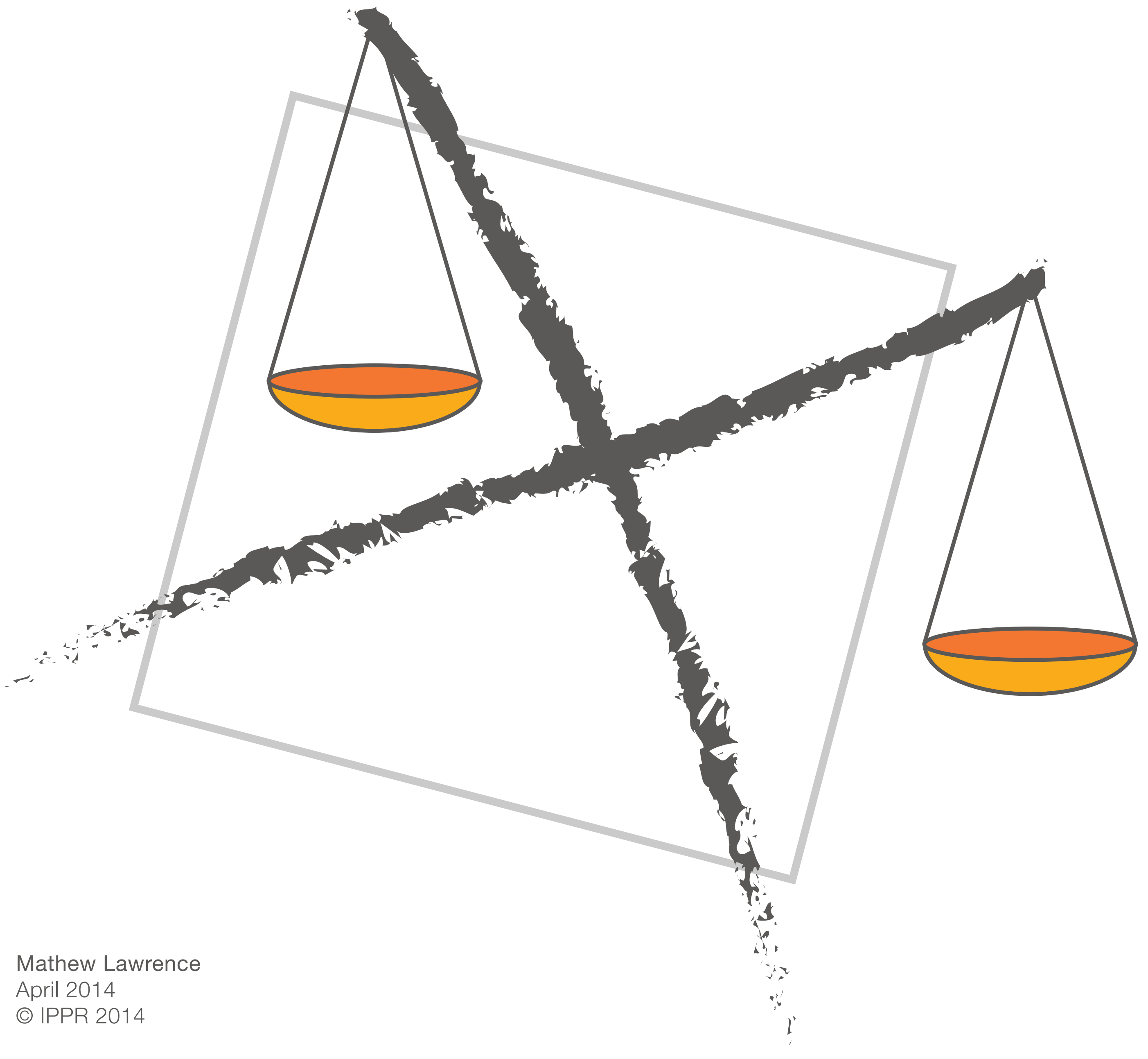
IPPR

REPORT

POLITICAL INEQUALITY

WHY BRITISH DEMOCRACY MUST BE REFORMED AND REVITALISED



Mathew Lawrence

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Institute for Public Policy Research

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BOLD IDEAS
for CHANGE

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SUMMARY

Political inequality threatens the integrity of British democracy. As the general election approaches, many of the symptoms of the democratic distress we are experiencing are rooted in its existence. Growing levels of electoral inequality by age and class, falling political participation rates, and low levels of belief in the efficacy of democracy, all reflect an ingrained sense that the political process is rigged in favour of the rich, the powerful and the well connected.

Political inequality is when certain individuals or groups have greater influence over political decision-making and benefit from unequal outcomes through those decisions, despite procedural equality in the democratic process. As such, it undermines a central democratic ideal: that all citizens, regardless of status, should be given equal consideration in and opportunity to influence collective political decision-making.

If we are to revive our democracy, regardless of the result in May, tackling political inequality must therefore become the fundamental goal of political and constitutional reform in the next parliament. To do so, however, it is critical we better understand the nature of political inequality and how it manifests itself.

The purpose of this report is therefore to define and explore the concept of political inequality, a phenomenon that remains underexplored in the British context. A second report based on the insights this report generates will follow in the spring, setting out a strategy for reversing political inequality, and providing detailed original case studies of examples of political inequality.

We begin by defining the concept of political inequality and why it matters, both from normative democratic concerns, and due to its effect on social and economic outcomes. Original polling for this report, which highlights stark class-based inequalities in the perception of how our democracy operates – and for whose benefit – demonstrates the degree of the problem. Only one in four DE voters, for example, believes democracy addresses their interests well, a 20 point difference compared to AB voters. A striking 63 per cent think it serves their interests badly. We must better understand why this is the case, and political inequality's role in causing it, if we are to address such disparities of experience.

The report then explores the academic literature emerging around the concept, which provides important insights into how political inequality occurs and to what consequence. In particular we investigate the relationship between political and economic inequality, the hollowing out of political parties, the broader phenomenon of post-democracy, and how questions of political economy shape the nature of political inequality.

Finally, we conduct a survey of political inequality in the UK today, examining who participates in political life, both formally, through voting and participating in political activity, and informally, through analysing who has voice and who is represented in British politics. What is clear is that differences in participation and influence by class and age are evident in almost all aspects of the political process. Political inequality appears ingrained, to the detriment of British democracy.

This analysis helps us to identify areas of thinking or potential action which are not prominent in the current political reform debate, and which will inform a follow-up report later in 2015 which sets out a strategy for tackling the problem.

- An agenda focussed on reversing political inequality must be far more sensitive to the effects of class and age in terms of who participates – and has influence – politically.
- Political inequality is intimately bound up in other socioeconomic inequalities.
- Devolution provides a critical opportunity to combat political inequality, potentially giving people a greater say over political decision-making in their locality and helping redress the overcentralisation of power in Whitehall.
- More broadly, the evidence presented suggests representative democracy needs a reboot.
- Political inequality is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, manifesting itself in multiple spheres in society.

Of course, there are many signs of democratic vitality in the UK today, from the mobilisation of all parts of Scottish society during and after the independence referendum, to civic campaigns across the country, for example for the living wage or affordable housing, to new forms of political activity facilitated by new networked technologies and the internet.

Nonetheless, the extensive nature of political inequality that we set out suggests that a strategy for democratic revival – rooted explicitly in tackling inequalities of participation and influence – is desperately needed. By better understanding the phenomenon of political inequality this report hopes to contribute towards such efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Growing democratic discontent – rising disaffection, falling participation, a surging 'anti-politics' populism – is a symptom of a deeper problem: stark, ingrained levels of political inequality in our political system. As the general election approaches, admirable efforts are being made to reverse some indicators of unequal political participation and influence, such as in recent campaigns to increase voting rates among the young.[1] These efforts are critical, yet far more is required as political inequality threatens the integrity and efficacy of British democracy.

Political inequality exists where, despite a procedurally equal democratic process with universal suffrage and regular elections, certain groups, classes or individuals have greater influence over and participate more in political decision-making processes, with policy outcomes systematically weighted in their favour. Democracy consequently appears unresponsive to the interests or preferences of the majority, subjecting those with fewer political resources to domination or systematic exclusion from political power, while being highly responsive to the needs of powerful but often weakly accountable individuals, groups or organisations.

Reversing systemic political inequality is therefore foundational to broader political renewal and should be the central task of democratic reformers, regardless of the general election result. To do so, however, we must better understand the phenomenon. The purpose of this report is consequently to introduce and define the concept of political inequality and survey its existence in the UK. Although an unfamiliar concept in the British context, political inequality offers a new analytical lens to familiar debates about political disenchantment and electoral disengagement, suggesting there are deeper structural reasons for these phenomena than simply a dislike of today's political class or public apathy. Rather they are rooted in inequalities within how our democracy actually operates, with some groups having more influence over – and consequently benefiting more from – government decision-making than others, through sustained, differing levels of participation, representation and voice in the political process.

Of course, all democracies suffer from a degree of political inequality. However, it is aggravated in the UK by historic features of our political system: a majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system for national elections; the disproportionate importance of marginal seats in the electoral system; the extent to which most of our political parties are dependent on large-scale private donations to fund their operation; and the degree to which an unusually centralised state leaves the political process vulnerable to capture. These specific characteristics magnify political inequality in the UK compared to other European democracies, a problem compounded by the unusually large differences in participation by class and age-group in the UK as against other democracies. In these critical areas, the UK is a democratic outlier in Europe.

To better understand political inequality in the UK we begin by briefly setting out the distinctive and well-known features of our political system that accentuate

1 For example, see the ***Bite the Ballot*** initiative (http://bitetheballot.co.uk/), or the ***xx Vote campaign*** (http://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/XXVOTE-Campaign/), respectively targeted at increasing the turnout of young people in general, and younger female voters in particular.

political inequality, before examining a critical manifestation of it in the UK today: unequal electoral participation rates and perceptions of democratic efficacy by class and age-group. We then offer an explanation for why political inequality has increased and suggest a potential route to democratic renewal.

The second section sets out why political inequality should concern us all, both from normative concerns about the health of our democracy, and for its social and economic consequences.

In the third section we examine the emerging body of literature that has developed the concept, focussing particularly on US-based scholarship that has done most to conceptualise the idea of political inequality. Of course, both the UK and the US have specific political institutions and traditions that shape how political inequality manifests itself in each country. Nonetheless, despite these differences, the literature is helpful in introducing critical new themes into debates around democratic reform in the UK, especially around the relationship between political and economic inequality, the hollowing out of democratic institutions such as political parties, and the broader phenomenon of the post-democratic drive to insulate public institutions from popular democratic pressure.

We conclude the report by surveying the evolving scale of political inequality in the UK through examining who participates in formal and informal political action and how, who funds political parties, what role the media plays in our democracy, and the impact of lobbying. In doing so, we aim to show what forms of political inequality are of particular concern in the UK today, to help provide a focus for reform for an accompanying report due in the spring. The second report will set out a series of new and detailed case studies of political inequality in the UK as it exists today. More broadly, by drawing on the insights gleaned from a political inequality analysis, that report will set out a strategy to reverse political inequality and outline new areas of potential action that are not prominent in the current political reform debate. Whatever the result at the next general election, for the health of our democracy it is vital that such an agenda is pursued.

