

# Damaged Politics?

## The impact of the 2019-24 Parliament on political trust and confidence

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# Damaged Politics? The impact of the 2019-24 Parliament on political trust and confidence

The 2019-24 Parliament has been one of the most politically turbulent and economically challenging of the post-war period. Two Prime Ministers have been brought down, one because of doubts about his honesty and the other after she precipitated a crisis on the financial markets. Meanwhile at a time when the country was trying to implement Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in a stuttering economy, a cost-of-living crisis, and struggling public services.

Concern about people's levels of trust and confidence in how they are governed and by whom is not new. But we may wonder whether the experience of the last four years has served to undermine it further. This chapter examines trends in political trust and confidence during this parliament and compares them with the experience of previous parliaments from the 1970s onwards. Thereafter it analyses how far the trends it has uncovered can be accounted for by some of the public policy challenges that government has faced before, finally, discussing the implications for political engagement, attitudes to constitutional change, and support for populism.

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## **Trust and confidence in government are as low as they have ever been**

Public trust and confidence has fallen now to record lows across a range of measures:

- 45% would 'almost never' trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party, more than ever before.
- 79% believe the present system of governing Britain could be improved 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal', matching the previous record high in 2019 during the parliamentary stalemate about Brexit.
- 58% would 'almost never' trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner, similar to the 60% recorded in 2009 in the wake of the MP's expenses scandal.

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## **Trust and confidence has fallen heavily among Leave voters**

Trust and confidence rose markedly among Leave voters following the implementation of Brexit. But that pattern has now largely been reversed.

- 48% of those who voted Leave now say they ‘almost never’ trust governments, even higher than the 40% who did so in 2019.
  - 60% of Leave voters ‘almost never’ trust politicians, matching the same number who did so in 2019.
  - 76% of Leave voters believe the system of governing Britain needs considerable improvement, almost matching the 81% who said so in 2019.
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## **Trust and confidence have been undermined by some of the policy challenges facing government**

People struggling financially and those dissatisfied with the NHS have lower levels of trust and confidence in government.

- 72% of those who are struggling financially ‘almost never’ trust politicians, compared with 49% of those living comfortably.
  - 86% of those who are dissatisfied with the NHS believe the system of governing Britain needs considerable improvement, compared with 65% of those who are satisfied.
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## **Those with low levels of trust and confidence are more likely to back constitutional change**

Support for changing the electoral system and the way in which England is governed has increased and is highest among those with low levels of trust and confidence.

- A record 53% now support changing the electoral system to one that is fairer to smaller parties.
  - Support for changing the system is as high as 62% among those who ‘almost never’ trust governments.
  - As many as 49% now favour some form of devolution for England, more than ever before.
  - 56% of those who ‘almost never’ trust politicians support English devolution.
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# Introduction

A general election inevitably puts a spotlight on the health of a country's democracy. By holding them to account, democratic elections incentivises politicians to be responsive to voters' needs and preferences and gives the electorate at least some influence over how they are governed. However, one quality that it is often argued is essential to the healthy operation of this process is that the public have a degree of trust in their politicians and a measure of confidence in their system of government (Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Devine, 2024; Hooghe, 2018). It is also argued that higher levels of trust make it more likely that people will vote, perhaps because they are more likely to feel that those standing for office will keep the promises they have made. In contrast, people with low levels of trust and confidence may seek change in the constitutional rules that determine how politicians secure and exercise power. They may even be persuaded by populist arguments that politicians are part of an elite that ignores the wishes and wisdom of ordinary people.

Doubts have, however, been raised about how much trust and confidence people in Britain actually have in how they are governed. More than one study has suggested that there has been a long-term decline (Jennings et al., 2017; Quilter-Pinner et al., 2021). Allegations of 'sleaze' in the 1990s, the MPs' expenses scandal of 2009, and the stalemate over Brexit in the 2017-19 parliament all seemingly took their toll (Curtice and Montagu, 2020). That said, our most recent research on the subject suggested that the resolution of the Brexit stalemate following the Conservatives' victory in 2019 appeared to reverse some of the decline caused by the impasse over Brexit, at least among those who voted to leave the EU (Curtice and Scholes, 2021).

However, there have been a number of significant events since that may have adversely affected public perceptions (Policy Institute 2023; Quilter-Pinner, 2022). Although many people may have trusted the decisions that the government made during the pandemic and followed the guidance on social distancing (Davies et al., 2021), the revelation that the public health regulations had not been adhered to within Downing Street itself might have had a corrosive effect. Indeed, the Prime Minister at the time, Boris Johnson, was eventually determined by his fellow MPs to have misled the House of Commons about the lockdown 'gatherings' that took place in Downing Street. Telling untruths does not promote trust.

Mr Johnson's loss of the premiership was soon followed by the demise of his successor, Liz Truss, following an adverse reaction on the financial markets to her attempt to cut taxation without being clear on how the reduction would be funded. That event might well have further undermined voters' confidence in how they were being governed. At the same time, the pandemic, together with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, left a legacy of a stuttering economy, falling living standards, a struggling health service, and high taxation. Alongside record levels of immigration, it was a far cry from what was promised by the advocates of Brexit before and during the 2019 election – and might well have served to make people more critical of how they are being governed.

This chapter examines what has happened during the 2019-24 parliament to the public's trust and confidence in how they are governed and assesses how their feelings now compare with the position over the longer term. Have levels of trust and confidence taken a knock during this time? Has the increased trust and confidence among those who voted to leave the EU been sustained or has this group reacted particularly negatively to the record of the last four years? Is there any

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evidence that the challenges that have beset the government have had an impact? And what impact has any of this made on people's levels of engagement with politics and their support or otherwise for constitutional reform?

