National Centre for Social Research

BSA 42 | Britain's democracy: A health check

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Contents

Britain's democracy: A health check

The 2024 General Election occurred against the backdrop of record low levels of trust and confidence in how Britain was being governed. In line with the tradition of post-war British politics, voters were able to hold the incumbent majority Conservative government to account and see it replaced by a Labour one. But did this process restore trust and confidence in the wake of an election, in which the combined level of support for the Conservatives and Labour fell to its lowest level ever?

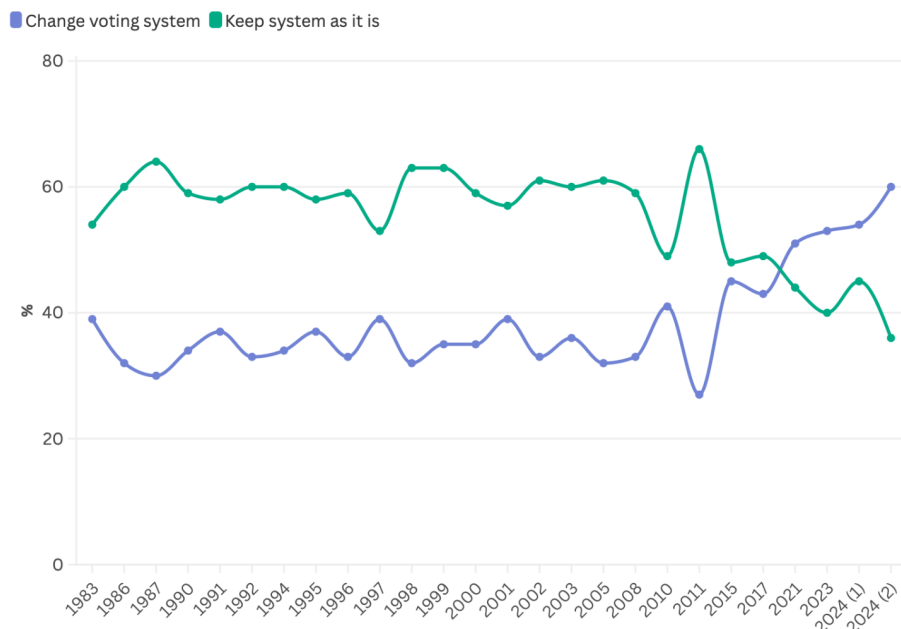## The impact of Brexit on Conservative and Labour support was still evident in the 2024 election

- As in 2019, voting for the Conservatives and Labour in the 2024 election varied little by social class.

- Age was the biggest demographic dividing line. The Conservatives were seven points ahead of Labour among those aged 65 and over, but were 35 points behind among those aged 18 to 24.

- Labour's vote was 25 points higher among those ideologically on the left than those on the right. But it was also 26 points higher among libertarians than authoritarians.

The 2024 election failed to restore trust and confidence

- Just 12% trust governments to put the interests of the nation above those of their own party just about always or most of the time, a record low.

- Only 19% think the system of governing Britain needs little or no improvement, unchanged from 2023.

- Trust and confidence are being undermined by continued high dissatisfaction with the NHS, the economy and Brexit.

Attitudes towards electoral reform, British Social Attitudes, 1983–2024

■ Change voting system ■ Keep system as it is

Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 1983, 1992: British Election Study; 2024(1): NatCen Panel

Support for electoral reform has reached a new high

- A record 60% are in favour of changing the electoral system 'to allow smaller parties to get a fairer share of MPs', rather than keeping the current system (36%).

- This change is backed by a majority of supporters of all parties and by those with low levels of trust and confidence in government.

- For the first time, over half (53%) would prefer coalition to single-party government (41%).

Introduction

Elections in Britain have traditionally been marked by some key characteristics. For most of the post-war period, they have presented voters with a choice between two alternative single-party governments, Conservative or Labour. Most voters voted for one or other of these two parties, while the single-member plurality electoral system usually served to ensure that smaller parties, and especially the most popular of these, the Liberal Democrats, found it difficult to secure much more than a foothold in the House of Commons (Gudgin and Taylor, 1979). Because there was either a Conservative or a Labour single-party government, it was clear to voters who was responsible for the successes and failures of the last four to five years, and, if they judged the incumbent government to have been wanting, they were able to replace it with an alternative (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999). Governments were thus clearly accountable to the electorate, whose votes, rather than post-election negotiations, determined which party was in power (Norton, 1997).

At the same time, the two main parties, the Conservatives and Labour, tended to represent the interests and values of two distinct groups in British society. The Labour Party was founded by trade unionists in 1900 with the explicit aim of providing working-class representation. The Conservatives, in turn, became the party of business and accordingly was more popular with those in middle-class occupations (Butler and Stokes, 1962; Pulzer, 1967). Reflecting these different demographic backgrounds, Labour tended to be more popular with those on the 'left', that is, those concerned about the level of inequality and who feel the government should be trying to reduce it. The Conservatives found it easier to win votes among those on the 'right', that is, those who prioritise creating the economic incentives that will persuade entrepreneurs to invest and thereby secure the economic growth from which all will benefit (Heath et al., 1985). These characteristics ensured the two parties had deep roots in British society.

So, the country's two-party system has ensured that governments have been held to account while diverse class interests have been represented. These two key attributes are thought to have underpinned voters' trust and

confidence in how they were being governed and thus the perceived legitimacy of the country's democracy. Indeed, previous British Social Attitudes (BSA) research has demonstrated that elections tend to boost trust and confidence in how the country is being governed (Curtice and Scholes, 2021). It has seemed that the chance to hold the government to account and to express class loyalties and ideological preferences has typically served to repair and renew the bond between the public and politicians. That process, in turn, has helped ensure that voters largely accept and follow the decisions made by politicians on their behalf and are content with the constitutional rules that determine how power is acquired and exercised (Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Devine, 2024; Seyd et al., 2018).

But is this picture still valid in the wake of the 2024 election? In this report we assess whether Britain's democracy still operates in this traditional manner. We examine first the demographic and ideological patterns of party support in the 2024 contest. Then we analyse the impact of the ballot on levels of trust and confidence. Finally, we assess the implications of our findings for whether and how people voted in the election and their attitudes towards some of the country's constitutional rules and conventions.

The challenge to the two-party system

The traditional pattern of support for the two parties that have dominated post-war British politics had come under significant challenge well before the 2024 election. True, the 2017 and 2019 elections had witnessed an increase in the combined level of support for the Conservatives and Labour, a trend that reversed what had hitherto seemed to be a long-term secular decline. At the same time, however, how people voted became increasingly shaped by whether they favoured or opposed Brexit, a decision for which a majority had registered their support in a referendum in 2016. As the country debated whether and how Brexit should be implemented, its supporters were increasingly drawn to the Conservative Party, while its opponents were increasingly more likely to vote for Labour (or the Liberal Democrats) (Curtice, 2020; 2024).

However, Brexit was not an issue that divided those on the left from those on the right. Rather, attitudes towards Britain's relationship with the EU were aligned with whether people had a libertarian or an authoritarian outlook. Libertarians (sometimes also referred to as social liberals) believe that individual citizens should have a high degree of autonomy in how they live their lives, and, at the same time, value living in a diverse society. Authoritarians (or social conservatives), in contrast, feel that, in order to foster social cohesion, society should require its members to reflect the moral and cultural values of the majority, and thus should limit the degree of diversity it should attempt to accommodate. With immigration a central issue in the EU referendum campaign, most authoritarians voted for Brexit and most libertarians against (Curtice, 2017a).

This second value divide between libertarians and authoritarians had always been reflected to some degree in how people vote (Heath et al., 1985). But the way Brexit reshaped the pattern of party support meant it now came to demarcate Conservative and Labour supporters just as much as where people stood on the left-right divide. The ideological difference between the two groups of voters had become two-dimensional rather than one-dimensional.

Meanwhile, attitudes towards Brexit did not primarily divide voters by social class but, rather by age and educational background. Younger people and graduates mostly voted to remain in the EU while older people and those with less in the way of educational qualifications were mostly in favour of leaving (Curtice, 2017b). Thus, while the Conservative Party had traditionally appealed primarily to middle-class voters, in backing Brexit it was now championing a cause supported by those with relatively few educational qualifications who, consequently, were more likely to be in working-class occupations. Meanwhile the party of the working class, Labour, was now supporting a position backed primarily by middle-class graduates. As a result, by 2019, the link between social class and support for the Conservatives and Labour (which had already been weakening before Brexit (Evans and Tilley, 2017)) had disappeared. Age was now the biggest demographic divide between the two sets of supporters.