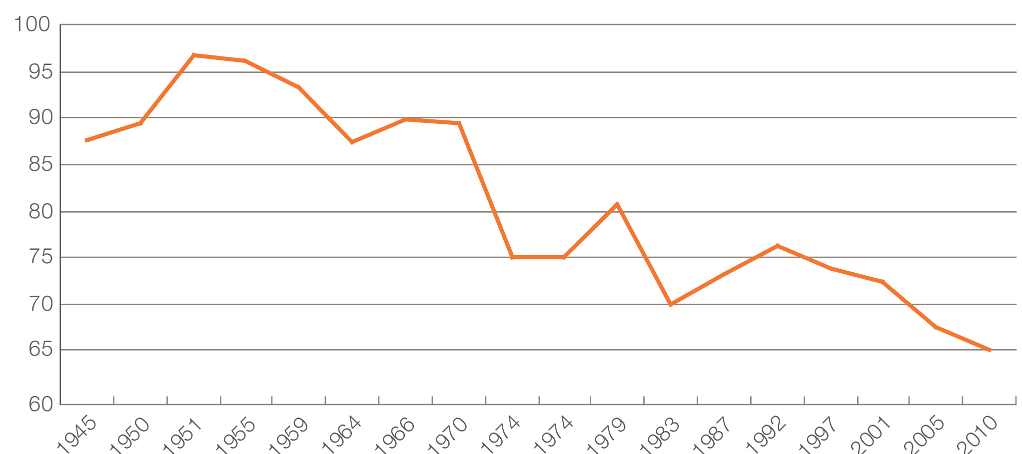
1.
POLITICAL INEQUALITY IN THE UK: CAUSES, SYMPTOMS AND ROUTES TO RENEWAL

Political inequality is not unique to the UK nor is it a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, there are specific features of our national political system that amplify the scale of political inequality here compared to other European democracies. While many of the historic features of the UK's political system are well known, it is worth briefly restating them before setting out how class and age profoundly shape who participates and has influence in politics.

1.1 The first-past-the-post electoral system

As support for the traditional electoral duopoly has declined (see figure 1.1) and the electoral geography of the UK has shifted, the inadequacy of the first-past-the post (FPTP) system in ensuring all voters are of equal importance in influencing who forms the national government has become more marked. For example, at the last general election, 69 per cent of the electorate (approximately 20.5 million people) lived and voted in safe seats; their votes had almost no chance of changing the local or national result (see table 1.1). Overall, around 15.7 million votes were cast for losing candidates, comprising approximately 53 per cent of all voters, with voters who lived in marginal seats possessing disproportionate influence over who would form the government.

Figure 1.1
The decline of the two-party vote in general elections, 1945–2010 (%)



Source: Lodge 2011: 5

Table 1.1
Marginal and safe seats in 2010 general election

Status	Seats
Marginal	194
Super marginal	88
Safe	438
Super safe	58

Source: Lodge 2011: 10
Note: Great Britain only; marginal seat defined as having a majority of less than 10 per cent; super marginal seat defined as having a majority of less than 5 per cent; safe seat defined as having a majority greater than 10 per cent; super safe seat defined as having a majority greater than 35 per cent.

The FPTP system, moreover, produces highly disproportionate results in terms of party representation in parliament, rewarding geographic concentration of support over the actual number of votes won. For example, in the 2010 general election it took 33,468 votes to elect a Labour MP, 35,028 votes to elect a Conservative MP, and 119,780 votes to elect a Liberal Democrat MP. Ukip, meanwhile, received 900,000 votes nationally without electing an MP. This disproportionality is expected to continue at the upcoming general election.

Of course, all electoral systems have their strengths and weaknesses. Nonetheless, the current FPTP system distorts political equality, with voters systematically discounted as political equals due to their unequal influence over the formation of the national government.

1.2 The disproportionate importance of marginal seats

Despite the significant weakening of support for the two traditional major parties in recent decades, the number of marginal seats has actually halved – from just above 160 in 1955 to roughly 80 in 2010 (Lodge 2011). In other words, even as the UK has increasingly developed into a multiparty system in terms of public support, more seats, typically from the old party duopoly, tend to remain safe. As a result, voters in the remaining marginal seats have far more sway over who forms the next government than voters in non-marginal seats. Indeed, as one analysis of the 2010 general election suggested, 'the most powerful 20 per cent of voters have 21 times as much power as the least powerful' – where 'power' is based on the chance of a seat changing hands and the number of voters required to do so in each constituency (Whitehead 2011).

Consequently by virtue of an accident of geography, a minority of voters living in marginal constituencies have disproportionate power in deciding the result of national elections due to the bias of the electoral system. As a result, the political process risks focussing on the concerns of those living in a small number of marginal seats rather than seeking to address the interests of all voters.

1.3 Party funding

The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 introduced three main reforms to party funding: it required all political parties to register with the newly created Electoral Commission; it set down accounting requirements for political parties; and it introduced controls on donations. As a result, donations in excess of £500 can only be accepted if they are from a 'permissible donor', defined as either individuals on the electoral register, or political parties, companies, trade unions or similar organisations that are registered in the UK. The act also introduced spending limits during elections, both for political parties and third parties. The act was supplemented by the Electoral Administration Act 2006, which increased transparency requirements on the reporting of donations.

Nonetheless, despite reform seeking to constrain the influence of organised money on the political process, wealthy individuals and organisations continue to have an outsized role in funding political parties, and, therefore, exercise a critical influence over the operation of the UK's political system. For example, between 2001 and mid-2010, just 224 donations, originating from fewer than 60 separate sources, accounted for nearly 40 per cent of the three major parties' declared donation income (Wilks-Heeg 2010). In 2014, meanwhile, political parties accepted £65.7 million in donations and loans, nearly double the £35.8 million of 2013, much of it from wealthy individuals (see table 1.2). For example, the largest donor to the Conservative party in the fourth quarter of 2014 was Mr Michael Gooley at £500,000, the largest donor for the Liberal Democrats Mr Max Batley at £400,000, while Labour's largest donor was the trade union UNISON at £1,384,289 (Electoral Commission 2015).

Table 1.2
Total of all donations (excluding public funds), by political party, 2013 versus 2014

Political party	Donations excluding public funds in 2014	Donations excluding public funds in 2013
Conservative	£28,930,508	£15,904,171
Labour	£18,747,702	£13,307,696
Liberal Democrats	£8,221,771	£3,870,637
UK Independence (Ukip)	£3,847,474	£668,829
Green	£661,410	£190,338
Scottish National (SNP)	£3,772,594	£41,500

Source: Electoral Commission 2015

This combination of a majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system for national elections running alongside a funding system dominated by wealthy individuals and trade unions is unusual within a European context. The majority of European national democracies operate a system of proportional representation while providing public funding for political parties (IDEA 2004). Although there have been efforts to address this imbalance with the devolved parliaments of Scotland and Wales, for example, both operating a more proportionate electoral system, overall the basic and distinctive characteristic of the UK's national political system has magnified the extent of political inequality in our democracy by giving disproportionate influence to certain groups, be they marginal seat-based voters or donors.

1.4 Inequalities in age and class-based political participation

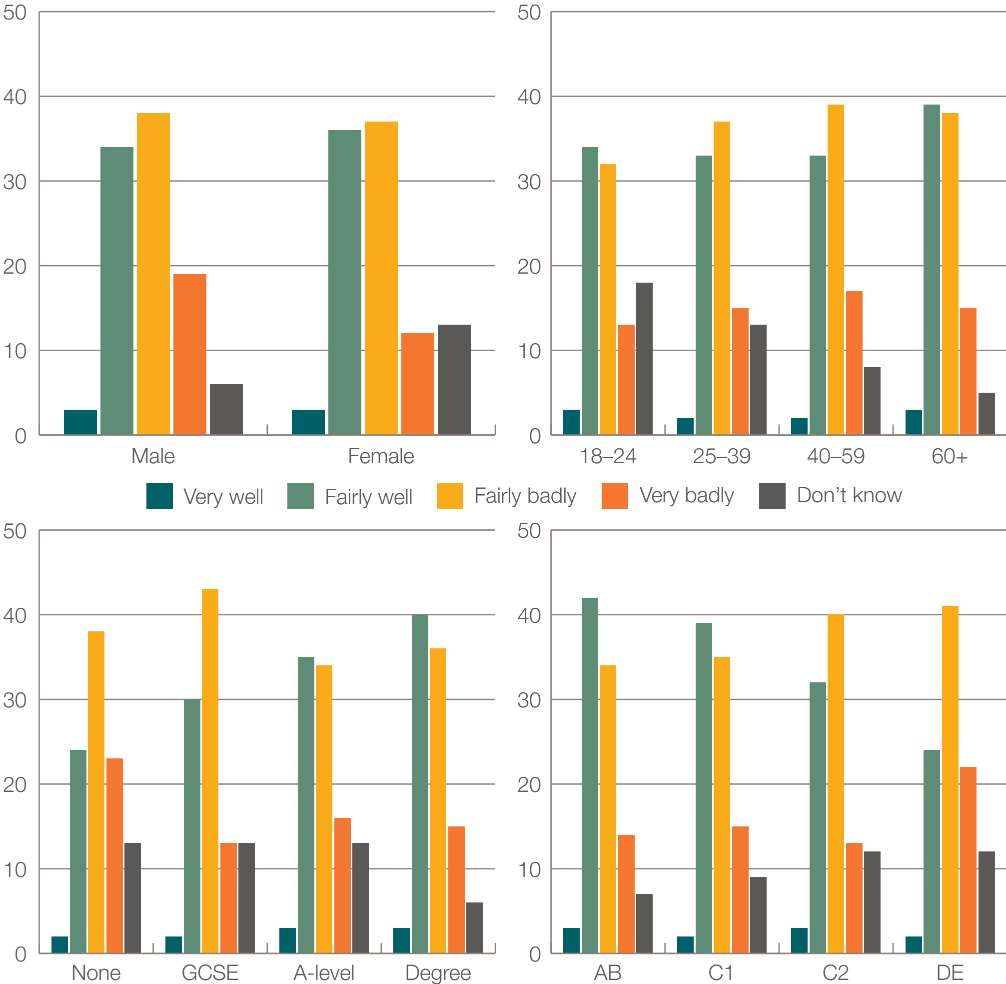
If the UK faces a set of structural challenges that undermine the principle of political equality, IPPR's original polling for this report (YouGov/IPPR 2014[2]) demonstrates the scale of political inequality within the UK and why political inequality is therefore such a challenge to democratic ideals, particularly the enduring importance of class in determining the responsiveness (or perceived responsiveness) of the state and political actors to particular class interests. Democracies should ensure the interests of all people bound by the decisions of a political community are considered in collective decision-making processes; if certain groups, individuals or classes dominate the process, or others are not effectively considered, democracy is undermined.