Much of our evidence will come from questions on trust and confidence that have been asked repeatedly on previous BSA surveys and were again asked in 2023. At the same time, to help us paint a broader picture of long-term trends in the public's evaluations of how they are being governed, we also look at another set of questions asked as part of an International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) module on citizenship and national identity.

# Trends in trust and confidence

We begin by looking at trends in trust in government and politicians, and confidence in systems of governing and democracy. First, we examine how well people think Britain’s system of governing is operating. Table 1 shows how people have responded when asked whether they feel the present system of governing Britain ‘works extremely well and could not be improved’, ‘could be improved in small ways but mainly works well’, ‘could be improved quite a lot’, or ‘needs a great deal of improvement’. Those who give the first two responses have been combined, as have those offering the last two. The question was first asked in a survey conducted in 1973 on behalf of the Royal Commission on the Constitution (Kilbrandon 1973a; 1973b), which was established to look at attitudes towards devolution. This, together with the presence of the question in a number of other surveys before it was first asked on British Social Attitudes, means we can chart the pattern of responses over a fifty-year period.

**Table 1 Attitudes towards how Britain is governed, 1973-2023**

Present system of governing Britain...	1973	1977	1991	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	48	34	33	29	22	35	56	46	48	35
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	49	62	63	69	75	63	42	52	50	62
<i>Unweighted base</i>	4892	1410	1034	1137	1034	1180	4214 <sup>1</sup>	2071	1060	2293
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2008	2010 (1)	2010 (2)	2011	2014	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	43	38	34	34	37	22	41	35	34	20
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	56	59	65	63	60	74	54	62	63	79
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1099	2287	4432	2373	1128	2288	1083	2215	2373	1088

<sup>1</sup> The sample for 1997 includes an over-sample of respondents in Scotland, which has been accounted for in the analysis.

**Table 1 Attitudes towards how Britain is governed, 1973-2023 (continued)**

Present system of governing Britain...	2020 (1)	2020 (2)	2021	2023
	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	39	32	39	19
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	61	66	61	79
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2408</i>	<i>1332</i>	<i>2207</i>	<i>1238</i>

Sources: 1973: Royal Commission on the Constitution, Memorandum of Dissent; 1977: Opinion Research Centre Survey; 1991, 1995, 2004, 2010(1), 2014: MORI/ICM/Rowntree Trust State of the Nation Surveys; 1997: British Election Study; 2020 (1), 2021 NatCen Mixed Mode Panel

The picture is striking. In our latest survey, four times as many people say the system of governing Britain could be improved ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ (79%) as express the view that it ‘could not be improved’ or only ‘in small ways’ (19%). The public are even more critical now of how they are being governed than they were at the height of the ‘sleaze’ allegations of the 1990s (see the reading for 1995) or in the immediate wake of the MPs’ expenses scandal (see the first reading in 2010). Meanwhile, having improved somewhat following the implementation of Brexit and held up during the COVID-19 pandemic, confidence in the British system of government has fallen back to the record low at which it stood in the midst of the parliamentary stalemate about Brexit in 2019.<sup>2</sup>

This impression is reinforced by how people responded when asked (as part of the ISSP module) to use a scale from 0 to 10 to indicate ‘how well does democracy work in Britain today?’. As Table 2a shows, in both 2004 and 2014 well over half gave a score of at least six out of ten to how well democracy was working. Now the figure stands at just 43%. Meanwhile, at 33%, the proportion who give a score of four or less is roughly double what it was in the two previous surveys.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> One other feature of this time series is that people are less likely to state that the system of government is in need of considerable improvement immediately after an election – see the readings for 1997, 2001, and 2010 (2). It is possible that this tendency had an impact on our readings for 2020, though both these were taken more than six months after the December 2019 election.

<sup>3</sup> In their forthcoming chapter Curtice and Scholes (2024) also report that there has been a decline over the last decade in the proportion who say they take pride in the way the democracy works in Britain.

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**Table 2a Perceptions of how well democracy works in Britain, 2004-2023**

	<b>2004</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2023</b>
	%	%	%
0-4 (poorly)	17	15	33
5	18	18	17
6-10 (well)	55	57	43
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>853</i>	<i>1580</i>	<i>1611</i>

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This decline in perceptions of how well democracy works in Britain is reflected in the scores that respondents gave when asked how well they thought democracy worked ten years ago. As Table 2b shows, in our latest survey, only 20% reported a score of four or less when asked about democracy ten years ago, well below the 33% who said the same of democracy in Britain now. This divergence between how respondents view democracy now and what they say about its functioning ten years ago was not present in 2014. In that survey, 15% rated democracy as working poorly, much the same as the 14% who at that point thought it had been working poorly ten years previously.

**Table 2b Perceptions of how well democracy worked in Britain 10 years ago, 2004-2023**

	<b>2004</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2023</b>
	%	%	%
0-4 (poorly)	16	14	20
5	15	15	14
6-10 (well)	53	55	49
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>853</i>	<i>1580</i>	<i>1611</i>

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Meanwhile, people are also as doubtful as they have ever been about whether government takes account of what they think. Since first asked in 1974, most have agreed that ‘people like me have no say in what the government does’. However, at 26%, the proportion who ‘strongly agree’ is now five points higher than in 2019 and, apart from in 1994 – after the allegations about sleaze – it is as high as it has ever been.<sup>4</sup> Equally, data from ISSP show that 35% now ‘strongly agree’ that they ‘don’t think the government cares much about what people like me think’, up from 20% and 19% respectively in 2004 and 2014. All in all, people are as critical of the state of Britain’s democracy as they have ever been.