However, after the 2019 election, Labour opted to accept Brexit, while the Liberal Democrats indicated they did not expect the issue to be revisited any time soon. Labour sought to reconnect with the many pro-Leave working-class supporters the party had lost to the Conservatives in 2019. So, did the party's victory in 2024 signal that its strategy had succeeded? If it did, does this mean that class re-emerged as the principal demographic division in party support and left versus right became once more the principal ideological division between the parties?

Despite its large overall majority, Labour won office in 2024 on the back of a little less than 35% of the vote in Great Britain. This was just two points up on what the party won in 2019, and represented the lowest ever share of the vote won by a party with a parliamentary majority. At the same time, the Conservatives recorded their lowest ever share of the vote (23%). Overall, fewer than three in five of all votes were cast for either the Conservatives or Labour, the lowest proportion since and including 1922, a sharp reversal of the renewed grip of Britain's two largest parties that was apparent in the 2017 and 2019 elections. Voters' choices were scattered across different parties to a greater extent than ever before. In particular, nearly 15% of the vote was won by a party, Reform, that was fighting an election across the length and breadth of the UK for the first time. That performance bettered the previous best performance recorded by a 'fourth' party in a Commons election, that is, the 13% won by UKIP in 2015. Meanwhile, with 7% of the vote,

the Greens also secured their highest ever share of a General Election vote. All in all, this does not obviously look like a return to the traditional tramlines of British politics.

Table 1 begins our analysis of the pattern of party support by showing how vote choice varied by social class in 2024 and the change this represented since 2019 (the latter is calculated using data collected by British Social Attitudes 2020).[1] It shows little sign of a systematic return to the traditional class basis of British politics. Although support for the Conservatives fell somewhat more heavily among working-class voters than among their middle-class counterparts, support for the party among those in professional and managerial occupations (21%) was still only marginally above that among those in semi-routine and routine jobs (17%). Meanwhile, according to these data, Labour's advance on 2019 occurred mainly among middle-class voters, and, as a result, the party's support was, if anything, higher among those in professional and managerial occupations (42%) than in semi-routine and routine ones (30%). Here, however, there is a need for some caution. A survey conducted via the NatCen Opinion Panel in July 2024, shortly after the election, recorded as much support for Labour among those in semi-routine and routine positions (41%) as it did among those in professional and managerial occupations (40%).[2] That said, even these alternative data do not suggest that 2024 saw any return to Labour being more popular among working-class than middle-class voters.

Table 1 Vote choice by occupational class and change since 2019

	Managerial and professional occupations	Intermediate occupations	Small employers and own account workers	Supervisory and technical occupations	Semi-routine and routine occupations
Party voted for in General Election	%	%	%	%	%
Conservative	21	24	30	16	17
Labour	42	44	23	36	30
Liberal Democrat	14	7	11	12	10
Reform UK	9	14	31	28	30
Green Party	8	5	4	6	9
Unweighted base	*1755*	*283*	*161*	*185*	*234*

Change 2019-2024

	Managerial and professional occupations	Intermediate occupations	Small employers and own account workers	Supervisory and technical occupations	Semi-routine and routine occupations
Party voted for in General Election	%	%	%	%	%
Conservative	-19	-23	-32	-31	-25
Labour	+7	+7	+3	+1	-9
Liberal Democrat	0	-1	+3	+7	+5
Green Party	+3	+2	0	+3	+6

Note: Reform UK did not contest the 2019 election. Meanwhile its predecessor, the Brexit Party, did not stand in those constituencies being defended by the Conservatives. As a result, no comparison with voting in 2019 is shown for Reform.

There was, however, one party that was more popular among working class voters: Reform UK. Our survey suggests the party won the backing of three in ten (30%) of those in semi-routine and routine jobs, more than three times the level among those in professional and managerial occupations (9%). Meanwhile, as has historically tended to be the case, support for the Liberal Democrats was a little (though not significantly) higher among those in professional and managerial positions (14%) than those in semi-routine and routine positions (10%). In other words, variation in support by occupational class was more apparent among those backing Reform than it was among those voting Conservative or Labour.

But if the traditional class basis of Conservative and Labour support was largely notable by its absence, a division in the popularity of the two parties by age was very clearly in evidence, as shown in Table 2. Despite a sharp fall in support among the party's older voters, at 36%, support for the Conservatives among those aged 65 and over was more than four times the level of 7% recorded among those aged under 35. Meanwhile, Labour won 49% of the vote among those aged 25 to 44, but just 29% among those aged 65 and over.

Table 2 Vote choice by age group and change since 2019

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Party voted for in General Election	%	%	%	%	%	%
Conservative	6	8	13	16	24	36
Labour	42	49	49	42	39	29
Liberal Democrat	14	12	10	12	11	13
Reform UK	13	12	12	17	16	16
Green Party	21	13	8	7	5	3
Unweighted base	*91*	*380*	*394*	*439*	*560*	*847*

Change 2019-2024

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Party voted for in General Election	%	%	%	%	%	%
Conservative	-10	-18	-20	-30	-29	-20
Labour	-18	-4	+8	+10	+11	+7
Liberal Democrat	+4	+2	-3	+2	+2	0
Green Party	+17	+9	+3	+2	+2	+1

See note to Table 1.

That said, Labour did not perform as well among younger voters as it did in 2019. Support for the party among those aged 18 to 24, most of whom would have been too young to vote in 2019, was as much as 18 points down on the equivalent figure in 2019. The party also slipped back a little among those aged 25 to 34. As a result, the age difference in support for Labour – in 2019 there was as much as a 38-point difference between the party's support among 18 to 24 year olds and that among those aged 65 and over — was now just 13 points. The erosion of Labour's vote among younger voters appears to have been occasioned by the Greens, whose support rose markedly among those aged 18 to 24 (up 17 points) and those aged 25 to 34 (up nine points), whereas the party only recorded a marginal advance among older voters. Age has now become a key demographic division for the Greens as well as Labour and the Conservatives. Meanwhile, although the difference is not statistically significant, Reform was also seemingly rather more successful in winning over voters aged 45 and over than it was in securing the backing of younger voters.

Meanwhile, as shown in Table 3, support for all the parties varied by educational background. Both the Conservatives and Reform performed best among those who said that their highest educational qualification was below A-level. Graduates, in contrast, were more likely to vote for one of Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the Greens. True, the Conservatives lost ground more heavily among those with fewer qualifications (they did, after all, have many fewer voters among graduates to lose in the first place), but this was counterbalanced by the fact that, at 25%, support for Reform among those with less than an A-level was five times higher than it was among graduates (5%). Meanwhile, the link between educational background and support for Labour and the Liberal Democrats was much the same as in 2019, while the increase in support for the Greens since 2019 was much more marked among graduates. In short, not only did support for the Conservatives and Labour once again vary by educational background, but this was also the case for both Reform and the Greens, albeit at opposite ends of the educational spectrum.

Table 3 Vote choice by highest educational qualification and change since 2019

	Degree or equivalent	A-levels or equivalent, and above	Qualifications below A-levels or equivalent
Party voted for in General Election	%	%	%
Conservative	17	21	26
Labour	45	38	35
Liberal Democrat	15	12	7
Reform UK	5	18	25
Green Party	10	8	3
Unweighted base	*1350*	*726*	*595*

Change 2019-2024

	Degree or equivalent	A-levels or equivalent, and above	Qualifications below A-levels or equivalent
Party voted for in General Election	%	%	%
Conservative	-13	-23	-31
Labour	+2	+5	+5
Liberal Democrat	-1	+3	+1
Green Party	+5	+4	+1

See note to Table 1.

Demographically, then, there was little sign of a return to the traditional division of Conservative and Labour support by social class. Instead, age and

education continued to be more greatly aligned with voter choice, a pattern that was particularly evident when we examine support for the challenger parties in the election, Reform and the Greens. But what of the ideological basis of voter choice? Has electoral choice become shaped primarily once more by the division between left and right, or did the 2024 election indicate that competition between the parties in Britain now occurs in a multi-dimensional landscape?