As figure 1.2 shows, this appears to be the case in the UK today. While voters in class occupations AB are fairly evenly split between whether democracy in Britain

2 All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,514 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 9–11 September 2014. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

addresses well or badly the interests of people like them, by significant majorities individuals in occupation classes C2 (-18) and DE (-38) think democracy serves their interests poorly. Indeed, only one in four DE individuals believes democracy addresses their interests well, a 20 point difference to AB individuals. A striking 63 per cent think it serves their interests badly. Even if all categories have a negative overall view of how effectively democracy serves their interests, the striking differentials between classes suggest a widespread sense that some people or classes have more influence than others and that democracy serves some interests far better than others. Indeed, our polling suggests that for many, democracy appears a game rigged in favour of the powerful and the well connected.

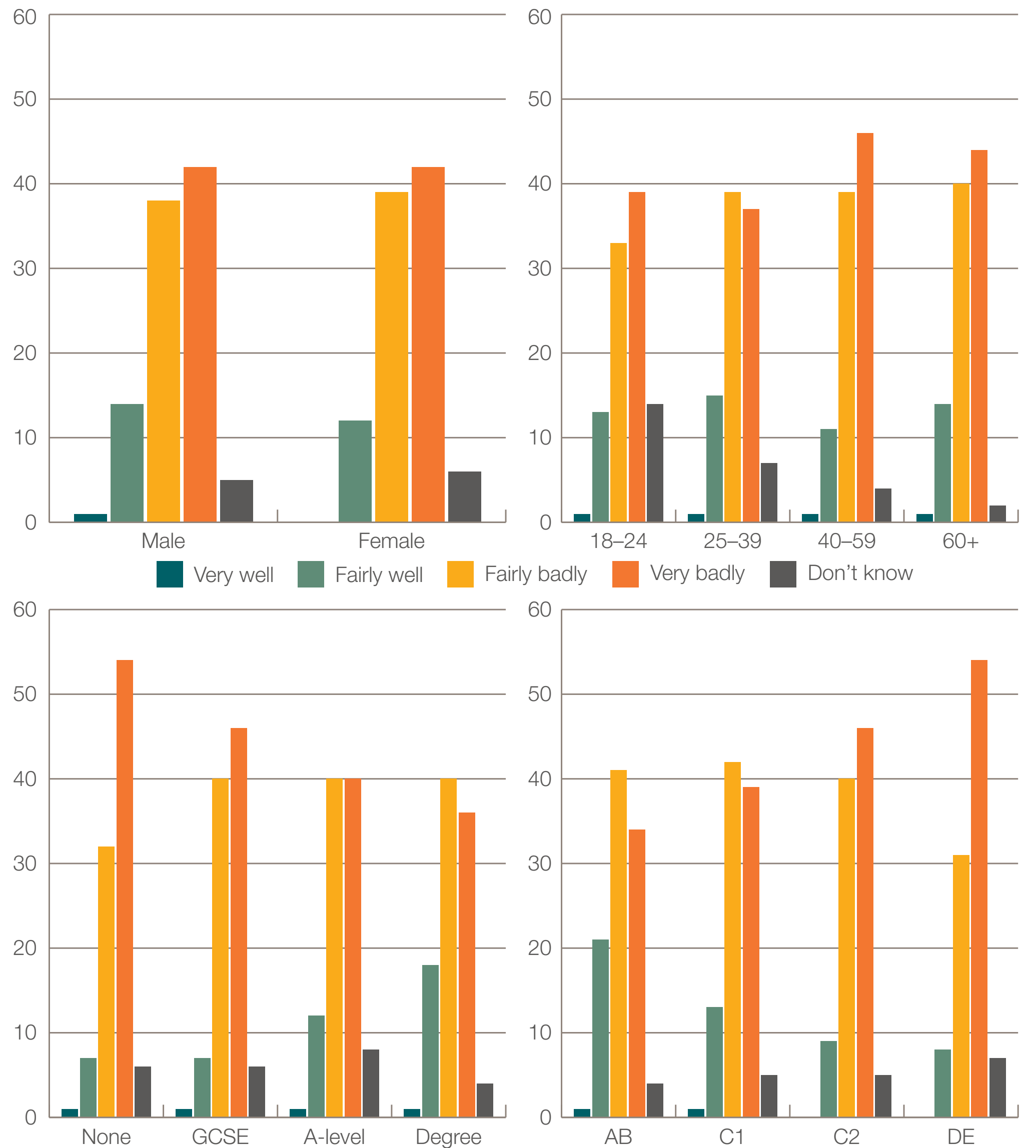
Figure 1.2
How well do you think democracy in Britain as a whole addresses the interests of people like you? (%)



Source: YouGov/IPPR original polling, 2014

Similarly, there is a clear, if less stark, educational and demographic divide, with those with higher levels of formal education and older voters believing democracy in Britain serves them better than younger and less formally educated voters. Meanwhile, as figure 1.3 makes very clear, few feel politicians understand their lives; though again, C2 and DE voters feel this most strongly, with less than one in 10 believing they do.

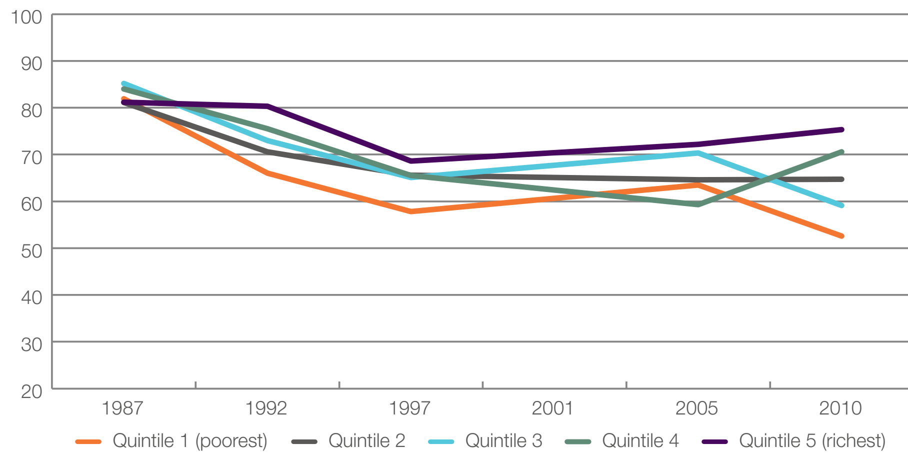
Figure 1.3
How well do you think politicians understand the lives of people like you? (%)



Source: YouGov/IPPR original polling, 2014

Participation in electoral democracy – much like perceptions of democracy's efficacy and representativeness – is starkly weighted by class. In the 2010 general election for instance, only 53 per cent of those within the lowest income quintile voted, compared to 75 per cent of those in the highest income quintile (Birch et al 2013). Importantly, as figure 1.4 demonstrates, the gap between turnout rates among richer and poorer individuals is growing. Turnout among all income quintiles was above 80 per cent in the 1980s. Yet by 2010 the poorest quintile turnout rate was 22.7 per cent below the highest income group, compared to only a 4 per cent difference in 1987, representing just over a fivefold increase. This meant someone in the richest quintile was 43 per cent more likely to vote in 2010 than someone in the lowest income quintile, with clear inequalities of influence between rich and poor at the ballot box as a result.

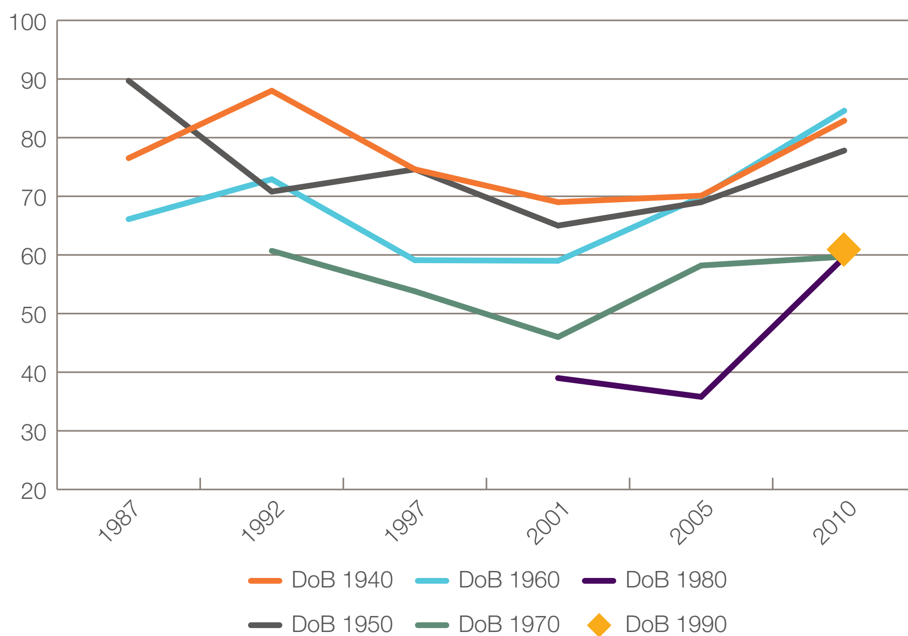
Figure 1.4
Estimated turnout changes by income group, 1987–2010 (%)



Source: Birch et al 2013: 8

Similarly, as figure 1.5 demonstrates, there is a clear and growing age divide in terms of who votes, with turnout among cohorts born in 1970, 1980 and 1990 lower than for older cohorts when they were first eligible to vote and – critically – have remained at a lower rate. For example, in 2010, turnout rates for those aged 18 to 24 slumped to just 44 per cent in 2010 compared to 76 per cent of those aged 65 or over. By contrast the age differential in 1970 between those groups was 18 per cent (Birch et al 2013). Moreover, age-based inequality is set to continue, with only 37 per cent of 18–24-year-old voters stating they are certain to vote at the next general election, compared to 70 per cent of 65-year-old voters and older (Ashcroft 2015). Democracy on current trends risks becoming a quasi-gerontocracy.

