for those working within political parties, the system itself can be the problem, actively working against achieving a better, more engaging democracy. Meeting the populist right’s challenges to democracy cannot mean propping up a redundant system that doesn’t serve, but finding a way to renew the system to better serve the values and principles that we are trying to defend.

**Disappointment, Disillusionment ... Delivery?**

Checking the vital signs of our democracy reveals a worrying prognosis. The general election in 2024 had the lowest turnout since 2001 – when turnout dropped just below 60% for the first time since universal suffrage; 40% of the registered electorate chose not to vote. That figure is higher than the vote share of any of the parties, but it is only half of the picture. There is, on top of this, another missing, invisible electorate – those who are eligible to vote, but not registered to do so. The Electoral Commission suggests up to 8 million potential voters could be missing. Adding this silent constituency to those who were registered but didn’t turn out means that, of the eligible electorate, nearly one in two potential voters did not cast a ballot in 2024.

There are many factors that drive turnout. Some are contextual, such as how close the contest is and how much is perceived to be at stake. On this measure, many blamed the polls, which gave Labour such a clear lead in the run-up to polling day, for dissuading voters. Other factors are practical – how easy it is to vote, and whether there are barriers (such as new voter ID laws which appeared to have a deterrent effect on turnout). There is, however, one factor that goes beyond the practicalities of voting: the feeling that party politics, whatever the party, whoever the leader, just isn’t connecting.

While support for democracy in general remains high, there is growing cynicism about how it works in practice. Trust, both in politicians and our political institutions, has reached record lows. In the year prior to the election, the percentage of people saying they ‘almost never’ trust the government to put the needs of the nation above the interests of their party was at 45%; 58% said they ‘almost never’ trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner. To put that in context, in 2009, in the wake of the expenses scandal, the number of people who said they almost never trust politicians was only 2 percentage points higher. The UK currently sits second from bottom of 30 surveyed OECD countries for trust in government.

This disillusionment and lack of trust undoubtedly had an impact on turnout at the general election. One-third (34%) of those who didn’t vote said it was because they don’t trust politicians; another 21% said it was because voting doesn’t change anything.

It is true, of course, that people tend to have higher levels of trust in government when the party they support is in power. Likewise, there is a connection between how well-off people feel under the system and how much they trust it. There is therefore a sound logic to the Starmer government’s approach of focusing on delivery as an answer to the problem of declining trust. Tackling the sense that the political system isn’t delivering as it should and that government has lost the power to make people’s lives better is crucial. Similarly, moving away from the empty promises of boosterism seen under the previous Tory government is an important step in addressing the sense that politics continually disappoints. But while delivery is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient one.

What ‘deliverism’ can’t provide is a sense of individual empowerment, and it is often those who feel like they don’t have a voice in the political system who do not trust it. There is a growing pessimism and anger in our politics, and this, combined with low trust, can easily create a toxic environment. Those most alienated from the political system and least likely to engage are also most likely to support populist alternatives. Hope not Hate research just after the general election in 2024 found that 37% of people believed that voting is not a credible mechanism for change – rising to 51% of those feeling financially desperate.

The combination of disengagement, low trust and pessimism is a warning sign. These are the fertile fields for the seeds of right-wing populism, but barren ground for those promoting democratic life.

There isn’t an easy answer to these problems, but often the way to grow trust is to be more trusting, so the solutions must surely start with trying to encourage greater participation and ensuring that people’s participation matters. People need to feel empowered to make their own lives better and create positive outcomes for their families and communities. There are material issues as well, of course, but it is important, too, that people feel their voice is heard. And there is a relationship between this sense of intention and trust – if the system is responsive to you, you tend to trust it, and to engage with it.