Table 4 shows how the level of support for the parties differed between those on the left and those on the right in 2024. It presents the same information for the 2019 election and for the 2015 election when, much like Reform in 2024, another pro-Brexit party, UKIP, fought nearly every constituency and came third in terms of votes, while the Greens recorded what, until 2024, was their highest ever share of the vote. Whether people are on the left or the right is measured by a left/right Likert scale derived from questions about inequality and what government should do about it (see Technical Details for further information). In each year, those on the left comprise the one third of respondents with the most left-wing responses and those on the right the one third with the most right-wing scores. Meanwhile, in the far-right hand column of the table, we show for each party the difference between its share of the vote among those on the left minus its share among those on the right.

Table 4 Vote choice by left/right scale position, 2024, 2019 and 2015

2024

Party voted for in General Election	Left	Centre	Right	Left-Right Gap
	%	%	%	%
Conservative	7	16	38	-31
Labour	52	41	27	+25
Liberal Democrat	11	14	11	0
Reform UK	11	16	17	-6
Green Party	14	6	3	+11
Unweighted base	770	988	952	

2019

Party voted for in General Election	Left	Centre	Right	Left-Right Gap
	%	%	%	%
Conservative	21	40	66	-45
Labour	55	36	16	+39
Liberal Democrat	10	13	11	-1
Green Party	5	4	2	+3
Unweighted base	*1128*	*813*	*1188*	

2015

Party voted for in General Election	Left	Centre	Right	Left-Right Gap
	%	%	%	%
Conservative	17	36	66	-51
Labour	51	33	15	+36

Liberal Democrat	7	9	7	0
UKIP	10	11	6	+4
Green Party	6	4	2	+4
Unweighted base	*751*	*939*	*845*	

See note to Table 1.
Note that for 2019 respondents' position on the left/right scale was as measured in 2020.

As we would expect, the Conservatives were more popular in 2024 among those on the right, while Labour secured more support among those on the left. The traditional ideological division between the two sets of voters has certainly not disappeared. That said, for both parties, the gap between those on the left and those on the right is somewhat weaker than in both 2019 and 2015.[3] In part, this simply reflects the fact that, in the wake of the precipitous fall in the party's support, the Conservatives had much more support to lose among those on the right. In Labour's case, the fall was occasioned by the fact that the party's support rose more among those on the right.

At the same time, however, a left/right divide was also evident in the pattern of support for the Greens and Reform. The Greens have always been somewhat more popular among those on the left than those on the right, but what was just a three-point difference in 2019 increased to one of 11 points in 2024. Meanwhile, Reform was marginally more successful in garnering support among those on the right (17%) than those on the left (11%). Intriguingly, this pattern contrasts with the character of support for UKIP in 2015. UKIP's support proved to be a little higher among those on the left (10%) than those on the right (6%). On the left/right spectrum at least, the character of support for the principal pro-Brexit challenger in 2024 is somewhat different from that of its predecessor (Curtice, 2015).

So, although the Liberal Democrats' support remains evenly spread across the left/right divide, the debate between left and right no longer only underpins support for the Conservatives and Labour — it also helps shape who votes for

the Greens and Reform. Consequently, across all the parties, the left/right divide was only reflected a little less in how people voted in 2024 than in 2019. In 2024, support for the Conservatives and Reform combined was 38 points higher among those on the right, compared with an equivalent figure of 46 points for the Conservatives and the Brexit Party in 2019. Meanwhile, in 2019, support for Labour and the Greens was 42 points higher among those on the left than those on the right, while the equivalent figure in 2024 was 35 points.

Table 5 undertakes the same analysis for where people stand on our libertarian/authoritarian scale, which measures to what extent people value social order rather than individual freedom (see Technical Details for further information on the construction of this scale). It shows that, having secured the support of two-thirds (66%) of authoritarians in 2019, support for the Conservatives among this group fell to a little less than a third (32%) in 2024. With the party having far less support in 2019 among libertarians in the first place, inevitably this meant that, at -24 points, the difference between the level of support for the Conservatives among libertarians minus their support among authoritarians was well down on the equivalent figure of -50 points in 2019. That said, we should note that this figure is still above that for the 2015 election (-15 points), which took place before the EU referendum.

Table 5 Vote choice by libertarian/authoritarian scale position, 2024, 2019 and 2015

2024

Party voted for in General Election	Libertarian	Centre	Authoritarian	Libertarian-Authoritarian Gap
	%	%	%	%
Conservative	8	25	32	-24
Labour	53	37	27	+26
Liberal Democrat	17	12	7	+10
Reform UK	4	14	28	-24
Green Party	14	5	3	+11
Unweighted base	*1087*	*796*	*828*	

2019

Party voted for in General Election	Libertarian	Centre	Authoritarian	Libertarian-Authoritarian Gap
	%	%	%	%
Conservative	17	46	66	-50
Labour	51	33	22	+29
Liberal Democrat	17	12	4	+13
Green Party	6	3	2	+4
Unweighted base	*1186*	*1082*	*936*	

2015

Party voted for in General Election	Libertarian	Centre	Authoritarian	Libertarian-Authoritarian Gap
	%	%	%	%
Conservative	33	45	48	-15

Labour	37	31	28	+9
Liberal Democrat	12	6	3	+9
UKIP	3	12	15	-12
Green Party	6	3	2	+4
Unweighted base	*994*	*722*	*828*	

See note to Table 1.

Note that for 2019 respondents' position on the left/right scale was as measured in 2020.

However, once again, it appears that Reform performed best among those groups of voters where the Conservatives lost support most heavily. Whereas just 4% of libertarians backed Reform, no less than 28% of authoritarians did so. The party's ability to secure the backing of authoritarians was even greater than that of UKIP in 2015. Meanwhile, at -48 points, the difference between the level of support for the Conservatives and Reform combined among libertarians and authoritarians, is almost identical to the figure of -50 points for the Conservatives and Brexit Party combined in 2019. Equally, the difference between libertarians and authoritarians in the level of support offered to Labour is, at +26 points, little changed from 2019, and is also still well above the gap that pertained in 2015 (+9 points). Meanwhile, at +11 points, the equivalent figure for the Greens is also higher than in 2019 and 2015, while the Liberal Democrat vote continues to be higher among libertarians than authoritarians.[4]

Two key points emerge from our analysis. First, the collapse in Conservative support helped ensure that the difference in the party's support between left and right and between libertarians and authoritarians was smaller than in 2019. In Labour's case, in contrast, there was little apparent change. Second, support for all the smaller parties differed substantially between libertarians and authoritarians, especially in the case of Reform. As a result, although support for both Reform and the Greens also differed between those on the left and those on the right, across the parties as a whole the libertarian/authoritarian divide demarcated who voted for whom to a greater extent than the left/right division. Support for the Conservatives and Reform

combined differed by 38 points between left and right but by 48 points between libertarians and authoritarians. The equivalent figures for Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens combined are 36 and 47 points respectively. In short, not only is party support in Britain two-dimensional rather than one-dimensional in character but it has also seemingly replaced a two-party system with one in which multiple parties compete within and between two opposing blocs.

Our analyses of both the demographic and the ideological patterns of support in 2024 suggest that, even though Brexit was a far less salient issue in the 2024 election campaign, many of the changes in the character of party support that became evident in the post-Brexit elections of 2017 and 2019 were still present. In practice, people's attitudes towards Brexit proved to be almost as sharp a dividing line in 2024 as they had been in 2019.

Table 6, for example, shows that while support for the Conservatives collapsed among those who voted Leave in 2016, it inevitably fell much less among the relatively small group of Remain supporters who backed the party in 2019. But it was Reform, rather than Labour or the Liberal Democrats, who primarily appeared to profit from the collapse in support for the Conservatives among Leave voters. Although Labour accepted the decision to leave the EU and the Liberal Democrats did not wish to revisit the issue any time soon, neither enjoyed much more than modest success in winning over those who had supported Brexit.

Table 6 Vote choice 2024 and change since 2019 by 2016 EU Referendum vote

	Remain	Change since 2019	Leave	Change since 2019
Party voted for in General Election	%	%	%	%
Conservative	16	-6	33	-38
Labour	49	+2	23	+4
Liberal Democrat	16	-1	6	+5
Reform	2	N/A	34	N/A
Green Party	9	+2	2	0
Unweighted bases	*1421*		*895*	

See also note to Table 1.