Figure 1.5
Estimated turnout changes by age-group, 1987–2010 (%)



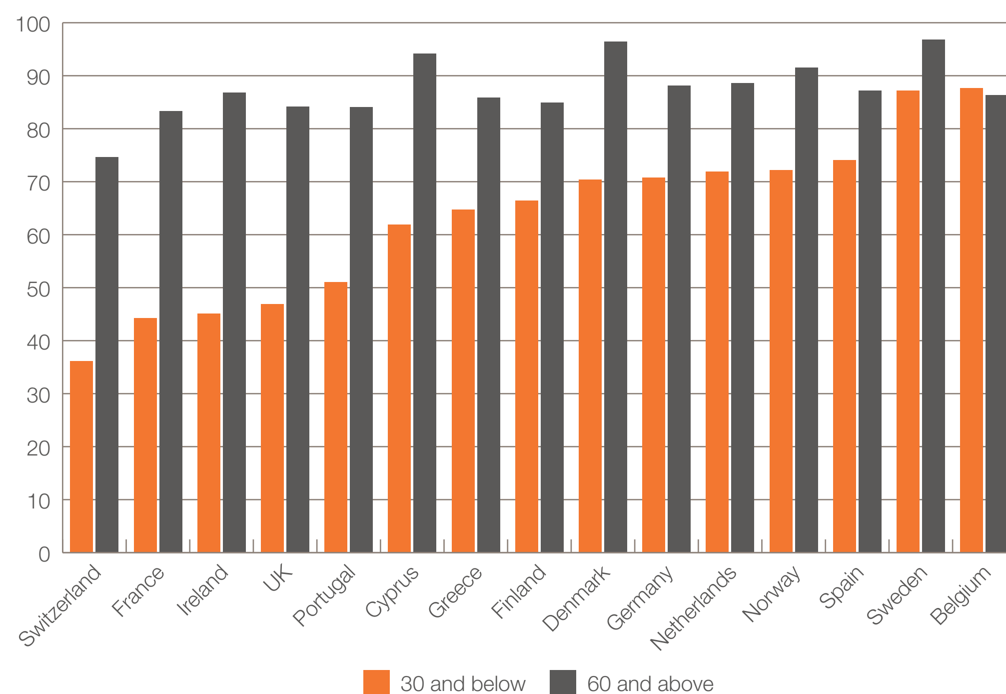
Source: Birch et al 2013: 7

The long-run decline in electoral turnout in the UK is therefore being driven by the relative collapse in electoral participation among the young and the less well-off, not by a uniform decline in turnout among all demographic groups. As a result, electoral inequality based on a distinctive non-voting population – generally younger and poorer – heightens political inequality by giving some groups far greater influence at the ballot box as a whole.

Furthermore, as figures 1.6 and 1.7 highlight, Britain fares poorly against other European democracies, both in its absolute turnout rates and crucially in the differential in turnout rates between youngest and oldest, and richest and poorest. While across almost all of Europe the rich and the old vote in higher numbers than younger and poorer voters, Britain is striking in the size of the gap, with a larger difference in the electoral power of the respective demographic and class groups as a consequence. We are clear outliers among European democracies, with starker inequalities in participation by class and age-group in terms of who votes.

Figure 1.6

Turnout by age-group (up to 30 versus 60 and over) across Europe at last national general election (%)



Source: Birch et al 2013 (from European Social Survey 2010 – wave 5)
Note: Question asks 'Did you vote at the last national election?' Does not include those who were ineligible to vote at last election.

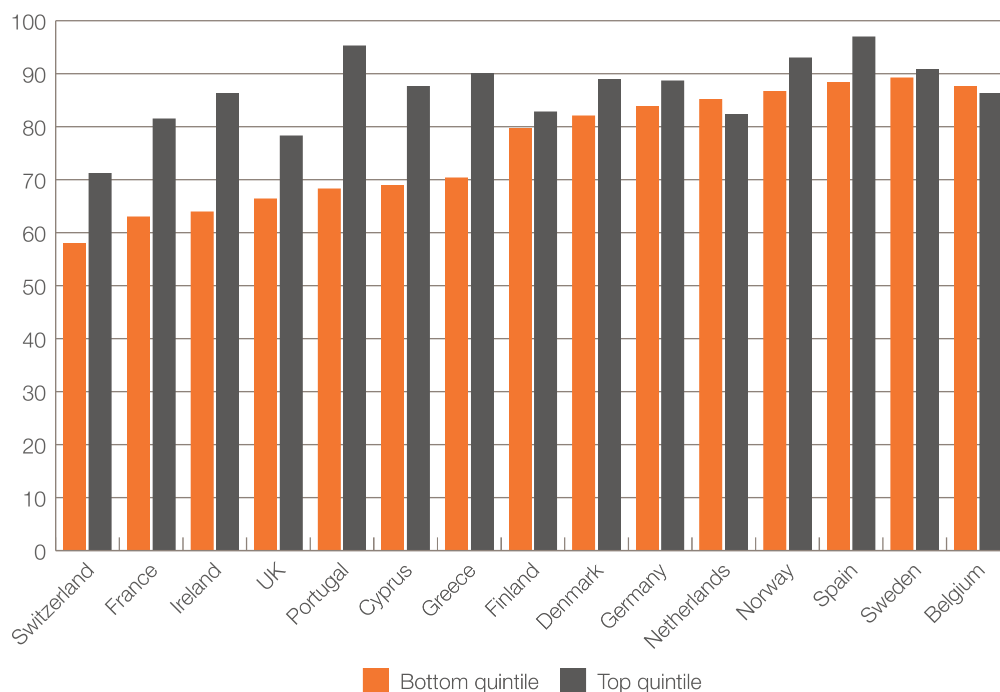
Inequalities by class in electoral participation and the perceived responsiveness of the political system are also reflected in perceptions of influence. The Hansard Society's most recent Audit of Political Engagement showed that 32 per cent of AB voters believe they have the ability to influence political decisions compared to only 19 per cent of DEs (Hansard Society 2014). An even larger number of AB voters – 66 per cent – have taken some form of activity to influence political decision-

making, laws or policies in the last year[3] and 92 per cent say they would if they felt strong enough. For C1s, it is 53 per cent and 85 per cent respectively; for C2s, 37 per cent and 70 per cent; and for DEs, 32 per cent and 68 per cent (ibid).

Clearly then, despite procedural equality in our democracy in terms of a universal franchise, who participates in political life and who feels they have influence is sharply structured along class and demographic lines. We are politically unequal as a society as groups and individuals with greater economic and social resources participate more, have greater belief in, and have greater influence over the political process and government decision-making. Moreover, this input-based inequality in the political process can lead to inequalities in the outcome of political decision-making, reinforcing patterns of political and economic inequality. As the election approaches, with polling consistently suggesting levels of turnout inequality by class and age will be similar if not worse than the previous general election (Ashcroft 2015), the entrenching of the UK's divided democracy should be of deep democratic concern.

Figure 1.7

Turnout by income quintile (poorest fifth versus richest fifth) across Europe at last national election (%)



Source: Birch et al 2013 (from European Social Survey 2010 – wave 5)
Note: Question asks 'Did you vote at the last national election?' Does not include those who were ineligible to vote at last election.

3 Participation includes voting but also non-electoral forms of participation, from attending demonstrations and meetings to signing petitions, participating in online campaigns or donating money to charities or political parties.

1.5 The roots of political inequality

These imbalances and divisions are symptoms of a deeper problem – political inequality – the growth of which has deep roots. Many of the institutions and political cultures that helped legitimate and sustain representative parliamentary democracy in the latter half of the 20th century are fragmenting and breaking down in the 21st. A political system with an effective electoral duopoly that enjoyed high political participation rates has given way to an era of multiparty competition, while mass political parties, once buttressed by settled class structures and institutions of political formation such as broad-based trade unions, have hollowed out and become socially deracinated. The forms of technological, cultural, economic and social change driving this process are only likely to accelerate; globalisation will continue to reshape the capacity of states to act while growing individualisation will reshape traditional forms of collective action and identity (Rosanvallon 2013).

Critically, this dynamic has reduced the efficacy and reach of the institutions and practices of postwar mass democracy, which, however imperfectly, was able to mobilise and advance the political influence of sections of society who our evidence suggests now feel politically excluded and without influence. Yet no equivalent set of political institutions has yet been invented or existing ones sufficiently revitalised that can constrain the advance of political inequality today. Powerful economic and political elites accordingly now face much weaker countervailing forms of democratic power when setting agenda, laws and policies as the long, ongoing transformation of postwar capitalism has seen political power gravitate away from democratic institutions, the electorate and the labour force, and towards institutions and economic actors insulated from popular, democratic pressure (see Streeck 2014).

In so doing, the old fear of liberal democratic theorists, that democracy would lead to the tyranny of the majority, has increasingly been replaced by a fear of the tyranny of the minority; we have gone from Mill to Piketty, from a fear of the masses to the problem of the 1 per cent as the chief threat to democratic equality. This is not to suggest that in the past the political system did not privilege the interests and choices of particular individuals or classes, whether based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality or economic status. The trajectory of political inequality is not linear and some aspects of our democracy have clearly improved. However, it is to suggest that as older forms of political mobilisation have withered and material inequalities have widened in the past three decades, both in the UK and in other developed democracies, political inequality has increased.

1.6 A route to democratic renewal

So, as the old order struggles and the new is not yet fully formed, morbid symptoms abound: growing popular disenchantment with formal politics and a sense of a political process emptied out of content or relevance for ordinary life. Yet those same forces accelerating the fragmentation of the old also offer the possibility of democratic renewal: new forms of communication and emerging social identities are breaking down old hierarchies of politics and production, allowing for new ways of participating and organising political and economic life. Though not preordained to do so, new networked technologies increasingly offer the potential for more democratic, responsive forms of politics and organisation, expanding who has voice within society and facilitating new forms of political mobilisation and influence. The challenge is therefore to build up institutions that strengthen new forms of democratic voice and influence while reviving what is necessary – broad-based political parties and other institutions of collective voice; mass political participation in formal and informal politics – of the old democratic order.

Discrete constitutional reform of the institutions and practices of representative democracy are therefore necessary but no longer sufficient in sustaining an agenda that must have reducing political inequality as its primary goal. As the political and

economic contexts have changed and become more complex and multilayered since the days of Charter 88, so must the modern democratic reform agenda. Of course, today's broader constitutional setting – an unelected second chamber, an unrepresentative electoral system, a European Union largely insulated from democratic pressure, a hereditary head of state – remains hierarchical and only loosely democratic in spirit and process, if at all, and much of the traditional constitutional reform agenda remains important.

However, many of its solutions remain too insensitive to class and demographic dimensions in how our political system operates; structural political inequalities in who participate and has voice will not end with a codified constitution and a more proportionate electoral system. If each citizen is to have the ability to exercise and influence political power in the ballot box but also beyond it, reform cannot stop there. Countervailing democratic institutions and practices that are more participatory, deliberative and powerful will also have to be institutionalised and experimented with that can better disperse and democratise political power, both within but also beyond the channels of representative democracy.

Prosecuting such an agenda will be difficult but it is not insurmountable. Our political fate is not sealed; the hollowing out of western democracy is not inevitable. For we remain optimistic about British democracy in general, even if the current political order in particular is struggling for popular purchase or legitimacy. From the widescale democratic mobilisation witnessed during and after the Scottish referendum to the grassroots energy of groups such as the New Era estate housing campaign, from the expansion of social media and online campaigning to the rapid growth of traditionally less-established political parties, there is diversity and dynamism in politics across the ideological spectrum and much flux in the political system. Moreover, the general election could still produce dramatic ruptures in the constitutional and political balance of British politics and the polity. The goal is to ensure that, in taking inspiration from these signs of revival, society is able to turn the theory of political equality into the actual ordinary experience of democratic life. To do that, however, we must better understand the phenomenon of political inequality.