But what of trust? We have two measures that have been asked repeatedly over the last forty years. The first asks people whether they trust ‘British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party’. With the sole exception of 2009, when the MPs’ expenses scandal was hitting the headlines, levels of trust were as low as they had ever been in the months preceding the 2019 election (Table 3). Thirty-four per cent said they almost never trusted governments, more than twice the proportion (15%) who said they trusted governments ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’. As with perceptions of Britain’s system of governing, this picture improved in the wake of the implementation of Brexit and during the pandemic, though, at 27%, the proportion who towards the later stages of the pandemic in 2021 said they ‘almost never’ trusted governments was still above what it had been on all but two occasions before 2009. Now, however, levels of trust have fallen to a new record low. Forty-five per cent say they ‘almost never’ trust governments, more than ever before, while only 14% do so ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’. The second half of the current parliament seems to have witnessed a remarkable fall in people’s regard for the motivations of government.

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<sup>4</sup> In our latest survey the proposition was worded slightly differently, as indeed it has been on some BSA surveys in the past. It read, ‘People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.’

**Table 3 Level of trust in British governments, 1986-2023**

Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	1986	1987 (1)	1987 (2)	1991	1994	1996	1997 (1)	1997 (2)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	40	37	47	33	24	22	25	33
Only some of the time	48	46	43	50	53	53	48	52
Almost never	12	11	9	14	21	23	23	12
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1548	1410	3414	1445	1137	1180	1355	3615
	1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2006	2007
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	28	16	28	26	18	26	19	29
Only some of the time	52	58	50	47	49	47	46	45
Almost never	17	24	20	24	31	26	34	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2071	2293	1099	2287	3299	3167	1077	992
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2016	2017	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	16	20	22	18	17	22	20	15
Only some of the time	42	45	45	49	51	51	48	49
Almost never	40	33	31	32	32	26	29	34
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1143	1081	2215	1103	1063	974	2986	1088

**Table 3 Level of trust in British governments, 1986-2023 (continued)**

Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	2020 (1)	2020 (2)	2021	2023
	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	23	23	24	14
Only some of the time	53	47	49	39
Almost never	23	30	27	45
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>2409</i>	<i>1332</i>	<i>2207</i>	<i>1238</i>

Columns that are shaded indicate a survey that was conducted shortly after a general election. Apart from 2017, these surveys recorded an increase in the level of trust. The 2016 survey was conducted after the EU referendum.

Source: 1987 (2); 1997 (2), British Election Study; 2020 (1); 2021: NatGen Mixed Mode Panel

Our second measure is how much people trust ‘politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner’. This is a question where we might expect people’s views to have particularly been affected by the revelations that led to the resignation of Boris Johnson. As Table 4 shows, the public have always been fairly sceptical that politicians tell the truth. Never have more than one in eight (12%) said they do so ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’, while often more than half have said they ‘almost never do so’, with the highest figure, 60%, recorded in the wake of the MPs’ expenses scandal. Nevertheless, after being as trustful as they had ever been during the pandemic, the proportion who now say they ‘almost never’ trust politicians to speak the truth when they are in a ‘tight corner’ has risen to 58%, only just below the 60% figure registered in 2009. Meanwhile, at 5%, the proportion who trust politicians to tell the truth ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ has fallen to a new record low. All in all, it appears that people’s trust in governments and politicians, and confidence in their systems of government is as low now as it has ever been over the last fifty years, if not lower.

**Table 4 Level of trust in politicians 1994-2023**

Trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner	1994	1996	1997	1998	2000	2002	2003	2005
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/most of the time	9	9	8	9	11	7	6	8
Some of the time	40	38	40	43	42	37	38	39
Almost never	49	49	50	46	46	55	54	52
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1137	1180	1355	2071	2293	2287	3299	3167
	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2016
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/most of the time	7	9	6	7	8	6	10	11
Some of the time	35	39	33	35	39	40	38	44
Almost never	57	49	60	56	51	53	45	45
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1077	992	1143	1081	2215	1103	1063	974
	2019	2020(1)	2020(2)	2021	2023			
	%	%	%	%	%			
Just about always/most of the time	6	11	10	12	5			
Some of the time	42	51	46	48	36			
Almost never	51	39	44	41	58			
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1088	2406	1332	2208	1238			

Source: 2020(1), 2021: NatCen Mixed Mode Panel

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# Changing attitudes to Brexit

In our previous analysis of the recovery in trust and confidence in government after the 2019 election, we demonstrated that most of the increase occurred among those who had voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum (Curtice and Scholes, 2021; Sivathasan, 2023). This suggests that any more recent disenchantment with Brexit, especially among its supporters, might explain some of the decline in levels of trust and confidence in how the country is governed.

Brexit is not as popular now as it was in the immediate wake of the 2019 election, when the polls suggested the country was still close to being evenly divided on the subject (Curtice, 2021). Since autumn 2022, the average level of support for re-joining the EU in the opinion polls has typically been at or close to 58%.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, as Montagu and Maplethorpe (2024) report in their forthcoming chapter, when asked about their preferences for Britain's future relationship with the EU, just 24% now say that Britain should be outside the EU, the lowest proportion since the 2016 EU referendum.