Of course, this analysis excludes those who were too young to vote in 2016, while some people may have changed their minds about whether Britain should be inside or outside the EU. However, replicating the analysis by how people say they would vote in a referendum now produces a largely similar picture. Indeed, it suggests that Labour secured the vote of as many as 55% of those who would vote to rejoin the EU, and only 18% of those who would vote to stay out – an even bigger difference than that in Table 6. Overall, no less than 85% of those who would prefer to rejoin the EU voted for one of Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens or one of the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales. True, only 71% of those who wish to stay out of the EU backed either the Conservatives or Reform, down somewhat on the equivalent figure of 80% in 2019. Nevertheless, despite the collapse in Conservative support among Brexiteers, the legacy of the Brexit debate was still very much in evidence in 2024 — and was continuing to weaken the traditional

demographic and ideological foundations of Britain's traditional two-party duopoly.

Trust and confidence in government

The 2024 election came at the end of a Parliament in which government faced an unprecedented series of policy challenges (as discussed in our report on Repairing Britain: Attitudes towards the economy, taxation and public services). Along with the rest of the world, Britain found itself in 2020 dealing with the first major pandemic in a century. This created a public health crisis that required social and economic activity to be 'locked down' and instigated a major expansion of public expenditure to support the labour market and public services. No sooner was the pandemic coming to an end than inflation began to rise to what, by the end of 2022, was its highest level since the 1970s. This happened partly as a result of the disruption to supply chains caused by the pandemic, and partly as a consequence of the inflationary impact on energy prices of an invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. Between them, the two crises helped ensure that, for the first time since 1945, living standards failed to improve over the course of the Parliament (Ray Chaudhuri et al, 2024). Meanwhile, public services, and especially the health service, struggled to deal with the legacy of the pandemic (British Medical Association, 2025). All of this happened just as the UK left the EU and thus was facing the challenge of adjusting to life outside that institution's single market and customs union. It was, in short, a Parliament in which the effectiveness of government was put to a severe test.

At the same time, the 2019-2024 Parliament witnessed unprecedented political turbulence. Even though the country was being governed by a single-party government that enjoyed a healthy parliamentary majority, no less than two Prime Ministers were brought down by their parliamentary colleagues. First, Boris Johnson was forced to resign in July 2024 in the wake of a mass resignation of his ministers occasioned by concern about the veracity of his statements. Indeed, Mr Johnson was subsequently adjudged by MPs to have misled the House of Commons in statements he had made about the degree of compliance with the COVID-19 regulations in 10 Downing Street during the

lockdown (House of Commons Privileges Committee, 2023). Meanwhile, his successor, Liz Truss, resigned the following October after an attempt to implement tax cuts (while also spending money on reducing energy prices) prompted a crisis on the financial markets that required intervention by the Bank of England. Her downfall paved the way for the person she had defeated in the leadership contest, Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor during the pandemic, to fill her shoes. These two political crises inevitably raised questions about both the ethics and the competence of those responsible for governing Britain.

In any event, as we showed in last year's report, trust and confidence in how the country was being governed fell during the Parliament to an all-time low (Curtice et al., 2024). Those who were dissatisfied with the health service and those who were struggling on their household income, both now significantly more numerous, were particularly discontent. Meanwhile, although trust and confidence among those who had voted for Brexit in 2016 had initially been boosted by its delivery in January 2020, this boost had largely disappeared by 2023 following considerable disappointment among Leave voters with how Brexit had worked out in practice. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the political turbulence of the Parliament helped to improve people's perceptions of how they were being governed.

But did the 2024 election see a reversal of these trends? After all, in some respects, the election fitted the familiar post-war pattern of British elections. The electorate voted against the incumbent Conservative government, whose support in the ballot boxes fell by 20 points compared with the last election in 2019. Labour came to power in their place with a parliamentary majority of 174. One single-party majority government of the right was replaced by another that looked more to the left. So, we might anticipate that the 2024 election helped to repair the damage done to trust and confidence in much the same way as previous elections have done.

However, as we have already noted, while the Conservatives were rejected by the electorate, only just over one in three voted Labour. Support for the parties fragmented as never before. As a result, it was quite remarkable that the electoral system still managed to deliver an overall majority for the winning party. It was even more remarkable, given that the Liberal Democrats were no longer significantly disadvantaged by the system, winning 72 seats, their highest tally since 1923. However, the system awarded both Reform and

the Greens just a handful of MPs. And the large majority it gave Labour, together with the tough treatment afforded to Reform, the Greens, and indeed the Conservatives, ensured that the relationship between votes cast and seats won was the most disproportional in modern British politics (Curtice, forthcoming). As a result, there were more voters than usual who might have felt they had reason to question the rules under which the election was fought and their party lost out. That could well have served to limit the extent to which the contest boosted levels of trust and confidence. Meanwhile, the policy challenges that had helped undermine trust and confidence during the last Parliament, including not least in respect of the NHS, were still very much in evidence after the election was over.

In this section, we examine how the level of trust and confidence in how Britain is governed as registered by surveys conducted after the election compares with the position beforehand – and consider whether a boost occurred like those observed after previous elections. We also assess whether and to what extent trust and confidence continued to be undermined by the policy challenges that were evident long before the election, as registered by people's feelings about their income, their level of satisfaction with the health service and their attitude towards Brexit.

We begin by looking at people's evaluations of "the present system of governing Britain". Table 7 shows that our 2023 survey indicated that the proportion who felt that the system needed little or no improvement had fallen to a record low of 19%. This figure did rise somewhat in the immediate wake of the 2024 election. Those who said that the system needed little or no improvement increased to 31% in a NatCen Panel survey (which re-interviewed those who had participated in the 2023 survey), conducted in the weeks immediately after the election. Even so, that figure was below what it had been at any time before the MPs' expenses scandal in the run-up to the 2010 General Election. Meanwhile, that apparent lightening of the public mood did not last long. Our regular British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, conducted in the autumn of 2024, found that, once again, just 19% reckoned the present system "could not be improved" or "could be improved in small ways but mainly works well", whereas just under eight in ten (79%) said it "could be improved either quite a lot" or "a great deal" – exactly the same figures as in our 2023 survey. Consequently, confidence in the system of governing Britain

remains at a historic low. On this measure, at least, the arrival of a new Labour government only made a short-term difference that has already disappeared.

Table 7 Attitudes towards how Britain is governed, 1973-2024

	1973	1977	1991	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Present system of governing Britain	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	48	34	33	29	22	35	56	46	48
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	49	62	63	69	75	63	42	52	50
Unweighted base	*4892*	*1410*	*1034*	*1137*	*1034*	*1180*	*4214*	*2071*	*1060*

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2008	2010 (1)	2010 (2)	2011
Present system of governing Britain	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	35	43	38	34	34	37	22	41	35
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	62	56	59	65	63	60	74	54	62
Unweighted base	*2293*	*1099*	*2287*	*4432*	*2373*	*1128*	*2288*	*1083*	*2215*

	2014	2019	2020 (1)	2020 2)	2021	2023	2024(1)	2024(2)	
Present system of governing Britain	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Could not be improved/could be improved in small ways	34	20	39	32	39	19	31	19	
Could be improved quite a lot/a great deal	63	79	61	66	61	79	69	79	
Unweighted base	*2373*	*1088*	*2408*	*1332*	*2207*	*1238*	*1783*	*1072*	

But what about levels of trust in government and politicians? Table 8 shows how people have responded since 1986 when asked how much they trust "British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party".