2.
DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL INEQUALITY: A WORKING DEFINITION

> *'Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruit in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between people, and their beliefs – in religion, literature, colleges and schools – democracy in all public and private life…'*
> ***Democratic vistas***, Walt Whitman, 1871

Our definition of political inequality is embedded in a particular view of democracy. At its most basic level, democracy is a system of government in which power is vested in the people, who rule either directly, or more commonly, through freely and competitively elected representatives based on the principle of universal suffrage. This is typically supported by a set of common rights, in particular freedom of association, organisation and expression. As a consequence, democracies should guarantee formal equality of respect to all individuals, where 'in arriving at decisions, the government give equal consideration to the good and interests of every person bound by those decisions' (Dahl 1998).

Wider material inequalities should not constrain participation nor should the political process entrench privilege by favouring the preferences of elites when they clash with the majority. Each citizen should have the ability to exercise and influence power through a range of routes, directed at institutions of political, social and economic authority. Public policy, meanwhile, should be implemented impartially, such that no individuals or groups are singled out for special treatment under the law or in the benefits they receive from the state.

Moreover, democracy, as Walt Whitman captures, should be plural, open, egalitarian, hard-fought, generous and vibrant – with political authority and decision-making based on the consent and participation of all members of society, with the preferences and interests of each person being given consideration in the decision-making process. It should therefore be conceived of as a whole way of life; the contest and consent of the ballot box is the foundational ballast, but on its own cannot support the rich, contested messiness of everyday democracy.

As Amartya Sen argues, democracy is public reasoning. It should be understood not just in the existence of competitive elections, but, more broadly, through ensuring all have the opportunity to influence and hold political decision-making accountable through 'political participation, dialogue, and public interaction' (Sen 2010). Of course there will be winners and losers – equal consideration does not amount to equal sway over political outcomes – but the outcome of this contest should rest on the strength of argument, organisation and democratic mobilisation, not on who can shout the loudest or who has the most resources, be they social, economic or cultural, to dominate the political agenda.

Democratic institutions, furthermore, should be potent sources of collective power, capable of re-imagining the institutions and practices that govern social and economic life (see Muir and Parker 2014, Gilbert and Fisher 2014). Democracy should be alive to and allow for institutional reinvention, with public democratic endeavour being capable of reimagining our common institutions, with the process open to the influence and consideration of all citizens.

The existence of political inequality threatens these democratic ideals. Political inequality is the ability of certain individuals or groups to influence the political decision-making process more than the rest of society, based on the unequal distribution of political, social and economic resources within society. Political inequality therefore reflects 'both unequal influence over decisions made by political bodies and the unequal outcomes of those decisions', with outsiders to the political system most disadvantaged (Dubrow 2014).

Who participates politically, who is heard, how the government reacts and to what effect are consequently all determined by an individual's socioeconomic position or the relative power of the organisation seeking to exercise influence over government decision-making. As such, political inequality is enmeshed in other forms of inequality in society, reflecting a form of power inequality within the political process.[4] Moreover, it is power exercised in a way that often lacks public transparency or accountability.

Formal political and legal equality – universal suffrage, the rule of law and rights to free expression, association and organisation – is consequently necessary for political equality to exist between citizens, but it is not sufficient. Rather, society remains politically unequal to the extent that particular individuals and/or groups are able to exercise and protect political power and make it respond to their interests via non-democratic agencies and practices, a term borrowed from Peter Mair (2013), therefore leaving the practice of policy decision-making largely unaccountable and biased in favour of those with the most political and economic resources, while subjecting those with fewer resources to domination or systematic exclusion from political power. This bias is both explicit, in the unequal balance of resources mobilised to affect the political process, and implicit, in how the interests of the powerful define the language, scope and material outcomes of political debate and decision-making.

Political equality therefore requires the revival of representative democracy, particularly higher electoral participation across all classes and social groups. However, institutional democratic equality, as represented through free, competitive elections, is not enough. It also needs expanded and deepened forms of citizen participation and deliberation in broader social life to challenge inequalities of influence that arise from concentrations of wealth, access and power. As the Harvard-based Archon Fung and Joshua Cohen ague, deliberation can blunt 'the power of greater resources with the force of better arguments; participation, because shifting the basis of political contestation from organised money to organised people is the most promising antidote to the influence conferred by wealth' (Cohen and Fung 2004). Any legitimate mass democracy must therefore necessarily be organised as a system of competitive representation, but a richer democratic life requires more than simply formal representative democracy if it is to address political inequality.

2.1 Why political inequality matters

The existence of political inequality is a problem in and of itself. It offends our normative commitment to a democracy where each citizen is able to exercise and influence power – and where political power is not undemocratically and unaccountably controlled. Alongside this primary reason, it also has significant practical impacts and consequences of concern even to those who may not care about the existence of political inequality in and of itself. In particular, it has the potential to harm the integrity of the political process and to affect how society and the economy are subsequently organised.

4 Power, in this case, is the ability of people to realise their wants, even if others oppose them.

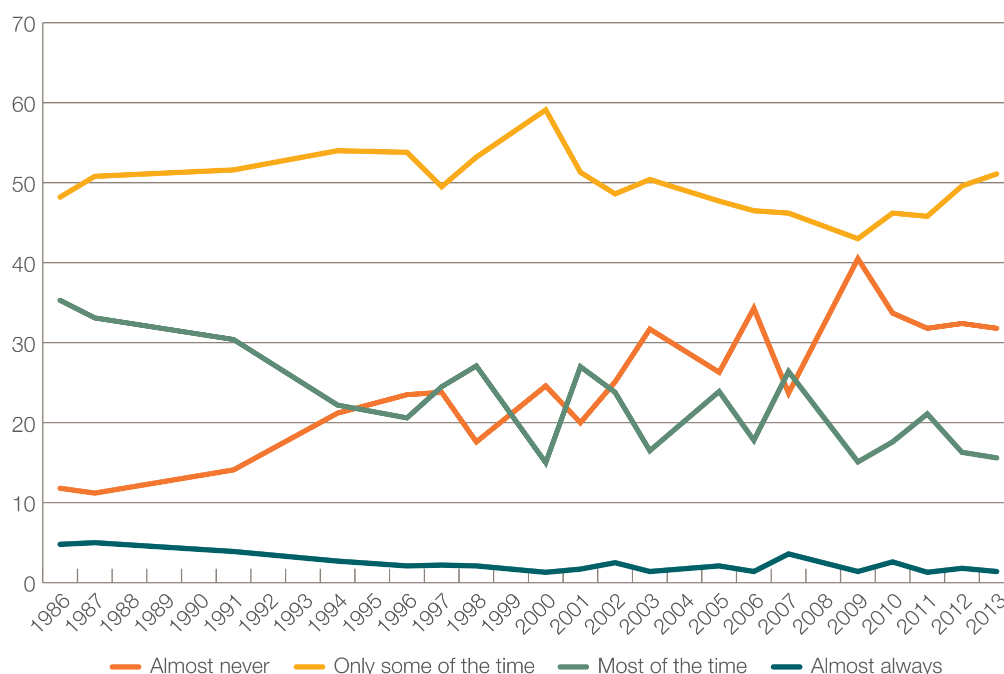
First, political inequality insulates political decision-makers from responding – or being perceived to respond – effectively to the whole public. For example, original YouGov/IPPR polling data for this report suggested nearly two out of three working-class citizens surveyed do not believe democracy in Britain adequately addresses their interests, a significantly worse gap than middle-class voters. Arguably partly as a result of this sense of exclusion – whether real or perceived – increasing numbers are removing themselves from participation in electoral politics. Moreover, as we have seen, electoral inequality is a problem that is getting worse: as explained, turnout differentials between classes and demographic groups have got significantly worse over time, since the 1980s and are predicted to continue at the next general election.

Such differentials in turn create a vicious circle of underrepresentation and disaffection, propelling a sense that the political system no longer works for ordinary people or is capable of representing their interests. Consequently, the less powerful or effectively represented too often resile themselves to self-disenfranchisement, while their richer peers find government more responsive to their interests. Moreover, extensive political inequality also raises the question of whether elected representatives can claim to be sufficiently representative of the population as a whole when an increasingly narrow section of society elects them. Political inequality, then, reinforces the hollowing out of democracy and reflects clear class inequalities in political participation and the exercise of political power.

Similarly, an ingrained sense that the democratic system and its elected representatives do not address majoritarian concerns or understand their lives will reduce trust in democracy and the political system's legitimacy. As figure 2.1 shows, this is not a new phenomenon; the UK has never been highly trusting of its politicians. However, it is an increasingly acute phenomenon, with the party system increasingly seen as detached from the interests and experiences of ordinary voters.

Figure 2.1

Trust in British governments (of any party) to place interests of people above party, 1986–2013 (%)



Source: British Social Attitudes 2013

Note: Question asks 'How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?'

Indeed, the British Social Attitudes data in figure 2.1 shows that only roughly half the population believes that politicians place the interests of the people first at least some of the time. Moreover, this growing sense of political disenfranchisement does appear to correlate to the rise of parties that repudiate much of the established political order. For example, just 3 per cent of Ukip voters believe that politicians are trying to do their best for the country, a far lower score than other party supporters (YouGov 2014). Of course, disenchantment does not automatically equate to there being an unequal political process. It does, however, suggest that there is a pervasive sense that it is too exclusive, with a widespread perception that it is not operating for the wider public interest.

Moreover, if those with greater wealth and income have greater influence over the political process, public policy is more likely to reflect their interests and underrepresent the interests of non-participating members of society. Political inequality is therefore a problem as it can help exacerbate other socioeconomic inequalities, being both a reflection but also a cause of deepening economic inequality. For example, IPPR estimated that the 2010 spending review saw an average loss in services and benefits of £1,850 per voter compared to £2,135 per non-voter. More starkly, this represented an estimated 11.6 per cent of the annual income of voters and a full 20 per cent of the income of non-voters, with electoral inequality correlated to unequal distributional outcomes (Birch et al 2013). Of course, there are limits to such case studies: they do not prove causality, for instance. Nonetheless, the analytical weight of the claim that economic inequality is driven by political inequality is much further advanced in studies of the link between the American political system and increasing levels of economic inequality in the United States, suggesting that such a relationship could be emerging in the UK also. We shall examine this link further in the next section.

Similarly, where certain interests are able to use captured political power to entrench their interests, for example around procurement contracting processes or relevant regulatory regimes, political inequality can undermine a level economic playing field. Again, we will consider this more substantively in the following section. Yet both these arguments suggest that from concerns of both economic and political efficacy, political inequality is troubling. Alongside the normative argument against it, there are many reasons to be interested in reducing political inequality. However, to do so we must first better understand the phenomenon.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE DEBATE ABOUT POLITICAL INEQUALITY

The following section introduces a series of works and concepts that have done much to deepen our understanding of political inequality. We will examine these in turn before drawing conclusions over how we should conceive of and seek to redress political inequality in the UK. In particular we will suggest where, given the constitutional and institutional design of the political system and British state, our democracy is most vulnerable to experiencing a rise in political inequality.