This change of mood is reflected in people's evaluations of the consequences of leaving the EU on immigration, the economy, and Britain's ability to make its own laws (Table 5; Curtice, 2023a; 2023b). In each case the impact of Brexit is regarded more negatively now than before. Seven in ten (71%) now think that the economy is worse off as a result of Brexit, compared with half (51%) in 2019. In an even more dramatic change, whereas previously fewer than one in ten thought that immigration would increase in the wake of leaving the EU, now nearly half (48%) believe that has been the consequence. Meanwhile, while around a half (51%) agreed that leaving the EU would strengthen 'Britain's ability to be an independent country that makes its own laws' in 2019, now that figure has fallen to around a quarter (26%).

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<sup>5</sup> In line with these poll results, the latest BSA survey suggest that (after leaving aside those who say don't know, will not vote, etc.), support now for rejoining the EU is eleven points above that for remaining in the EU at the time of the 2016 referendum. Details of opinion polling on how people might vote in a referendum on rejoining the EU can be found at <https://www.whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/should-the-united-kingdom-join-the-european-union-or-stay-out-of-the-european-union/>

**Table 5 Perceptions of the consequences of leaving the EU, 2015-2023**

	2015	2017	2018	2019	2023
<b>Perceived impact of leaving EU</b>	%	%	%	%	%
<b>On the economy</b>					
Better off	24	26	25	23	12
Won't make/hasn't made much difference	31	25	26	22	15
Worse off	40	45	45	51	71
<b>On immigration</b>					
Higher	9	5	8	n/a	48
Won't make/hasn't made much difference	31	39	37	n/a	38
Lower	57	54	54	n/a	10
<b>Strengthened ability to make own laws</b>					
Agree	n/a	54	53	51	26
Neither agree nor disagree	n/a	17	18	19	34
Disagree	n/a	27	27	28	38
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1105	1025	958	1088	1217

In 2015 respondents were asked whether Britain 'would be' better off, etc., if 'Britain were to leave the EU'. In 2017-19 they were asked whether Britain's economy 'will be' better off etc. 'as a result of leaving the EU'. In 2023 they were asked whether Britain's economy 'is' better off, etc. Et simile for the other questions in the table.

Crucially, these changes are especially marked among those who voted Leave in 2016. Now two in five Leave voters (40%) feel that the economy is worse off as a result of Brexit, more than double the 18% who felt that would be the case in 2019. Nearly two-thirds of those who voted for Brexit (64%) now believe that immigration is higher as a result of leaving the EU, compared with just one in twenty (5%) who previously expected that to be the case in 2018. Meanwhile, although nearly half (47%) of Leave voters feel that Brexit has strengthened Britain's ability to make its own laws, that figure is well down on the 85% who held expected that to be the case in 2019.

# The impact of Brexit

In short, it appears that for many of those who voted to leave the EU, Brexit has not turned out as they anticipated. But has this apparent disappointment undermined their trust and confidence in how Britain is being governed? Has it washed away the higher level of trust and confidence that Leave voters expressed in 2020 following the implementation of Brexit?

Table 6 indicates that for the most part this does appear to be the case. Across our three main measures of trust and confidence in government and politicians, the difference between Leave and Remain voters in their pattern of response is more akin to what it was in 2019 than 2020 or 2021. For example, in 2019, the proportion of Remain voters (20%) who said that little or no improvement was needed to Britain's system of government was little different than the equivalent figures among Leave supporters (17%). But in 2020, Leave voters were 22 points more likely than Remain supporters to express that view, and while both groups were a little more positive in 2021 than in 2020, the gap between them was still one of 21 points. Now, the difference has fallen back to eight points, following a 28-point drop in the proportion of Leave voters who feel little or no improvement is needed. While Leave voters are still more likely than Remain supporters to express a positive point of view, the gap has narrowed substantially.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 6 Political trust and confidence by EU referendum vote, 2016-2023**

	2016			2019			2020			2021			2023		
EU Referendum Vote:	Remain %	Leave %	Diff												
<b>System of government</b>															
Could not be improved/ could be improved in small ways	n/a	n/a		20	17	-3	24	46	22	31	52	21	16	24	8
Could be improved quite a lot/ a great deal	n/a	n/a		80	81	1	75	54	-21	69	48	-21	83	76	-7

<sup>6</sup> Further supportive evidence emerges if we compare the evaluations of Remain and Leave voters as to how well democracy is working in Britain. Those who voted Leave (30%) are just a little less likely than those who voted Remain (33%) to say that it is working poorly.

**Table 6 Political trust and confidence by EU referendum vote, 2016-2023 (continued)**

	2016			2019			2020			2021			2023		
EU Referendum Vote:	Remain %	Leave %	Diff												
<b>Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party</b>															
Just about always/Most of the time	27	18	-9	14	12	-2	17	31	14	21	31	10	13	16	3
Only some of the time	54	50	-4	58	48	-10	56	44	-11	52	49	-3	44	35	-9
Almost never	19	32	13	28	40	12	26	25	-1	27	20	-7	42	48	6
<b>Trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner</b>															
Just about always/most of the time	13	6	-7	7	3	-4	7	13	6	10	15	5	5	7	2
Some of the time	53	37	-16	49	35	-14	49	44	5	48	52	4	41	43	-8
Almost never	34	56	22	43	60	17	44	43	1	42	34	-8	53	60	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	386	378		402	397		635	463		981	801		543	348	

n/a: not available  
 Diff: % Leave – % Remain  
 Source: 2021: NatCen Panel

Meanwhile, although the difference is not as big as in 2016 or in 2019, Leave voters are now once again more likely than Remain supporters to say they ‘almost never’ trust governments or politicians, in contrast to the position in 2020 and (especially) 2021. Not that Remain voters are particularly trusting now. While trust among Leave supporters has largely fallen back to the levels in evidence in 2019, Remain voters are even less trusting now than they were in 2016 or 2019. Not

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only has the boost to trust that was in evidence among Leave voters in the wake of the delivery of Brexit largely been lost, but trust among those who were opposed to exiting the EU has fallen to a new low.