Table 8 Level of trust in British governments, 1986-2024

	1986	1987 (1)	1987 (2)	1991	1994	1996	1997 (1)	1997 (2)	1998	2000
Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	40	37	47	33	24	22	25	33	28	16
Only some of the time	48	46	43	50	53	53	48	52	52	58
Almost never	12	11	9	14	21	23	23	12	17	24
Unweighted base	*1548*	*1410*	*3414*	*1445*	*1137*	*1180*	*1355*	*3615*	*2071*	*2293*

	2001	2002	2003	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012
Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	28	26	18	26	19	29	16	20	22	18
Only some of the time	50	47	49	47	46	45	42	45	45	49
Almost never	20	24	31	26	34	23	40	33	31	32
Unweighted base	*1099*	*2287*	*3299*	*3167*	*1077*	*992*	*1143*	*1081*	*2215*	*1103*

	2013	2016	2017	2019	2020 (1)	2020 (2)	2021	2023	2024 (1)	2024 (2)
Trust government to place needs of the nation above the interests of their party	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	17	22	20	15	23	23	24	14	14	12

Only some of the time	51	51	48	49	53	47	49	39	48	41
Almost never	32	26	29	34	23	30	27	45	38	46
Unweighted base	*1063*	*974*	*2986*	*1088*	*2409*	*1332*	*2207*	*1238*	*1783*	*1072*

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, 2024(1): NatCen Panel

The shaded columns indicate how the level of trust in government has usually increased after an election, albeit to what were still becoming increasingly lower levels. However, it appears that unlike previous ballots, even in the short term, the 2024 election had little or no impact on the level of trust. In our 2023 survey, just 14% indicated they trusted governments "just about always" or "most of the time", a record low, while as many as 45%, more than ever before, responded "almost never". Even in the NatCen Panel survey conducted immediately after the 2024 election, the 14% figure stayed the same, although there was a modest drop of seven points, to the still relatively high figure of 38%, in the proportion who said "almost never". Meanwhile, in our latest BSA survey, only 12% say that they trust government "just about always" or "most of the time" (a new record low) while 46% indicate they "almost never" trust the government (also the highest on record). In short, the election and the arrival of a new government did nothing to reverse a long-term decline in levels of trust in the willingness of government to put the nation's interests before its own.

A second question about trust that has regularly been included on BSA surveys asks respondents, "How much do you trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner?". In practice, as Table 9 shows, rarely have more than one in ten replied "just about always" or "most of the time". Integrity has long not been a quality the public readily associates with politicians. But in 2023 the proportion giving that response slipped to a new low of 5%, while 58% stated that they "almost never" trusted politicians

to tell the truth in a tight corner, a figure only exceeded previously in 2009, in the midst of the MPs' expenses scandal. Again, the 2024 election appears to have had little impact. In our immediate post-election survey, the proportion who said they trusted politicians at least most of the time did no more than edge up to 6%, while the proportion who said they almost never did so only fell by three points to 55%. Meanwhile, in our latest BSA survey, again only 5% trust politicians to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner "just about always" or "most of the time", while 59% say they "almost never" do so, a figure that more than matches the 58% recorded in 2023.

Table 9 Level of trust in politicians, 1994-2024

	1994	1996	1997	1998	2000	2002	2003	2005
Trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	9	9	8	9	11	7	6	8
Only some of the time	40	38	40	43	42	37	38	39
Almost never	49	49	50	46	46	55	54	52
Unweighted base	*1137*	*1180*	*1355*	*2071*	*2293*	*2287*	*3299*	*3167*

	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2016
Trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/Most of the time	7	9	6	7	8	6	10	11
Only some of the time	37	39	33	35	39	40	38	44
Almost never	57	49	60	56	51	53	45	45
Unweighted base	*1077*	*992*	*1143*	*1081*	*2215*	*1103*	*1063*	*974*

	2019	2020 (1)	2020 (2)	2021	2023	2024 (1)	2024 (2)	
Trust politicians to tell the truth in a tight corner	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Just about always/Most of the time	6	11	10	12	5	6	5	
Only some of the time	42	51	46	48	36	38	35	
Almost never	51	39	44	41	58	55	59	
Unweighted base	*1088*	*2406*	*1332*	*2208*	*1238*	*1783*	*1072*	

Why then is trust and confidence still so low? As we noted earlier, the delivery of Brexit initially boosted the trust and confidence of those who voted to leave the EU in 2016, but by 2023 that boost had largely disappeared (Curtice et al., 2024). Now, in the wake of Leave voters' continued disappointment with Brexit, however, there is no trace left at all. An overwhelming majority (85%) of those who voted Leave at the referendum think the present system of government could be improved "quite a lot" or a "great deal", an increase of nine percentage points on 2023 and the highest proportion since 2019. The equivalent figure for Remain voters is now 81%, four points lower than among Leave voters, in contrast to being seven points higher in 2023. The disenchantment among Leavers is even starker on our questions on trust. A majority of Leave voters now say they "almost never" trust governments to put the needs of the nation over party interests (59%), an increase of 11 points in the past year and significantly higher than the equivalent figure for Remain voters, which, at 36%, is down six points on 2023. Equally, nearly three-quarters (73%) of Leave voters now "almost never" trust politicians to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner, up from 60% in 2023 and 20 points above the equivalent figure for Remain voters (53%, unchanged from 2023). Disillusion with Brexit among those who voted for it has played a key role in ensuring that overall levels of trust and confidence remain at or near a record low.

Previous research has also shown there is a relationship between people's evaluations of the NHS and their levels of trust and confidence. As stated in our report on Repairing Britain: Attitudes towards the economy, taxation and public services, as many as 59% are now dissatisfied with the health service, up seven points on the already record high level recorded in 2023. Meanwhile, over half (56%) of those who are dissatisfied with the way the NHS is working "almost never" trust governments to put nation before party, compared with 38% of those who are satisfied. This 18-point gap between the two groups is similar to the 20-point one in evidence last year. Equally, as many as 86% of those who are dissatisfied with the NHS believe the system of government needs "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of improvement, compared with 69% of those who are satisfied, a 16-point difference that is only a little below the 21-point gap observed in 2023. It therefore seems unlikely that trust and

confidence can be restored until the NHS, and perhaps public services more broadly, are seen by voters to be working.

Equally, last year's BSA report showed a relationship between people's feelings about their household income and their levels of trust and confidence (Curtice et al., 2024). In our latest survey, as many as 26% say they are "struggling" or "really struggling" on their present income, the same proportion as in 2023 which itself was a record high since we first asked this question in 2010. This group of strugglers (52%) are more likely than those who are living either "comfortably" or "really comfortably" (39%) to say they "almost never" trust governments to put the national interest first. They are also more likely than those living comfortably (by 51% to 33%) to say the system of governing Britain "needs a great deal" of improvement. In both cases, the difference between the figures for the two groups is not dissimilar to that in evidence in 2023. Despite the change of government, the country's economic difficulties, as reflected in people's ability to pay their bills, continues to depress trust and confidence.

Consequences?

But do the continued low levels of trust and confidence matter? One possibility is that it had an impact on the outcome of the 2024 election. One relatively unusual feature of the ballot was a low turnout. At just below 60%, it was the second lowest ever in a post-war election, only marginally bettering the 59% recorded in 2001. That, in itself, raises questions about the health of Britain's democracy. Maybe turnout itself was depressed because those with low levels of trust and confidence were particularly likely to stay at home? Alternatively, perhaps support for the parties that were challenging the traditional Conservative and Labour dominance of the electorate, that is, Reform and the Greens, was especially high among those with little trust or confidence? Perhaps low trust and confidence is one of the reasons for the fragmentation of Britain's electoral politics that was apparent in 2024? In this section, we therefore turn to assess why turnout was so low in 2024 and whether people's trust and confidence made a difference to how they voted.

Beyond the election itself, as we noted earlier, voters who are distrustful may be more inclined to question the constitutional rules under which the

country's democracy is operating. Given the highly disproportional outcome of the 2024 election, we focus, in particular, on attitudes towards the electoral system and whether or not people feel it should now be replaced by a system of proportional representation. And how do people now feel about the relative merits of Britain's traditional system of single-party government rather than having a coalition government? Is the way in which Britain has traditionally conducted its elections no longer thought to be good for the health of its democracy?

Turnout

All surveys find it more difficult to secure the participation of those who do not vote in elections. Indeed, 71% of those aged 18 and over who responded to our 2024 survey said they voted in the election of the year, well above the official figure of 59%. However, that represents a fall of nine percentage points as compared with the proportion who, in our 2020 survey, said they had voted in the 2019 election.[5] That fall closely matches the eight-point fall in turnout in the actual results. Consequently, our data are likely to provide a reasonable basis upon which to analyse why turnout fell so sharply in 2024.

It is often suggested that low levels of trust and confidence serve to depress turnout, although the empirical evidence has always been less than clear (Curtice, 2011). For example, according to our 2020 survey, those who said the system of government needed "a great deal" of improvement were only three points less likely to say they had voted than those who thought the system needed little or no improvement. Only in the case of those who "almost never" trusted governments was turnout clearly somewhat lower (by ten percentage points) than it was among those who did not take that view.