3.1 Economic inequality as a function of political inequality

Political inequality is causally related to rising economic inequality; this is the central claim of an influential set of American political scientists who have been at the forefront of debates about political inequality, including Martin Gilens, Larry Bartels, Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson. Rising inequality is not simply the result of blind economic dynamics. Rather, it is the outcome of policy choices in a political system where the better organised and resourced interests of the wealthy have disproportionate influence on political decisions. Political inequality – differing levels of access, influence and voice between citizens – therefore constitutes and reinforces other forms of inequality.

For example, in *Affluence and Influence, Economic inequality and political power in America* Gilens (2012a) argues that American policymakers respond overwhelmingly to the preferences of the well-off. Analysing thousands of proposed policy changes, he suggests that the preferences of affluent Americans exhibit a strong relationship with eventual policy outcomes, regardless of what the majority of Americans think. By contrast, when middle- and low-income Americans differ from the affluent in their preferences, policy almost always follows the preferences of the wealthy. As a result, political representation effectively functions for the affluent; it is their voices that are heard.

However, the middle-class and the poor are significantly underrepresented in American democracy, with their views markedly less influential upon government policy formation, except in times when they share the preferences of the wealthy. Indeed, when it comes to policy outcomes, Gilens (2012b) concludes: 'the views of the affluent make a big difference, while support among the middle classes and the poor has virtually no relationship to policy outcomes'. The consistent unresponsiveness of the political system to the preferences of middle- and low-income Americans when they differ from the economic elite is therefore a signal of political inequality: the ideal that all citizens have reasonable influence over their government's policy decisions is not matched in practice, as elites dominate politically the rest of the citizenry when their views come into conflict over policy.

Larry Bartels makes a similar argument in *Unequal democracy: The political economy of the new gilded age* (Bartels 2008), which claims that while growing economic inequality has multiple causes, 'economic inequality is, in substantial part, a political one'. Foreshadowing Gilens, he argues that the American political system is dominated by the interests of the wealthy over other citizens, despite procedural equality in the political system. For example, he highlights how the views of the top 1 per cent of American income earners, especially the top 0.1 per cent, are both

more likely to be conservative in orientation and far more likely to be reflected in actual government policy than the preferences of the rest of the country. Gilens also shows that politics remains vital in shaping how income growth is distributed: Republican presidents in particular have consistently produced more income growth for wealthy households over middle-class and working-poor families, greatly increasing economic inequality in the process over the past four decades. This growing income gap is rooted in political decisions and processes, highlighting how unequal representation and influence has helped propel economic inequality.

Hacker and Pierson, however, argue that the institutional structure of American politics and the organisational ecology of civil society are more central to explaining growing economic inequality, rather than focussing narrowly on the decisions of political parties themselves. In *Winner Take All Politics* (Hacker and Pierson 2011), they described the political system as akin to a battleground where organisations with (usually) conflicting interests compete to shape the nation's institutional structure, with inevitable distributional consequences. Powerful organisations and individuals have consequently successfully lobbied both the Democratic and Republican parties, promoting their policy preferences and remoulding markets to suit their interests, regardless of what average voters prefer.

By contrast, Hacker and Pierson argue low- and middle-income Americans lack organisational capacity, particularly given the relative decline of labour unions. As a consequence, policy generally reflects the interests of the rich and powerful. Political inequality in this analysis reflects the withering of broad-based representative bodies, with politics increasingly captured by and directed towards furthering the interests of economic elites. While the British political system may not be captured by organised money to the extent of the US Congress, the hollowing out of the major political parties and the weakening of the labour movement in recent decades, combined with the centralised nature of the British state, suggests this analysis is of particular relevance regarding political inequality in the UK.

Finally, the intimate relationship between political and economic inequality has also been highlighted by Joseph Stiglitz, who suggests: 'The main question confronting us today is not really about capital in the twenty-first century. It is about democracy in the twenty-first century' (Stiglitz 2014). By this he means that how market rules are established is formed through the political process. Yet what he terms the 'rules of the game' have been increasingly altered to favour powerful economic interests as democratic institutions have been increasingly unable to constrain the growing power of capital. In this analysis it is the resuscitation of democratic life – restoring a greater degree of political equality in terms of both who is heard and how democratic institutions shape markets – that becomes the primary task for progressive politics.

3.2 Corporate power and post-democracy

The growth of post-democratic forms of political life reflects a related, similarly influential argument. First popularised by Colin Crouch, it argues society is becoming increasingly post-democratic, in the sense that 'while the forms of democracy remain fully in place – and today in some respects are actually strengthened – politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times; and that one major consequence of this process is the growing impotence of egalitarian causes' (Crouch 2004). Crouch points to the decline of the set of forces that make active/mass politics possible – such as organised social classes, broad-based political parties and effective labour representation – as central to the hollowing out of democratic life. In turn this has led to an increasingly remote, narrowly drawn, professionalised political class whose political programmes are increasingly captured by, and reflect the interests of, corporate and business interests over that of ordinary citizens.

This aspect of political inequality is arguably particularly acute because the countervailing powers that once constrained such powers, organised labour in particular, are much weaker than they once were. For example, only 13 per cent of the private sector workforce are in a trade union while collective bargaining coverage has fallen to only a third of workplaces, halving in the past 30 years (van Wanrooy et al 2013). Corporate power over the democratic process has therefore expanded at the same time as other forms of voice and influence have reduced. Political inequality in the 'post-democratic' critique therefore manifests itself as the dominance of elite interest in policy formation over the interests and efforts of wider society. We will test this theory in the following section in relation to the UK, especially around lobbying, political party funding and the 'revolving door' between the civil service and the private sector.

The argument that corporate interests can subvert the democratic process of course reflects an older tradition that is sceptical of the capacity of democratic institutions to guarantee formal political equality in societies marked by significant inequalities of material resources. As the American democratic socialist Michael Harrington (1972) argued: 'Economic power is political power, and as long as the basic relationships of the economy are left intact, they provide a basis for the subversion of the democratic will.' The retrenchment of democratic institutions and practices in the face of organised economic power, as Crouch argues, is a contemporary distillation of this claim.

3.3 Political parties and the hollowing out of representative democracies

Political parties are critical to effectively functioning democracies. As Robert Dahl (1966) argued, when you think of democracy, you think of elections, which require mass political parties. For Dahl, they are the hinge which links broad-based political participation with organisations that have the ability to form governments with popular legitimacy. Consequently, the claim that they no longer fulfil either a representative or mass participatory function effectively, as Peter Mair argued in *Ruling the Void*, is deeply problematic:

> *'The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form.'*
> Mair 2013

Mair claimed that in representative democracy's golden age, mass parties 'gave voice to the people' while providing a route for political accountability. However, over time – and in a process that has accelerated in the last few decades – these parties have become progressively residualised, withdrawing from 'the realm of civil society towards the realm of government and the state'. Political elites subsequently remodel themselves as a more homogeneous professional class unmoored from their social base, while the electorate similarly withdraw from politics, reflected in steadily decreasing electoral turnout and party participation over the last three decades across both the UK and indeed much of Europe. This process has been enhanced because many of the traditional routes into politics or sites of political socialisation – trade unions or the churches, for example – have withered in this time. We will test these claims in greater detail in the following section of this report.

Moreover, Mair also argued that political parties are constrained by an inability to make certain political decisions as policy decision-making has increasingly transferred from the power of national governments to other non-democratic institutions; for example trade policy is restricted by the World Trade Organisation, immigration policy by the EU, or monetary policy from central banks (Mair 2013).

Earlier, Mair wrote on the consequences of depoliticisation where policy at the national level becomes decided upon by a bureaucratic elite – away from democratic accountability in public consultation. For him, the indirect consequence of the depoliticisation of policy is that elections gradually become second-rate contests, in particular elections to the European parliament (Mair 2006).

This analysis suggests that if political inequality is going to be challenged, political parties will have to be reinvented for a more pluralistic, networked age, becoming more porous and reconnected to broader civil society, rather than continuing to travel in the hollowed-out direction Mair sketches. More than that, areas of social and economic life over which democratic institutions have scope and influence will have to be expanded, to re-anchor politics with a governing purpose. Such arguments run against powerful contemporary trends – greater individualisation and ongoing globalisation, against a backdrop of the increasing power of weakly accountable supranational institutions – but they appear urgent tasks if substantive political equality is to be achieved.

For others, the current malaise of representative democracy is evident not only in its increasing withdrawal from civil society and relative capture by powerful economic interests: it also reflects the fact that the institutions of the Westminster parliamentary system are struggling 'to keep up with the fluidity and complexity of contemporary culture' (Gilbert and Fisher 2014). 'Fordist' democratic institutions and practices inherited from the mid-20th century appear cumbersome and unresponsive in the conditions of an increasingly 'post-Fordist', less hierarchical and more networked society. The stalling of political equality is therefore rooted in a far wider structural level than simply ineffective political parties or the often weakly democratic institutions of the British state. It also reflects the relatively sclerotic and narrow nature of the contemporary political process compared to the democratic culture of the society it inhabits.

The philosopher Roberto Unger makes a similar argument about political inequality: democratic politics appears trapped within the limits of the institutional and ideological settlement of the mid-20th century, increasingly incapable of 'mastering the restructuring of society so that the structure is not just there on a "take it or leave it" basis' (Unger 2014). Democratic politics as such becomes anaemic, with power to affect institutional change gravitating towards non-democratic actors and institutions, undermining claims of political equality that all have the capacity to influence institutional change.

3.4 Lessons for understanding political inequality

What can we draw from an analysis of the literature in terms of understanding – and combatting – political inequality given the particular nature of the UK's democracy?

First, there is the paradox that democracy rests its legitimacy partly on the claim of political equality between citizens, of the idea that power is vested in the whole people. Yet, 'everywhere there is democracy, there is political inequality' (Dubrow 2014). Closing the gap between the ideal of democracy and its reality in practice therefore requires committing ourselves to tackling multidimensional forms of political, social and economic inequalities, which in turn structure differences in who influences decision-makers.

It also requires an acceptance that political inequality is an ingrained feature of most developed democracies; reversing it even slightly will be a challenge requiring patience and the careful revitalisation of democratic institutions, some that are arguably not yet fully conceived. For example, how voting, campaigning and democratic participation actually works will necessarily require reform so that the electoral mechanisms of our democracy reflect the technologies and cultures of the 21st century. This may require greater experimentation in how we organise our

democracy, for example by extending access to mass communication networks to broad-based social movements where much of the energy in politics is today, or greater public financing of non-party-based political and social action in an attempt to make the distribution of political resources more equal.

Second, political inequality is an interconnected and wide-ranging concept. It is therefore important to stress that political inequality is experienced in both formal and informal political activity; any reform agenda must therefore be broad-based in its attempts to tackle political inequality.