Misalignment between expectations and the perceived outcome of Brexit has seemingly played a role in the particularly marked decline in trust and confidence among those who voted Leave. For example, among those Leave voters who now think that the economy is better off as a result of Brexit, a half (50%) think that the way Britain is governed is in need of little improvement, similar to the position among Leave voters as a whole in 2020 and 2021. In contrast, just 16% of Leave voters who believe the economy is worse off as a result of leaving the EU take the same view. Similarly, 68% of Leave voters who disagree that leaving the EU has strengthened Britain's ability to make its own laws 'almost never' trust governments, compared with just 30% among those who believe Britain's sovereignty has been strengthened. Other analyses of our data along similar lines point in the same direction.

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# Policy challenges

The implementation of Brexit has not been the only significant public policy challenge over the last four years. Following stuttering economic growth and the highest level of inflation since the 1970s (Office for National Statistics, 2024; Ray-Chauduri et al., 2024), gross domestic product per head and household living standards had not improved by the end of 2023 on those in 2019. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has left the UK National Health Service (NHS) with a legacy of record high waiting lists and, as the upcoming chapter by Montagu and Maplethorpe (2024) records, a sharp fall in levels of satisfaction with the health service (see also Jefferies et al., 2024). Perhaps another reason for the decline in trust and confidence in government is public dissatisfaction with the apparent ineffectiveness of public policy?

Table 7 shows for both 2019 and 2023 how people's responses to our three principal measures of trust and confidence varied according to their level of satisfaction with the NHS. In each case, it shows the proportion expressing the most negative views about the country's politics. In 2019 there was a modest relationship between levels of satisfaction with the NHS and trust and confidence in government. For example, whereas around one in three (32%) of those who were satisfied with the health service 'almost never' trust governments, among those who were dissatisfied, the figure was 40%. That relationship would in itself mean that, other things being equal, the increase in dissatisfaction with the health service from 25% in 2019 to 52% in 2023 will have brought about some decline in trust and confidence.

**Table 7 Trust and confidence in Government by satisfaction with the NHS, 2019 and 2023**

	Satisfied	Neither	Dissatisfied
<b>2019</b>	%	%	%
Governing system could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	78	75	83
Almost never trust governments	32	34	40
Almost never trust politicians	49	49	57
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	679	146	261

**Table 7 Trust and confidence in Government by satisfaction with the NHS, 2019 and 2023 (continued)**

	Satisfied	Neither	Dissatisfied
<b>2023</b>	%	%	%
Governing system could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	65	80	86
Almost never trust governments	32	42	52
Almost never trust politicians	46	55	65
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>317</i>	<i>278</i>	<i>641</i>

However, the relationship between trust and confidence in government and satisfaction with the NHS is also stronger now than in 2019. For example, whereas in 2019 there was just an eight-point difference between those satisfied and dissatisfied with the NHS in the proportion who ‘almost never’ trust governments, the equivalent gap is now 20 points. There are similar widenings of the difference on our other two measures of trust and confidence as well. In short, not only are people more likely to be dissatisfied with the NHS, but dissatisfaction is now more strongly linked to whether people have trust and confidence in government.

But perhaps the relationships are a consequence of people’s partisanship? After all, Labour supporters are both more likely to be dissatisfied with the health service and are less likely to trust government. However, this proves not to be the case. Those who are dissatisfied with the NHS have less trust and confidence irrespective of how they voted in the 2016 referendum or the party they support now.

Meanwhile, living standards have been adversely affected by the fact that for a significant period during the 2019-24 parliament prices rose more quickly than incomes (Wernham et al., 2024). Indeed, in our latest survey, 70% said that their income had failed to keep pace with prices over the last year or so. At the same time, 26% reported that there were ‘struggling’ on their current income, up from 17% in 2020 (despite the COVID-19 lockdown at the time) and 16% in 2018.

Table 8 reveals that those who say they are struggling on their current income are less likely to trust both governments and politicians and a little more critical of the system of governing. Again, this relationship exists irrespective of people’s vote on Brexit or the party they support. Although, in this case, it appears that the strength of the relationship is much the same now as it was in 2020, that more people now say they are struggling also helps explain why trust and confidence in government have declined.

**Table 8 Trust and confidence in Government by feelings about household income, 2020 and 2023**

	<b>Living Comfortably</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Struggling</b>
<b>2020</b>	%	%	%
Governing system could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	65	67	74
Almost never trust governments	22	34	37
Almost never trust politicians	36	48	57
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>701</i>	<i>423</i>	<i>186</i>
<b>2023</b>	%	%	%
Governing system could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	76	78	85
Almost never trust governments	34	46	57
Almost never trust politicians	49	56	72
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>476</i>	<i>414</i>	<i>323</i>

The substantial policy challenges that have faced government since the last election have played an important role in the erosion of trust and confidence in Britain’s political system. That the fallout from Brexit has not met people’s expectations has reversed much of the increase in trust and confidence that occurred among Leave voters in the immediate wake of the implementation of Brexit, while doing nothing to improve evaluations among those who backed Remain. At the same time, perceptions of the country’s post-pandemic economic difficulties and the problems that have beset its health service are also associated with lower levels of trust and confidence. The negative perceptions and disappointment of the last four years have taken their toll.