In any event, there is little sign in our data that those with less in the way of trust and confidence were any more than a little less likely to vote in 2024 – if that. Those who said they "almost never" trust governments were just three points less likely to say they had voted than those who trusted them at least "most of the time" – an even smaller difference than the one that pertained in 2019. Similarly, small differences of between three and four percentage points also arise in respect of trust in politicians and in whether the system of governing Britain is in need of improvement. The fall in turnout largely

occurred irrespective of people's level of trust and confidence in how they were being governed.

However, that still leaves the question of why turnout fell as sharply as it did. If low levels of trust and confidence were not a demotivating factor, maybe there are other signs that voters' motivation to vote was weak in 2024? Does such an analysis raise further questions about the health of Britain's traditional party system?

One key potential motivation for going to the polls is having an interest in politics. That said, at 38%, the proportion who in our latest survey say they have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of interest in politics is almost the same as in our 2019 survey (39%), conducted shortly before that year's election. There is no sign here that turnout fell because fewer people are interested in how their country is being governed. What, however, is the case is that turnout fell most heavily compared with 2019 among those with little or no interest in politics. At 28%, turnout among those with "no interest at all" was as much as 16 points down on 2019. Equally, the 63% reported turnout among those with "not very much" interest was 24 points lower than in 2019. In contrast, turnout did not fall at all among those with "a great deal" of interest in politics and only slipped by four points (to 90%) among those with "quite a lot" of interest. It seems that the 2024 election was less successful at rousing the interest of those who are usually only peripherally engaged in politics.[6]

Further evidence emerges if we look at another potential motivating factor, that is, whether or not people feel that as citizens they have a duty to vote. To address this issue, we ask:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view about general elections?

It's not really worth voting
People should vote only if they care who wins
It's everyone's duty to vote

Two-thirds (67%) of people of voting age state in our latest survey that they have a duty to vote. In contrast, over three-quarters (78%) felt that way in 2019. Meanwhile 18% state that people should only vote if they care who wins, up three points on 2020, while 7%, an increase of six percentage points, say it

is not really worth voting. Meanwhile, Table 10 shows that whereas over nine in ten of those who feel people do have a duty to vote reported voting in the 2024 election, less than half of those who do not acknowledge such an obligation turned out to vote. So, it appears that the decline in the proportion who believe people do have a duty to participate in an election could have served to depress turnout. At the same time, turnout was much lower in 2024 than in 2019, by as much as 21 points, among those who reckon that people should only vote if they care about the outcome. Once more, those who are less strongly motivated to go to the polls were particularly likely to stay at home.

Table 10 Turnout by perception of duty to vote, 2019 and 2024

	2019	2024
% voted		
It's everyone's duty to vote	94	92
People should vote only if they care who wins.	70	49
It's not really worth voting	43	43
Unweighted base	*1132*	*763*

Note: Table based only on those in Great Britain aged 18 and over who stated whether or not they voted in the election.

But why might the outcome of the election come to seem to matter less this time around, thereby leading those who are less engaged in politics to stay at home? A possible clue is provided by a question about the difference between the Conservatives and Labour that has been asked regularly on BSA and, earlier, by the British Election Study, thereby giving us a series of readings stretching back 50 years to 1964 (Curtice and Simpson, 2018). Respondents are asked:

Now considering everything the Conservative and Labour parties stand for, would you say that…

There is a great difference between them

Some difference

Or not much difference?

After the 2019 election, Labour, in particular, attempted to move closer to what it regarded as the centre of British politics, following the replacement of Jeremy Corbyn as the party's leader by Sir Keir Starmer. This re-positioning was similar to that which occurred under the 'New Labour' banner before 1997. Labour tried to avoid holding distinct positions from the Conservatives on two key issues in particular, Brexit (as we have already noted) and taxation, where the party promised not to increase the rate of the most widely-paid taxes. It is therefore not surprising that Table 11 reveals that the proportion who felt there was a "great difference" between the Conservatives and Labour nearly halved between 2020 (42%) and 2024 (23%). The figure in 2024 is not as low as the 17% and 13% recorded in 2001 and 2005, in both of which elections also only around three in five voted, but it is well below the figure for any election before then. In short, we can conclude that many voters had registered that the gap between the two parties that have traditionally dominated British politics had narrowed.

Table 11 Perceived difference between Conservative and Labour parties, 1964-2024

	1964	1966	1970	Feb 1974	Oct 1974	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Great difference	48	44	33	34	40	48	88	85	56	33	17
Some	25	27	28	30	30	30	10	11	32	43	39
Not much	27	29	39	36	30	22	7	5	12	24	44
Unweighted base	*1699*	*1804*	*1780*	*2391*	*2332*	*1826*	*3893*	*3776*	*1794*	*2836*	*1076*

	2005	2010	2015	2017	2020	2024					
	%	%	%	%	%	%					
Great difference	13	23	27	45	42	23					
Some	43	43	42	35	42	44					
Not much	44	34	31	20	15	30					
Unweighted base	*1049*	*1035*	*2056*	*2854*	*1332*	*1072*					

Source: 1964-1997: British Election Study. Figures for 1964-1992 as quoted in Crewe et al (1995). Respondents saying "don't know" or who refused to answer have been excluded. Between 1964 and October 1974 the question read, "Considering everything the parties stand for would you say there is a good deal of difference between them, some difference or not much difference?"

Those who think there is a great deal of difference between the Conservatives and Labour were indeed more likely to vote than those who did not feel there was much of a difference. To that extent the decline in the perception that the

two parties were far apart may well have helped reduce turnout. However, the difference between the level of turnout among those who thought there was a 'great difference' (83%) between the parties and that among those who thought there was 'not much' (76%) was markedly lower than the 24-point difference seen in 2019. Maybe this reflects that the fact that, with fewer than six in ten backing either the Conservatives or Labour, perceptions of the difference between them mattered less in persuading voters that it was worth casting a ballot.

In any event, one other change in the relationship between voters and the parties has occurred. Ever since initial research on the topic in the 1950s, it has long been recognised that some voters form an emotional or affective bond with a party (Butler and Stokes, 1972). Such voters do not just vote regularly for a particular party but also identify as a supporter of that party, and thus say that, 'I am a Conservative' or 'I am Labour', as appropriate. For this group, voting is not about voting for whichever party they think currently has the best leader or policies but rather about presenting an opportunity to express membership of a political tribe or group. One consequence of forming such an identity is that these voters are more likely to vote irrespective of the circumstances of a particular election.

The BSA survey measures party identity each year. First, it asks, respondents whether they think of themselves "as a supporter of any one political party". If a party is not named in response to that question, they are further asked, "Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?". Those who say "No" in response to this question are regarded here as those who do not have a party identity.

The latest survey confirms that those without a party identity were less likely to vote in 2024. Just 55% of those who said they did not feel closer to one of the parties reported voting in 2024, compared with as many as 86% of those who declared an identity, a difference of 31 percentage points. Much the same was true in the 2019 election – only 67% of non-identifiers turned out to vote, compared with 94% of those with a party identity, only a slightly smaller difference of 27 points.[7] Evidently both identifiers and non-identifiers were somewhat less likely to vote in 2024 than in 2019. However, crucially, the proportion of people who identify with a party fell during the last Parliament.

In our latest survey, as many as 40% say they do not feel closer to any of the parties, well up on the 29% figure recorded in our 2020 survey.

The marked drop in turnout in 2024 was not then occasioned by low levels of trust and confidence. In part it reflected a weakening of the extent to which voters feel a sense of attachment or commitment to any of the parties. At the same time, fewer people feel they have a duty to vote and those who do not were more likely to stay at home than in 2019, as also were those with less of an interest in politics. Between them, these may be felt to be signs of a party system whose ability to command the loyalty and attention of voters had weakened.

Challenger parties

If those with low levels of trust and confidence in how Britain is being governed were not markedly less likely to cast a vote, did they perhaps register their dissatisfaction by being more likely to vote for a party that has not hitherto been part of the political mainstream? After all, someone who is unhappy with the way in which they are being governed might wish to use their vote to register their dissatisfaction, rather than withdraw from the democratic process (Hirschman, 1970). It seems that this indeed is what happened, and especially so in the case of Reform.