Third, analysts of political inequality suggest it has important socioeconomic impacts: it is both an input- and output-based form of inequality in the political process. The relative exclusion of low-income households and the young from influencing political decision-making means their interests are not effectively accounted for. Public policy is subsequently structured to typically benefit the more politically active members of society, which are often those who are already more economically or socially powerful than the average person. Making the political process more porous and open to influence from middle- and lower-income households is therefore an important task for advancing political equality, as well as challenging material inequality. This suggests that new mechanisms are needed to expand the pool of voices that are heard in political life, including the range of civil society and community groups that have influence over decision-making.

Fourth, it is important to note this is a deep structural challenge within democratic systems globally; the UK is not unique in having a formally equal political system being unequal in practice. Nonetheless, some of the key building blocks of British democracy remain within the capacity of British politics and actors to reform. Fatalism should not be the response to pressures created by wider structural changes in developed democracies. However, if political parties –the hinge of democratic systems – are to retain their relevance, particularly if the momentum towards a multiparty system continues, it is an imperative that they reinvent themselves, becoming more open, democratic and pluralistic. Experiments in primaries and community organising in recent years suggests tentative steps in that direction; much more, however, is needed to strengthen the representative function of political parties and how they interact with wider civil society, becoming more open and willing to be led, not simply lead.

Similarly, as Crouch and others have argued, too many people feel divorced from the decision-making process, lacking agency or influence, from national policy decisions through to local politics. More thought should therefore be given over where power is held and how it is democratically influenced, questions that are within the control of our politics. The wider debate around devolution, both to Scotland, but also within England therefore offers a potentially important tool in combatting political inequality. However, it is important that any strategy that shifts the locus of decision-making also shifts substantive power too, to avoid the hollowing out of the power of democratic institutions that our analysis has suggested is part of growing political inequality.

Finally, questions of political economy – how our economic and political institutions are arranged to produce economic value – are vitally important when considering the nature of political inequality. The de-democratisation of questions affecting the economy and workplace naturally limits the sites where the influence of ordinary citizens can be felt on policymaking generally, and distributional concerns in particular. Expanding the institutions and workspaces over which democratic influence is felt is therefore important in tackling political inequality. As the experience of American democracy also suggests, any attempt to do so must also build a better firewall between the decision-making processes of government from the influence of powerful, unaccountable actors, to prevent the capture of democracy by organised money.

To summarise, political inequality is a multidimensional phenomenon, where political power and influence is systematically weighted in favour of some parts of society against others, with those with greater social and economic resources having greater influence over the political process, its decisions and its outcomes. However, finding where political inequality manifests itself and in what form can be a challenge as its nature is not always straightforward or overt. In the final section we examine where we believe political inequality flourishes.

4.
THE SITES AND SOURCES OF POLITICAL INEQUALITY IN THE UK

In the previous sections we have explored the concept of political inequality and drawn out the analytical themes of the literature that examines the phenomenon. In the following, we set out to prove our contention that political inequality in the UK exists and cuts across all forms of political activity. Of course, compared to other measures of inequality, such as economic disparities, political inequality is more difficult to measure directly. Nonetheless, inequality in political participation, influence and the exercise of power can express itself through a range of ways.

As previously argued, inequalities of class and demography in political participation are particularly problematic, undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of democracy. Moreover, it is especially troublesome given we fall behind most developed democracies in this regard. We therefore begin by examining how unequal participation rates are in both formal and informal forms of political activity. The role of political parties – and how they are funded – remains vital in terms of who has influence and how. We consider this next, before examining the role of lobbying and the media in exercising substantial and often weakly accountable forms of influence on the political process. In doing so, we hope to give some sense of the scale of political inequality in the UK, and set out where reform should focus, regardless of the election result.

4.1 Participation

Political participation is, self-evidently, axiomatic to democracy. If democracy is to constitute 'the rule of the people', it is clear that 'the people' must participate in the process of rule. Indeed the democratic theorist Sidney Verba (2001) argued: 'participation is … at the heart of political equality', defining political participation as activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action, either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy, or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies. Next we will examine who votes, who joins political parties and who funds them, before focussing on the strength of other forms of democratic participation – which in some ways are more dynamic than either party- or electoral-based participation.

4.2 Voting

The trend for voter turnout in national, local and European elections over the past three decades has been decline. Yet the overall turnout rate should not be our only concern. A greater problem for British democracy in terms of growing inequality is who turns out to vote. In brief, younger and less affluent people are far less likely to vote when compared to older and better-off voters.

Birch et al (2013) show that in the 2010 general election just 44 per cent of those aged between 18 and 24 voted, compared to 76 per cent of those aged 65 and over. This gap has grown at an alarming rate in recent years jumping from 18 percentage points in 1970 to 32 points in 2010. Besides the age-demographic divide, there is also a striking division between social classes in voter turnout. In the 1987 general election there was only a four-point gap in the turnout rate that existed between the highest and the lowest income quintiles;

by 2010 this had grown to 23 percentage points. Interestingly, the level of turnout inequality – measured by age and especially income – tends to be lower in more egalitarian countries than more unequal societies. This evidence appears to support Frederick Solt's argument that economic inequality depresses political involvement, especially among the less well-off, because many come to believe that the democratic process is rigged in favour of the rich and so feel 'that politics is simply not a game worth playing' (Solt 2008).

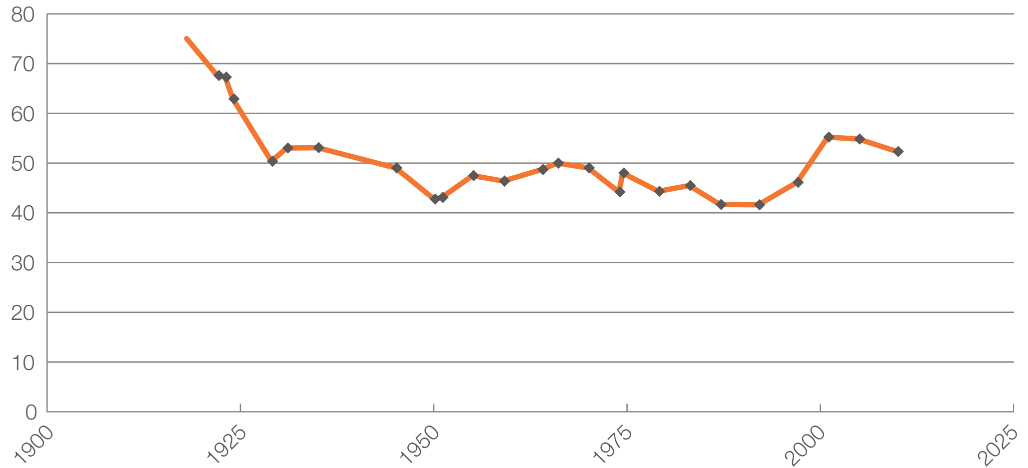
More broadly, if there is a growing class divide in terms of who votes, this is part of a wider trend in which the overall proportion of non-voters has spiked significantly since a low of 41.6 per cent in 1992 to a postwar high of 55.2 per cent in 2001. In 2010, the majority of the population were non-voters (52.3 per cent) indicating a growing retreat from electoral participation. Interestingly, this U-shaped curve dips in the 1960s and 1970s before rising sharply in the 1980s and 1990s, in parallel with trends in economic inequality. Of course, this does not prove that economic inequality causes political inequality or that political inequality causes economic inequality, but the parallel does conform to what we would expect on theoretical grounds – that there is a connection between the variables – which suggests that the relationship between the economic and political inequality is worth exploring further.

Table 4.1
Electoral participation and non-participation rates (general election, % of population)

Year	Registered	Unregistered	Voters	Non-voters
1918	49.6	50.4	25.0	75.0
1922	47.1	52.9	32.5	67.5
1923	47.8	52.2	32.7	67.3
1924	48.4	51.6	37.1	62.9
1929	63.1	36.9	49.6	50.4
1931	65.1	34.9	47.0	53.0
1935	66.9	33.1	46.9	53.1
1945	67.6	32.4	51.0	49.0
1950	68.4	31.6	57.2	42.8
1951	69.5	30.5	56.9	43.1
1955	68.4	31.6	52.5	47.5
1959	68.1	31.9	53.6	46.4
1964	66.5	33.5	51.3	48.7
1966	65.8	34.2	50.0	50.0
1970	70.7	29.3	51.0	49.0
1974	70.7	29.3	55.8	44.2
1974 (2)	71.3	28.7	52.0	48.0
1979	73.1	26.9	55.7	44.3
1983	74.9	25.1	54.5	45.5
1987	77.3	22.7	58.3	41.7
1992	75.1	24.9	58.4	41.6
1997	75.3	24.7	53.9	46.1
2001	75.1	24.9	44.8	55.2
2005	73.5	26.5	45.2	54.8
2010	73.2	26.8	47.7	52.3

Source: IPPR analysis based on following population, registration and turnout data: Rose and Munro 2010; Annual Abstract of Statistics, Q3 2011, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html; 'General Election 2010', House of Commons Library Research Paper 10/36, 2011

Figure 4.1
Percentage of population as non-voters



Source: IPPR analysis based on following population, registration and turnout data: Rose and Munro 2010; Annual Abstract of Statistics, Q3 2011, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html; 'General Election 2010', House of Commons Library Research Paper 10/36, 2011

The growing level of electoral non-participation is problematic for the basic legitimacy of the political system. More than that, when certain groups are less likely to vote than others, governments have less incentive to respond to the interests of those who choose to abstain. Birch et al (2013) demonstrate the preferential treatment of voters over non-voters through analysing the 2010 spending review in combination with the 2010 British Election Study. For example, individuals aged between 18 and 24 – a group with low levels of electoral participation – faced cuts to services worth 28 per cent of their annual household income, compared to just 10 per cent for those aged between 55 and 74, who as a group typically vote more. The difference is even more overwhelming when analysing different income groups. Those with annual household incomes under £10,000 were likely to lose an equivalent of 41 per cent of their average income in benefits and services, and those earning between £10,000 and £19,999 would lose 12.72 per cent from the spending cuts, compared to just under 3 per cent for those earning more than £60,000. Again, lower-income groups, who were disproportionately affected, are known to vote at lower rates than better-off voters who were not as adversely impacted by the spending review.

Unequal turnout therefore risks reinforcing a viscious circle of political disaffection and underrepresentation among groups in which electoral participation is already falling. As government policy becomes less responsive to their interests the less inclined they will be to vote in future. And the less they vote, the less likely politicians will respond to their interests, establishing a downward spiral of political exclusion and negative policy outcomes. As a result, ingrained and unequal levels of turnout based on social class or demographic group is a very substantial threat to the vitality and legitimacy of British democracy.