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# Implications: political engagement

What, though, have been the consequences of this decline in trust and confidence? One concern that is often expressed is that it reduces public engagement with the political system (Almond and Verba, 1963; Crozier et al, 1975; Wolfinger, Glass & Squire, 1990; Pattie and Johnston, 2001). Moreover, our data show that the proportion of all people who say that they support a party has fallen from 44% in 2020 to 36% now, while the proportion who say they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics has similarly slipped from 46% in 2020 to 36% now.

There are some respects in which those with low levels of trust are less likely to be engaged in politics. Those who almost never trust governments or politicians are less likely to say they think of themselves as the supporter of a party. For example, in our latest survey, 28% of those who almost never trust governments claim to be a party supporter, compared with 50% of those who trust governments most of the time. Equally, those with low levels of trust are less likely to say they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics. Only 31% of those who almost never trust politicians express a relatively high level of interest, compared with 47% of those who trust politicians most of the time.

However, it is not clear that the apparent decline in political engagement that occurred during the 2019-24 parliament has been caused by the decline in trust. To begin with, much of the decline in interest in politics and being a supporter of a political party was already in evidence in our 2021 survey, before there was a marked fall in trust. By 2021 only 38% said they had 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics, while the proportion who said they supported a political party had slipped to 41%. Meanwhile, even among those who trust politicians most of the time, the proportion who say they are a supporter of a party is twelve points lower now than in 2020 (falling from 61% to 49%), similar to the seven-point fall (from 36% to 29%) among those who almost never trust politicians. Equally, among those who say they trust governments most of the time, there has been a twelve-point fall (from 53% to 41%) in the proportion who express 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics, similar to the eight-point drop (from 40% to 32%) among those who almost never trust governments. While the decline in trust may well have not fostered a high level of engagement in politics during this parliament, we should be careful about assuming it has been a significant causative influence.

Previous analyses of BSA data have also suggested that there is only a weak link between political trust and participation in elections (Curtice, 2010). According to our 2020 survey, there was little difference between those who trusted government 'most of the time' and 'some of the time' in their reported level of turnout in the 2019 general election, although the level was twelve points lower among those who 'almost never' trust government. Meanwhile, those who almost never trusted politicians were only two points less likely than those who did so most of the time to report having voted. On their own at least, the low levels of trust identified in our latest survey do not necessarily point to the prospect of a low turnout at the next general election.

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# Implications: constitutional change

Another possibility is that declining levels of trust and confidence have served to increase support for change in the constitutional rules under which Britain is governed (Seyd et al., 2018). If people feel that Britain is being governed badly, they might hope that changing the rules under which power is obtained and exercised might help improve the quality of the country's governance.

One of the most important constitutional provisions in any representative democracy is the electoral system that is used to elect those representatives. A system of proportional representation might be expected to produce more coalition governments than the single member plurality system currently used in Britain, which has produced single party majority governments for most of the post-war period. We might therefore anticipate that changing the electoral system would be relatively attractive to those who have low levels of trust and confidence in the current system.

Since the 1980s, BSA has often asked the following question about electoral reform. It summarises for respondents two of the key arguments that are often made for and against changing the system (Renwick, 2011) and then asks for their own view:

***Some people say we should change the voting system for general elections to the UK House of Commons to allow smaller political parties to get a fairer share of MPs.***

***Others say that we should keep the voting system for the House of Commons as it is to produce effective government.***

***Which view comes closer to your own?***

The first option implies a switch to a system of proportional representation, while the second refers to the existing single member plurality system.

Two years ago, Curtice and Scholes (2022) reported that, for the first time in forty years, a majority backed changing the electoral system rather than keeping it as it is. That appears not to have simply been a temporary change of mood. As shown in Table 9, our latest survey also finds a majority (53%) are in favour of reform and the popularity of the existing system has slipped to a new low of 40%.

**Table 9 Attitudes to electoral reform, 1983-2023**

	1983	1986	1987	1990	1991	1992	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	39	32	30	34	37	33	34	37	33	39	32	35
Keep system as it is	54	60	64	59	58	60	60	58	59	53	63	63
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	3955	1548	1410	1397	1445	3534	1137	1227	1196	1355	1035	1060

  

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2008	2010	2011	2015	2017	2021	2023
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	35	39	34	36	32	33	41	27	45	43	51	53
Keep system as it is	59	57	61	60	61	59	49	66	48	49	44	40
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	2293	1099	2287	1160	1075	1128	1081	2215	2140	2009	2073	1238

Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 1983, 1992: *British Election Study*

Table 10 shows attitudes towards electoral reform broken down by people's trust and confidence in how and by whom they are governed. Those with lower levels of trust and confidence are more likely to support changing the electoral system. For example, whereas a majority (62%) of those who trust governments to prioritise the nation's needs 'just about always' or 'most of the time' believe we should keep the existing electoral system, among those who 'almost never' trust governments a majority (62%) are in favour of change. Similarly, 65% of those who reckon Britain's system of government could at most only be improved in small ways believe we should retain the current electoral system, whereas 60% of those who are more critical of how we are governed back a change in the way that MPs are elected.