Nearly one in four (24%) of those who 'almost never' trust governments to put the country's interests before party voted for Reform — compared with just 5% of those who trust governments "just about always" or "most of the time". Equally around a quarter (26%) of those who think the system of governing Britain needs a great deal of improvement backed Reform, compared with just 5% of those who reckon the system needs little or no improvement. A similar but weaker pattern is apparent in the case of the Greens. They won the support of 10% of those who almost never trust governments, compared with 4% of those who do so at least some of the time. Meanwhile, the Greens won the backing of 13% of those who reckon how Britain is governed needs a great deal of improvement, whereas only 6% of those who take the opposite view voted for the Greens. Crucially, none of the other parties' support relates to low levels of trust and confidence in such a marked or systematic way.

Equally, the success of the challenger parties may also help explain why turnout among those who thought there was little difference between Conservative and Labour was only a little lower than it was among those who thought there was a great difference between the two parties. No less than 53% of those who voted for Reform said there was little difference between the Conservatives and Labour, while 45% of Green voters expressed this view. The view that the Conservatives and Labour offered little choice was evidently widespread among those who decided to back one of the challenger parties. This implies that occupying the centre ground was not necessarily a costless strategy for Britain's mainstream parties in the 2024 election.

Change the system?

Finally, is there any evidence that the low level of trust and confidence associated with the 2024 election together, perhaps, with the highly disproportional outcome of the election, has had an impact on people's attitudes towards electoral reform?

Since the 1980s, BSA has regularly asked the following question:

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?

As Table 12 shows, historically this question has uncovered majority support for retaining the current single-member plurality system. However, by 2015, support for change was regularly above the 40% mark, and since 2021, consistently over half have said they were in favour of change. In 2023, 53% said that we should change the voting system, while only 40% indicated that we should keep the existing system. That mood appears to have held up in the immediate wake of the 2024 election, with support for change increasing yet further to a record high of 60%.

Table 12 – Attitudes to electoral reform, 1983-2024

	1983	1986	1987	1990	1991	1992	1994	1995	1996
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	39	32	30	34	37	33	34	37	33
Keep system as it is	54	60	64	59	58	60	60	58	59
Unweighted base	*3955*	*1548*	*1410*	*1397*	*1445*	*3534*	*1137*	*1227*	*1196*

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2008
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	39	32	35	35	39	33	36	32	33
Keep system as it is	53	63	63	59	57	61	60	61	59
Unweighted base	*1355*	*1035*	*1060*	*2293*	*1099*	*2287*	*1160*	*1075*	*1128*

	2010	2011	2015	2017	2021	2023	2024 (1)	2024 (2)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	41	27	45	43	51	53	54	60
Keep system								

as it is	49	66	48	49	44	40	45	36
Unweighted base	*1081*	*2215*	*2140*	*2009*	*2073*	*1238*	*1783*	*1072*

Source: British Social Attitudes, apart from 1983, 1992: British Election Study; 2024(1): NatCen Panel

We showed in last year's report that those with low levels of trust and confidence were more likely to support a change in the electoral system (Curtice et al., 2024). This finding is replicated in this year's survey. For example, just over two-thirds (68%) of those who "almost never" trust governments to put national over party interest support changing the system, compared with just 41% of those who trust governments at least most of the time. Similarly, 72% of those who think our political system needs a "great deal of improvement" believe we should change the voting system, compared with only 38% of those who feel the system is in need of little improvement.

When support for changing the voting system first exceeded 50% in 2021, the trend was primarily occasioned by a change of mind among Labour supporters, influenced perhaps by the fact that, under the current system, their party had lost four elections in a row and that the road to securing an overall majority at the next election appeared to be steep. Indeed, the Labour Party itself voted in favour of proportional representation at its 2022 annual conference. However, now that we have a Labour government, elected under first past the post with a landslide majority, we might anticipate that Labour supporters have warmed once more to the current voting system. We might wonder too whether, having seen their party do better under the current system than they have for 100 years, support for change among supporters of the Liberal Democrats has weakened as well. Conversely, perhaps the severe defeat suffered by the Conservatives might have caused some of them to have re-thought their party's longstanding opposition to reform?

In practice, there has only been a small decline in support for reform among those who identify as Labour supporters – 60% backed change in 2023, while this proportion has now slipped to 55%. On the other hand, backing for change among Liberal Democrat supporters has fallen markedly from 71% in 2023 to 56% now. So, support for change has weakened somewhat among those who profited from the current system in the 2024 election. Meanwhile,

the opposite has happened among those who lost out from the current system. The outlook of those who identify as Conservative has changed significantly. In 2023, only 24% were in favour of changing the voting system, but that proportion has now more than doubled to 52%. At the same time, substantial majorities of both Reform (78%) and Green (90%) supporters are in favour of change. As a result of these trends, there is now majority support for change among supporters of all five of Britain's biggest parties. The heavily disproportional outcome of the 2024 election appears to have helped create – for the time being at least – a public that, irrespective of partisanship, is questioning the current electoral system to an unprecedented degree. [8]

One potential consequence of changing the Commons electoral system to one of proportional representation is that it would make it less likely that any one party would be able to win an overall majority – and that one of the distinctive features of Britain's traditional democracy, that is, single-party majority government, would most likely be lost. But to what extent might the public welcome such a change? Table 13 shows how people have responded since 1983 when they have been asked:

Which do you think would generally be better for Britain nowadays ....

...to have a government at Westminster formed by one political party on its own,
or, to have a government at Westminster formed by two political parties together — in coalition?

Between 1983 and 2010 – when the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats formed the first post-war coalition – public opinion was relatively evenly balanced. The public has never been as enthusiastic about single-party government as most Conservative and Labour politicians. However, the experience of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition appears to have had an adverse impact on the public's view of such an arrangement and, from 2011 through to 2017, clear majorities were in favour of single-party government. However, public opinion now seems to have swung around to favouring coalition over single-party government once more. Indeed, at 53%, support for having two or more parties in government is now at its highest level since our question was first asked 40 years ago.

Table 13 Preference for single party or coalition government, 1983-2024

	1983	1986	1987	1991	1994	1995	1996	2003
Single party	47	52	58	56	45	45	47	43
Coalition	49	43	37	40	49	50	48	50
Unweighted base	*1761*	*1548*	*1410*	*1445*	*1137*	*1227*	*1180*	*1160*
	2005	**2007**	**2010**	**2011**	**2014**	**2015**	**2017**	**2024**
Single party	48	48	48	63	62	59	60	41
Coalition	44	45	40	28	29	33	33	53
Unweighted base	*1075*	*992*	*1081*	*2215*	*971*	*2149*	*2009*	*1051*

Source: 1983, British Election Study

As we might anticipate, those who are in favour of changing the electoral system are more likely to prefer coalition government. However, the relationship is perhaps not as strong as might have been anticipated. While 60% of those in favour of proportional representation say they would prefer a coalition, so also do 45% of those who would prefer to keep the existing system. Public attitudes towards electoral reform do not necessarily map clearly onto the arguments that are often made by the advocates and opponents of change. Moreover, in contrast to attitudes towards proportional representation, preference for single party vs. coalition government is only weakly related to trust and confidence in how Britain is being governed. For example, while 53% of those who think the system of governing Britain needs "a great deal" of improvement prefer coalition government, so also do 47% of those who think little or no improvement is needed.

Conclusion

Since 1945, Britain's politics have been dominated by two political parties, the Conservatives and Labour. Between them, they have alternated in office, usually with the backing of a parliamentary majority. This system has enabled voters to hold their rulers to account and has helped maintain public trust and confidence in the way the country is governed.

The outcome of the 2024 election seemed to maintain the traditional pattern of Britain's democracy. A majority Conservative government was replaced by a majority Labour one. Nevertheless, the ballot has left some significant questions hanging over the continued health of Britain's traditional system of democracy.

In contrast to previous elections, the 2024 contest did little to restore people's trust and confidence in how they are being governed. Even in the immediate wake of the election, people's confidence in Britain's system of governance and their trust in governments and MPs appeared little changed. Meanwhile, within just a few months, trust and confidence were back down to the record or near record lows that had been observed before the election. As a result, levels are lower now than they have been after any previous election. A key reason for this trend is that the formidable policy challenges that helped to undermine people's trust and confidence during the previous five years looked just as formidable after the election as they had done beforehand. Dissatisfaction with the health service was even higher, many people continued to struggle to pay their household bills, and many Leave voters remained disillusioned with how Brexit has turned out. A change of government did little to change these perceptions.