A good place to start would be to ensure that our elections and parliament reflect voters’ views fairly and that people feel their vote is valued through a proportional representation system. Elections for most people are the only point at which they engage in the democratic process, but even at this very basic level, there are unnecessary barriers and complications, and too many people go to the polling station knowing their vote won’t count. To begin to turn the tide on the political disconnect, it is essential that this fundamental voting experience is a meaningful one. There is broad and growing support for changing the electoral system at Westminster to a more proportional system. This fundamental change would be a huge step toward forging a better connection with voters. Not only would proportional representation help ensure that all votes are meaningful, but it would reshape the political dynamic at Westminster, opening the door to a different political culture

**An Electoral Straitjacket: The Ming Vase Strategy**

The increasing fragmentation of our politics means that general elections under our electoral system are, for parties, especially Labour, now a complex game of piecing together an optimally located voter coalition. This is partly because geography takes centre-stage in first-past-the-post (FPTP) elections. Labour has learned that it is more important to attract votes in the right places than to increase vote share overall, which inevitably means that the political offer is steered toward those voters who hold the keys to unlocking the election – from ‘White Van Man’ to ‘Waitrose Woman’, the (ideally located) target voter has an outsized influence on what matters. This also means that there are many who don’t matter as much – traditionally anyone in a ‘safe seat’, but certain demographics, too; typically younger voters and those in more densely populated urban areas are overlooked, and of course, those who are unlikely to vote (an increasing number). But as the previous decade of political turmoil has exposed, ignoring any group of voters has the potential to backfire.

The necessary and limiting focus on the target voter encourages an electoral cognitive dissonance whereby the electoral offer (or at least the offer that takes centre-stage in the debate) is detached from the values or broader aims of the party. This dissonance shapes the direction of politics beyond the election, dictating policy choices once in office and affecting how well government policy matches up to public preferences. Comparative studies have shown that under Westminster-style systems, given the inbuilt need to persuade key voters in key seats, a narrow set of interests exerts the greater pull on policy choices. This means greater spending on targeted benefits such as key infrastructure in certain constituencies, over generalised public goods such as welfare spending. It means that policy choices shift toward certain interests. Far from creating a pull toward a popular unity, this converging on the median voter in the median district can actually skew policy away from the median because voters are themselves not evenly distributed.

The oft-quoted ‘Ming vase strategy’ attributed to Starmer’s election campaign, in which, like Blair, he exercised the caution of ‘a man carrying a priceless Ming vase across a highly polished floor’, is a reflection of this. The fear of a small last-minute shift in the polls affecting the election outcome is a genuine risk, particularly in a close race, and particularly facing a hostile media, but it is also a reflection of the fragility of FPTP results in an increasingly multiparty electoral system.

This fragility can be seen across the last decade of election results. The 2017 election resulted in a hung parliament, but it would have been a Conservative majority if just 533 voters in nine constituencies voted differently. In 2017, Labour received 3 million more votes than it did in 2024, but 149 fewer seats. Labour’s landslide majority in 2024 was achieved on a 1.6 percentage point increase on its 2019 vote share. The Conservatives experienced the same switch in fortunes this decade. Their 2019 ‘landslide’ was achieved on a 1.3% increase in vote share, while the previous election had seen the Prime minister lose her majority. Increasingly, under our system, a small shift in vote share can mean the difference between a huge win or crushing defeat.

Such an imbalance may not work as well for Labour at the next general election as it did in 2024. Labour’s 2024 electoral coalition, pieced together to deliver a highly efficient vote spread, is not tightly bound ideologically. Mostly this is an electoral coalition based on a desire for change, and one which will be harder to hold together with a call for continuity. Even a modest Conservative recovery at the next election could see Labour out of power.

To date, Labour has not needed to listen as much to those voters it lost to the Green Party or Lib Dems; typically, these were younger voters in more urban areas where Labour’s vote share stacks up without leading to more MPs. This may change. To secure a second term, Labour will need to expand its vote share, drawing votes from progressives, too. The electoral contest is no longer a case of the red wall or the blue wall, but rather a battle across many, sometimes contradictory, sites. The fragility of the electoral coalition carefully pieced together in 2024 will be hard to defend.

This is an electoral game that is increasingly difficult to play and win. It’s not good for voters, but nor does it serve those trying to win elections. The reality of fighting FPTP elections in a multiparty and volatile electoral arena is one of high stakes and limited options. There is very little room to manoeuvre in campaigning, or in office, when so much can ride on so few and the margins are so narrow.

The structures of our politics dictate the possibilities within it. Voters are not the only ones limited by the choices they can make; those in power also find their options, the choices they can make, the changes they can bring about, are limited by the Westminster system. The Ming vase strategy is undoubtedly a sound one in these circumstances, but it is an unenviable position to hold.

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