**Table 10 Attitudes towards electoral reform by political trust and confidence, 2023**

		<b>Change voting system</b>	<b>Keep as is</b>	<b>Unweighted base</b>
<b>System of government</b>				
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	%	31	65	239
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	%	60	35	978
<b>Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party</b>				
Just about always/Most of the time	%	32	62	186
Only some of the time	%	53	42	501
Almost never	%	62	33	530
<b>Trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner</b>				
Just about always/most of the time	%	40	58	70
Some of the time	%	49	44	466
Almost never	%	58	37	688

Of course, in part at least, these views may reflect people’s perceptions of whether a change of electoral system would or would not be in their party’s interest. In their 2022 analysis, Curtice and Scholes noted that attitudes had mostly changed among those who supported the Labour party, where, after losing four elections in a row under the current system, there was majority support for change for the first time. That finding is also replicated in our latest survey. Three in five (60%) Labour supporters say that we should change the voting system, whereas among Conservative supporters 73% wish to keep the system as it is, little different from the 71% who expressed that view when BSA first asked the question in 1986. Labour supporters are also more critical of Britain’s system of government and are less inclined to trust governments and politicians. However, even if

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we look at Conservative and Labour supporters separately, we find that there is still a relationship between support for electoral reform and levels of trust and confidence. For example, among Labour supporters, support for electoral reform stands at 63% among those who think the system of government could be improved at least ‘quite a lot’, compared with the 43% among those who believe it needs little or no improvement. Meanwhile, among Conservative supporters, 32% of those who ‘almost never’ trust governments are in favour of changing the electoral system, compared with 10% of those who trust governments at least ‘most of the time’.<sup>7</sup>

A similar pattern is evident in attitudes towards the prospect of devolution for England. Since 1999, BSA has regularly asked people in England the following question:

***With all the changes going on in the way the different parts of Great Britain are run, which of the following statements do you think would be best for England...***

***For England to be governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK Parliament***  
***For each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health***  
***For England as a whole to have its own new parliament with law making powers***

This wording reflects the debate about devolution in England at the turn of the century when devolved institutions were being created in Scotland and Wales and the then Labour government was proposing that regional assemblies should be introduced across England. That idea was dropped after the defeat in a referendum of a proposal for an assembly in the North East (Sandford, 2009), although more recently a measure of devolution has been given to a number of ‘city regions’ run by a ‘metro mayor’. However, our question still gives some indication of how much public support there is for a change and whether or not the level of support has risen or fallen over time.

Table 11 reveals that throughout the last two and a half decades, typically between a half and three-fifths of adults in England have said that England should continue to be governed as it is now, with those preferring a change being divided between those who think that every region should have its own assembly and those who believe that England as a whole should have its own parliament. There has been little evidence of a consistent trend in either direction – at 58%, support for the status quo in 2021 was almost identical to the 57% registered 20 years earlier. However, our latest survey puts support for the current position at a record low of 45%, while support for regional assemblies matches the previous all-time high of 26% recorded in 2003.

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<sup>7</sup> It may also be the case that the relationship between trust and support for changing the electoral system has strengthened in recent years. In 2017 (the previous time both questions appeared on the survey), only 50% of those who almost never trust government were in favour of changing the electoral system, 17 points above the equivalent figure (33%) among those who did so most of the time. The equivalent gap in Table 10 is 30 points.

**Table 11 Attitudes in England towards how England should be governed, 1999-2023**

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	62	54	57	56	50	53	54	54	57	51
Each region to have its own assembly*	15	18	23	20	26	21	20	18	14	15
England to have its own Parliament	18	19	16	17	18	20	18	21	17	26
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2718	1928	2761	2897	3709	2690	1794	928	859	982
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2015	2018	2020	2021	2023
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Governed as it is now	49	53	56	56	56	51	52	55	58	45
Each region to have its own assembly	15	13	12	15	14	22	18	20	19	26
England to have its own Parliament	29	23	25	22	20	19	22	22	20	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	980	913	967	939	925	1865	2535	1164	1804	1061

*Base: respondents living in England*

\* In 2004–2006 the second option reads “that makes decisions about the region’s economy, planning and housing”. The 2003 survey carried both versions of this option and demonstrated that the difference of wording did not make a material difference to the pattern of response. The figures quoted for 2003 are those for the two versions combined.

Support for England to be governed as it is now is lower among those with less trust and confidence. For example, as Table 12 shows, only 38% of those who ‘almost never’ trust governments to put the country’s needs first believe that England should continue to be governed as it is now, compared with 60% of those who say they trust governments at least ‘most of the time’. The equivalent figures are much the same for how much people trust politicians to tell the truth and their evaluations of the system of government. The pattern is also apparent separately among Conservative and Labour supporters. Among Conservative supporters, for instance, 47% of those who ‘almost never’ trust governments believe that the current arrangements for the governance of England should remain in place, compared with 72% of those who trust governments at least ‘most of the time’.

**Table 12 Attitudes in England towards how England should be governed by political trust and confidence, 2023**

		<b>Governed as now</b>	<b>Regional Assemblies</b>	<b>English Parliament</b>	<b>Unweighted base</b>
<b>System of government</b>					
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	%	68	17	13	215
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	%	39	29	26	828
<b>Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party</b>					
Just about always/Most of the time	%	60	18	19	172
Only some of the time	%	48	26	20	438
Almost never	%	38	30	28	432
<b>Trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner</b>					
Just about always/most of the time	%	69	16	13	62
Some of the time	%	49	28	17	413
Almost never	%	40	27	29	573

*Base: respondents living in England*

It appears that the decline in trust and confidence in how Britain is governed in recent years is associated with lower support for current constitutional arrangements. Some people at least appear to have been persuaded by recent developments of the need for change in the rules that govern Britain’s democracy. While such a change may not necessarily be ‘unhealthy’ for a democracy, it might be regarded as symptomatic of a system of government that is under strain.

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# Implications: populism

Perhaps more serious, at least in the eyes of some commentators, is the possibility that low levels of trust and confidence might be fuelling a 'populist' outlook, where people believe that they are being governed by an elite that is disregarding the wishes of ordinary people in favour of the pursuit of their own interests. Such an outlook is sometimes said to be harmful to the pursuit of compromise and respect for constitutional rules, both of which are essential for a liberal democracy to operate effectively (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013; 2017).