What the election does appear to have done is to provide an opportunity for some voters to express their discontent by voting for parties that posed an unprecedentedly strong challenge to the country's traditional, limited panoply of political parties. Those with low levels of trust and confidence were markedly more likely to vote for Reform or the Greens, thereby helping to push the share of the vote won by the Conservatives and Labour combined to

a record low. For many, the choice between the two parties of government looked too much like a choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Moreover, the foundations of Britain's traditional two-party system, already much undermined by the debate about Brexit, emerged looking as weak as they have ever done. The traditional demographic division between middle and working-class voters that had long provided the foundation of support for the Conservatives and Labour respectively showed no sign of re-emerging. Voters' age and educational background mattered much more. While the ideological division between left and right was still reflected in how people voted – albeit not just in choosing between Labour and the Conservatives but also between Green and Reform — the disagreement between libertarians and authoritarians that had been central to the debate about Brexit mattered even more. This divide was particularly evident in the pattern of support for Reform. It seems it has become more difficult for the Conservatives and Labour to span the multi-dimensional character of electoral choice that now exists in Britain.

True, the near record low turnout in 2024 does not seem to have been a direct result of the low level of trust and confidence. Rather, it appears to have been a result of the inability of the parties to persuade the less interested and engaged that the election mattered. Fewer voters felt emotionally attached to a party or believed they had a duty to vote. Those that felt that way were much less likely to go to the polls. And we should not be surprised that an election that did not engage the electorate failed to instil trust and confidence in how the country is being governed.

In any event, support for retaining the single-member plurality system that, despite the fragmentation of party support, again facilitated the replacement of one single-party government with another, has reached a new low, including not least among those with low levels of trust and confidence. For the first time there appears to be majority support for a change among supporters of all parties. At the same time, there is also increased acceptance of government by coalition rather than by a single party. It seems that the highly disproportional outcome of the 2024 election has made some voters question whether, in today's fragmented electoral world, the continued use of single-member plurality is still conducive to the health of the country's democracy.

However, important though the debate about electoral reform may be, we should be wary of anticipating that changing the electoral system would prove sufficient to restore voters' faith in how they are being governed. Ultimately, they are looking for more effective government than they feel they have enjoyed in recent years, not least in respect of the economy and public services. The key question ultimately facing Britain's democracy is whether it can deliver.

Addendum

The apparent weakness of the underpinnings of Britain's traditional two-party system revealed by the outcome of the 2024 election has since seemingly been affirmed by the evidence of subsequent opinion polls and the results of local elections in England held in May 2025. In those local elections, which were largely held in places outside the main conurbations where traditionally the Conservatives are strong, Reform came first with as much as 31% of the vote, the first time that a party other than Conservative or Labour has topped a local election poll. Fewer than two in five votes (37%) were cast for either the Conservatives or Labour.

Meanwhile, the opinion polls have recorded the sharpest ever drop in the popularity of a newly elected government, while support for the opposition Conservative party has dropped below the party's all-time low of 24% in 2024. In polls conducted during the ten days immediately after the local elections, Reform had risen to 30%, with both Labour (22%) and the Conservatives (18%) well behind. The Liberal Democrats, on 14%, were slightly up on their tally in the 2024 General Election (12%), as were the Greens – indeed in their case their 9% share equals their previous record high in opinion polling.

In March this year, NatCen ascertained from members of its Panel how they would vote now in a General Election. Because members of the NatCen Panel have previously responded to a regular British Social Attitudes interview, we can examine whether the demographics of party support and the relationship between vote intention and people's position on our value scales has changed in the wake of the rise of Reform.

The data reveal that the increase in Reform's support has been most marked among those groups of voters where the party was already relatively popular in 2024. Support for Reform was up by ten points on the 2024 election among those aged 55 and over, compared with just two points among those under 35. Meanwhile, backing for the party was up by 11 points among the one-third most right-wing of our respondents compared with four points among the one-third most left-wing. Similarly, willingness to vote for Reform

was nine points higher among those in our most authoritarian group, but just four points higher among the most libertarian. At the same time, the party's tally was up by 11 points among those who voted Leave in the 2016 EU referendum but by only three points among those who backed Remain.

Conversely, support for the Conservatives has fallen more heavily among the over 55s, among those on the right, among authoritarians, and among those who voted for Brexit. As many as one in five (20%) of those who voted Conservative in 2024 (and who declare a current party preference) say they would now vote Reform.

As a result of these patterns, Reform is now the single most popular party among authoritarians and among those who voted Leave. Its support among authoritarians is as much as 29 points higher than among libertarians, while the party's tally among Leavers is as much as 40 points higher than it is among Remainers. At the same time, the party remains markedly more popular among those with fewer educational qualifications and among those in working class occupations.

Support for the Greens, meanwhile, has risen most among those on the left, among libertarians and among those who voted Remain, while the party remains markedly more popular among younger than older voters. In short, both Reform and the Greens are continuing to profit from a post-Brexit electoral landscape that has seen the traditional relationship between occupational class and voting either Conservative or Labour disappear, and in which the potentially disruptive division between libertarians and authoritarians has become a key feature. With Labour's support falling since 2024 by similar amounts in virtually all demographic and value groups, the once seemingly firm anchors of Britain's two-party system seem, if anything, to be even more adrift now than they did in the summer of 2024.

Acknowledgements

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Publication details

Footnotes

1. As noted in the Technical Details, for the first time, the latest BSA included people living in Northern Ireland and those aged 16 and 17 years. Given that the voting age in 2024 was 18 and that the party system in Northern Ireland was very different, all analyses of voting behaviour and turnout in 2024 in this report are based only on respondents in Great Britain aged 18 and over. In addition, all the analyses at Tables 1-6 exclude those who did not vote or who did not state how they had voted. ↑

2. This latter picture is also closer to that obtained by the British Election Study Internet Panel which suggests that support for Labour among professional and managerial workers was just four points above that among those in semi-routine and routine occupations. ↑

3. We should note that the link between left/right position and vote choice was stronger on BSA 2020 than it was on a NatCen Panel survey conducted shortly after the 2019 election (with position on the left/right scale measured just a few months before the election). That put the left/right gaps in Conservative and Labour support at 25 and 28 points respectively (Curtice, 2020). That suggests a need for circumspection about coming to any conclusion that there has been any marked change in the relationship between left/right position and Conservative vs Labour support. (In contrast, the figures for 2024 in Table 4 are very similar to those in a NatCen Panel survey conducted shortly after that election.) ↑

4. As we might anticipate, these divisions are replicated if we analyse party support by where people stand on so-called 'culture war' issues. For example, 33% of those who think equal opportunities for lesbian, gay and bisexual people have "gone too far" voted Conservative, while 24% backed Reform. In contrast, just 2% and 1% respectively of those who believe that equal opportunities for lesbians, gay and bisexual people have not gone far enough voted that way. In contrast, 58% of those who feel that equal opportunities have not gone far enough backed Labour, while 24% supported the Greens. Among those who feel equal opportunities have gone too far, the figures are 30% and 3% respectively. Similar differences are observed in response to comparable questions about transgender people, and Black and Asian people. ↑

5. Note that the figures being used here are based on all respondents including not only those who did not give an answer to this question but also those who said they were not eligible to vote. That latter group comprises 6% of the sample. Among those who said they did or did not vote, the proportion who reported doing so was 76%. This figure is ten percentage points below the equivalent figure for 2019 in our 2020 survey. ↑

6. These figures are based solely on those who stated that they did or did not vote in the election (see also Footnote 5). ↑

7. The figures here are based on those in Great Britain aged 18 or over who indicated whether or not they voted. ↑

8. Despite the 2022 conference vote, Labour's manifesto did not include a commitment to changing the electoral system. It did contain a proposal that the voting age for general elections should be reduced from 18 to 16. While 46% say that 16 and 17 year olds should "definitely" or "probably" be able to vote in general elections, 53% feel they "definitely" or "probably" should not. Meanwhile, in contrast to electoral reform, support for allowing 16 and 17 years olds to vote is highest among those with more trust and confidence. ↑

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