



By: *Harvey Morris*

# Battered British look forward to a break from politics



Not long to go now! In a week's time British MPs will shut up shop and head for their constituencies, their summer holidays, or both, and give the public a well-deserved break from the daily dramas of parliamentary politics.

That section of the public, that is, that admits to paying attention to politics, currently running at just under half.

That proportion is **down** by 10 per cent from a decade ago, according to data from the British Election Study Internet Panel, reinforcing the perception that growing numbers of people are simply switching off.

Already in 2019, an audit by the Hansard Society that tracks parliament's work, **found** that, while core democratic indicators remained relatively stable, "beneath the surface, the strongest feelings of powerlessness and disengagement are intensifying".

Those feelings are evidently linked to diminishing trust in politicians, with the number of people saying they had zero trust in them ballooning from 16 to 35 per cent in the decade to the general election held a year ago.

## The danger of a growing democratic deficit

These and other research insights point to the danger of a growing democratic deficit, which is by no means confined to the UK but is particularly worrying in a nation that prides itself on having defied earlier anti-democratic trends.

It is a challenge that has been taken up by those politicians and constitutionalists who believe the British system needs updating in order to convince the average voter that he or she can have a genuine stake in day-to-day politics.

**Reformers should not hold their breath**

Proposals range from the perennial one of introducing proportional representation to the introduction of an Australian-style **system** of compulsory voting that it is claimed would create a more engaged and representative electorate.

More radical ideas include the wider use of people's assemblies in which ordinary citizens would discuss and even decide on issues of local and national importance.

But reformers should not hold their breath. They are still waiting for a promised revamp of the House of Lords, the UK upper house that still has almost 100 hereditary peers pending the final passage of promised legislation to remove them.

## The myth of centuries-old democratic norms

The very nature of Britain's crumbling neo-Gothic parliamentary estate at Westminster lends itself to the myth that the nation's democratic norms have existed for centuries. In reality, the mock medievalism of parliamentary traditions, like the building itself, dates back only to the Victorians.

It was only in the reign of Queen Victoria that a property-owning establishment bowed to the pressure of campaigners and the threat of potential revolution by extending the franchise to a marginally wider electorate.

Universal male suffrage only came at the end of World War I, while some women had to wait another 10 years until they finally won the right to vote.

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The nature of British democracy, therefore, is neither eternal nor immutable. The difference now is not that a large proportion of the population is denied a vote but rather that many are choosing not to cast one.

Labour **won** a landslide majority in July last year with less than 10 million votes from a registered electorate of more than 45 million.

A **drop** in turnout to just under 60 per cent was seen as a reflection of widespread disillusionment with an increasingly disorderly decade of Conservative rule, overseen by five prime ministers.

After the divisive legacy of Brexit and its aftermath, the revelations that Conservative politicians and their aides had been partying while the rest of the country was locked down by Covid restrictions was the final straw for many voters.

## Politics is an activity and not a commodity

Given a troubled and lacklustre first-year in office, Labour has inherited similar levels of distrust as experienced by their predecessors. Growing numbers of voters appear to wish a plague on all their houses, while the rise in popularity of Reform may express as much public frustration as it does hope.

A forward-looking paper published by parliament last October on democratic engagement and trust in the institution argued that wider public participation was critical for a healthy democracy.

Researchers Ekaterina Kolpinskaya and Oliver Bennett **cited** existing evidence that showed a good starting point would be for politicians to win public trust by aligning their policy priorities with society's values and by demonstrating their own competence and honesty.

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More steps should meanwhile also be taken to foster great political engagement, particularly among marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

Beyond these sensible goals, the British should also remind themselves that politics is an activity and not a commodity. Particularly on a local level, there should be opportunities for people to show that their wishes and opinions count.

## A solid democratic framework in need of repair

Britain has a solid democratic framework, but, like its parliament building, those underpinnings need some urgent updates and repairs.

In an uncertain world, Western-style democracies are under pressure everywhere, and it is not just their own sometimes venal politicians who are to blame.



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In the last century, the British resisted the siren calls of both Fascism and Communism and kept their democracy alive while it was

being eclipsed elsewhere.

That sentiment persists, although there are worrying signs that some, including among the young, are being tempted to muse about more authoritarian alternatives.

This is a frustrating era for electorates in the UK and beyond. But democracy has plenty of life in it yet, as long as it can evolve away from a them-and-us relationship between regular citizens and a political caste that determines their fate.

What is needed to confront the challenges of the age is more democracy, not less.