The ISSP module on citizenship and national identity asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a set of five statements that expressed aspects of a populist outlook (or in one instance the opposite of that outlook) (Akkerman et al., 2014):

***The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions***

***Politicians talk too much and take too little action***

***There is a conflict between the ordinary people and those in power in Britain***

***Business leaders make their money at the expense of ordinary people***

***It is better to rely on the opinions of experts than the experiences of ordinary people***

Table 13 reveals that there is widespread agreement with three of these propositions. Around three-quarters 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that 'politicians talk too much and take too little action', that 'business leaders make their money at the expense of ordinary people', and that 'there is a conflict between the ordinary people and those in power in Britain'. Opinion on the other two items, whether the people should make the important decisions, and on relying on experts, is more evenly divided.

**Table 13 Populist attitudes, 2023**

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
	%	%	%	%	%
Politicians talk too much and take too little action	39	40	13	4	1
Business leaders make their money at the expense of ordinary people	38	34	16	7	2
There is a conflict between the ordinary people and those in power in Britain.	36	38	16	5	*
The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	13	29	24	23	5
It is better to rely on the opinions of experts than the experiences of ordinary people*	7	23	33	23	8

Unweighted base: 1,611

\* Because, unlike the other items in the table, this item is worded in an anti-populist direction, the direction of the scale has been reversed in the table for this item

There is a close correspondence between the responses that people give to these items – those who agree with one item also tend to agree with the others.<sup>8</sup> This means we can use them to generate a scale score that indicates how populist an outlook someone has<sup>9</sup>. In Table 14, we use this scale score to identify three groups, that is, those with the most strongly populist outlook, those with the least populist point of view, and those in between.

<sup>8</sup> A reliability test of the five items finds that Cronbach's alpha is 0.98, indicating that the five items can be regarded as all tapping the same underlying dimension.

<sup>9</sup> The scale is formed by scoring 'strongly agree' for the first four items and 'strongly disagree' for the last one as 1, 'agree' for the first four and 'disagree' with the last as 2, etc. for the remaining responses. Each respondent's scale score is the sum of these scores divided by five. Those with a scale score of between 1 and 2 are classified as 'most populist', those with a score of between 2 and 2.4 as 'in between', and those with a score of between 2.4 and 5 as 'least populist'.

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**Table 14 Populist outlook by perceptions of how well democracy works in Britain, 2023**

<b>Democracy in Britain...</b>			
	<b>Works Poorly %</b>	<b>Neither %</b>	<b>Works Well %</b>
Most populist	55	38	26
In between	22	24	26
Least populist	22	38	48
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>517</i>	<i>253</i>	<i>719</i>

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The table shows that those who think democracy is currently performing poorly in Britain are markedly more likely to have a populist outlook than are those who believe it is doing well. It is likely that some people's evaluations of democracy in Britain are a reflection of their populist outlook rather than vice-versa. Moreover, because this is the first time that this combination of questions has been included in a survey in Britain, we do not have a previous measure of where people stand on our populist scale, and thus we cannot say whether a populist outlook is more or less common than previously. Nevertheless, the decline in trust and confidence in how Britain is governed is unlikely to have done anything to diminish the popularity of an outlook that some regard as a potential threat to the health of a country's liberal democracy.

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# Conclusion

The public's trust and confidence in how they are governed has been shaken by the events that have occurred in the 2019-24 parliament. They are more likely than ever to think that the country's system of government needs improvement. They are at least as distrustful of government and politicians as they have ever been. And they are inclined to think that democracy works less well in Britain now than it did in the past.

This pattern can be tied at least in part to the policy challenges that have faced the country since the 2019 election. Many of those who voted Leave in 2016 feel that Brexit has not had the impact they expected, and that perception has largely reversed the boost to their trust and confidence that was in evidence shortly after the UK left the EU. It is those who are struggling financially following the cost-of-living crisis, and those who are dissatisfied with the state of the health service – two groups that are now far more numerous – who are particularly disenchanted with the state of government and politics in Britain. Meanwhile, although more difficult to prove, the dramatic resignations of two Prime Ministers has probably only served to undermine the nation's trust and confidence further.

In any event, although this disenchantment may not necessarily have a significant impact on levels of political engagement, one consequence does appear to be an increased willingness to contemplate constitutional change, whether that be changing the way that MPs are elected or the introduction of more devolution in England. At the same time, there also appears to be a risk that, rather than simply looking for a change in the rules that structure Britain's democracy, people with low levels of trust and confidence may be more open to populist claims that politicians of all parties are more concerned about pursuing their own interests rather than fulfilling the wishes of the electorate. That prospect potentially poses a challenge to all those who aspire to being in government.

The task facing the next government will not simply be to revive Britain's stuttering economy and its struggling public services at a time when money is tight. It will also need to address the concerns of a public that is as doubtful as it has ever been about the trustworthiness and efficacy of the country's system of government and the people who comprise it. Addressing some of the policy challenges will likely help in that endeavour. However, it is likely to require more than that – in particular, a style and manner of governing that persuades people that the government has their interests at heart after all.

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The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) is run by a group of research organisations in different countries, each of which undertakes to field annually an agreed module of questions on a chosen topic area. Between 1985 and 2019, an International Social Survey Programme module was included on BSA as part of the self-completion questionnaire. In 2021, ISSP fieldwork in Great Britain was conducted using sample from the NatCen Opinion Panel and in 2022 and 2023 was run as a module on BSA. Each ISSP module is chosen for repetition at intervals to allow comparisons both between countries (membership is currently standing at 45) and over time. Further information on ISSP is available on their website: [www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org)

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