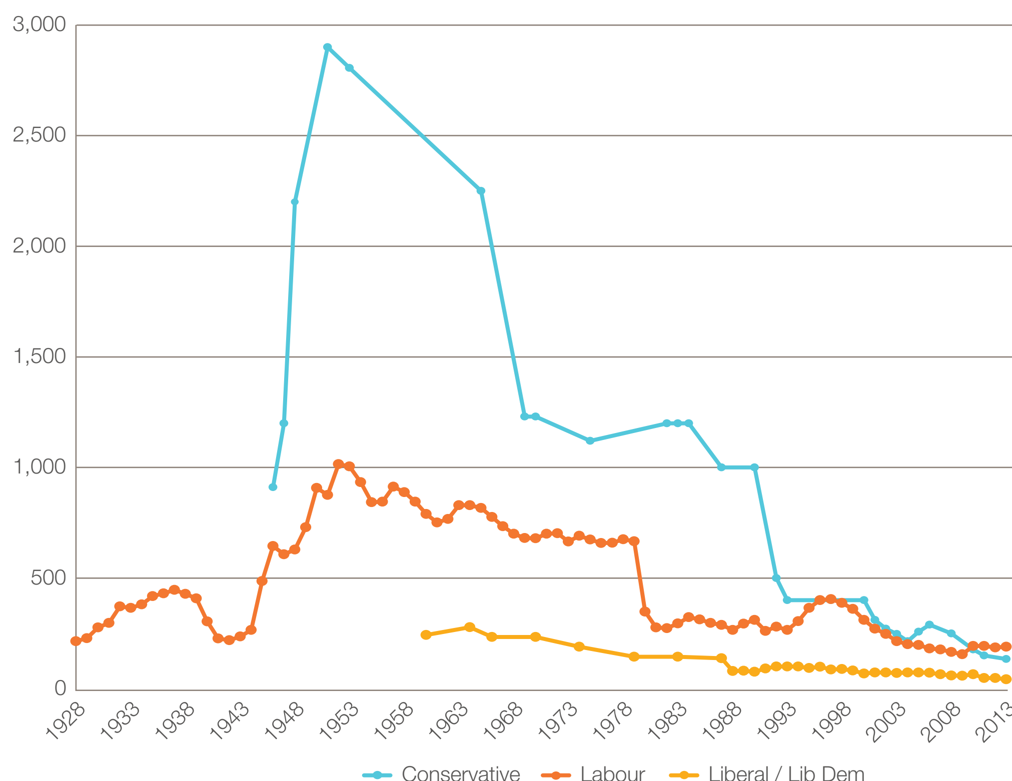
4.3 Political parties: membership and funding

Political parties should fulfil a vital role in our social and economic lives. They serve as the bridge between governing institutions and citizens, their members elected to represent the will of the people. In recent years, however, there is substantial evidence to indicate that political parties are withering in the UK. Indeed, Peter Mair (2013) declared in his final book that the 'age of party democracy has passed'

as they have become increasingly socially deracinated, professionalised and are no longer 'capable of sustaining democracy in its present form'. According to Mair, political parties have gradually moved away from representing the citizenry (and particular interest groups) to the state and instead represent the state to the citizens. The UK is not alone in this. Across developed democracies, political parties have professionalised, and experienced declining membership rates. Yet how far have parties hollowed out in recent decades in the UK and how more advanced is this than European comparisons?

The traditionally largest UK political parties have experienced a significant long-term decline in membership numbers since the late 1970s, as figure 4.2 demonstrates. In the summer of 2014, Labour had approximately 190,000 members, the Conservatives roughly 134,000 and the Liberal Democrats around 44,000, though these numbers are prone to fluctuate. This is a sharp contrast to the early 1950s when combined membership of just the Conservative and Labour parties reached nearly 4 million (Keen 2015). Likewise, less than 1 per cent of the UK electorate is now a member of the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat parties, compared to 3.8 per cent in 1983 (ibid). The UK, moreover, is an outlier in Europe in terms of political engagement in this respect: only Poland and Latvia have a lower percentage rate of party membership as percentage of national electorate (van Biezen et al 2012).

Figure 4.2
Membership of the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour parties ('000s)



Source: Keen 2015: 4

However, more positively, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of people who have joined other parties, albeit nowhere near enough to make up for the historical decline in membership of the largest two parties. For example, the

Scottish National party has experienced a very dramatic growth in membership in the wake of the Scottish independence referendum, while the Green party in England and Wales has seen its membership numbers for the first time pass 50,000 during the beginning of 2015.[5] The United Kingdom Independence party also achieved a record growth in membership in 2014, reaching over 35,000.[6] The rise of these parties reflects a significant change in the landscape of party membership, particularly in Scotland, indicating that the UK's political system is still capable of attracting active participation in formal politics, even if membership rates remain significantly lower overall than in previous decades.

Less positively, and arguably more pertinently for questions of political inequality, cleavages in the background of party members further highlight differing levels of political participation by social class and occupation. For example, in 2014 the professional and managerial middle class dominated the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Green parties, accounting for around 44 per cent of all members. By comparison, those with working-class backgrounds accounted for just 28 per cent of all members. The Labour party appears more balanced, with 36 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively, holding middle- and working-class occupations, though this marks a decline from the traditional composition of the party (Keen 2015).

Despite the decline of broad-based political parties and the social cleavages within existing membership, political parties still remain important for a healthy democracy; revitalising and deepening their democratic reach therefore remains a vital task when confronting forms of political inequality. Perhaps these reasons are best summarised in the following extract from the House of Commons report into parliamentary representation:

> *'Without the support of political parties it would be difficult for individual Members of Parliament, as legislators and/or as members of the Executive, to organise themselves effectively for the task of promoting the national interest – including by challenge to the Government, where that is necessary and appropriate – and ensuring that proposed new laws are proportionate, effective and accurately drafted.'*
>
> House of Commons final report from the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, 2010

4.4 Party funding and spending

Political parties therefore remain vital for a mass democracy to function effectively. How their activities are funded and by whom is therefore an important question when considering who has influence over parties and their policy formation. In particular, elections – the most substantial cost a political party faces – have become much more expensive in recent decades. In 2010 alone the Electoral Commission estimates that over £31 million was spent in total on campaigning by all the registered political parties – £8 million of which was spent by Labour and £16 million by the Conservatives (see table 4.2). This was the third highest campaign spending in history, as our analysis indicates.

Perhaps more tellingly, as figure 4.3 shows, the campaign spend per elector at 2015 prices has risen substantially from the late 1970s, with most elections marking an increase in the amount spent per elector. In simple terms, having a strong arsenal of funding seems to have become more fundamental than ever in order to compete in and win elections.

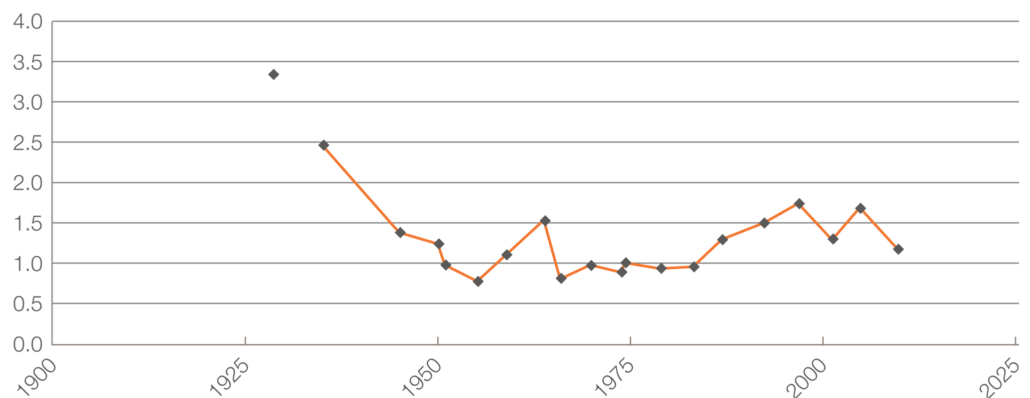
5 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-29505094
6 http://www.ukip.org/ukip_membership_crashes_through_35_000

Table 4.2
Electoral spending by parties, 1900–2010

Year	Campaign finance: constituency spend	Campaign finance: central party spend	Campaign finance: combined spend
1900	£627,112		
1906	£958,921	£28,108	£987,029
1910	£1,068,225	£10,965	£1,079,190
1910 (2)	£790,960	£144,465	£935,425
1918			
1922	£1,018,075		
1923	£982,340		
1924	£921,165		
1929	£1,213,507	£535,000	£174,8507
1931	£654,105		
1935	£772,093	£473,000	£1,245,093
1945	£1,073,216	£130,000	£1,203,216
1950	£1,170,124	£227,000	£1,397,124
1951	£946,018	£200,00	£1,146,018
1955	£904,677	£222,000	£1,112,677
1959	£1,051,219	£920,000	£1,971,219
1964	£1,229,203	£1,871,000	£3,100,203
1966	£1,136,882	£566,000	£1,702,882
1970	£1,465,980	£1,241,000	£2,706,980
1974	£2,096,407	£1,127,000	£3,366,407
1974 (2)	£2,261,228	£1,624,000	£3,885,228
1979	£3,689,258	£4,050,000	£7,739,258
1983	£6,314,788	£6,800,000	£13,114,788
1987	£8,305,721	£14,000,000	£22,305,721
1992	£10,779,146	£23,600,000	£34,379,146
1997	£13,344,959	£33,700,000	£47,044,959
2001	£11,885,785	£26,689,901	£38,575,686
2005	£14,171,960	£42,325,730	£56,497,690
2010	£14,028,000	£31,153,114	£45,181,114

Source: IPPR analysis based on: Rallings and Thrasher 2007, Electoral Commission (no date), Keen 2015, Pinto-Duschinsky 1981, Pinto-Duschinsky 1985

Figure 4.3
Campaign spend per elector at 2015 prices (£)



Source: Rallings and Thrasher 2007, Electoral Commission (no date)
Note: Data for 1931 not available.

It is clear that money is increasingly vital for the running and winning of elections, and this raises important questions about who is funding political parties and how. Of the three main sources of party funding in the UK – donations, membership fees, state funding (though this is reserved for supporting basic administrative costs) – it is the first that primarily funds our political parties. Indeed, of the UK's main political parties, the Green party (in both England and Wales, and its Scottish sister) is the only one where membership fees outweigh other funding sources (Keen 2015: 10).

Instead, as is well known, British political parties are unusually reliant on donations to fund their operation, especially in comparison to their European counterparts. As table 4.3 demonstrates, the three largest parties' fundraising activities this parliament raised very significant proportions from a number of key donors. This raises fears that donors will extract a price for their support in ways that bypass normal democratic channels. For example, while the historic funding link between Labour and the trade unions has been well advertised – and remains important from the evidence below – the connection between the hedge fund industry and the Conservative party has also recently been stressed, with a very significant part of their funding coming from the sector, and the City more generally (Watt and Wintour 2015). Moreover, the reliance on a narrow band of wealthy donors to fund party politics – and the outsized potential it grants them to affect policy – is arguably a growing concern; in the 2010 election campaign, 164 individuals donated £50,000 or more to one of the three main political parties, up from just 28 individuals in 2001 (Wilks-Heeg 2014).

Table 4.3
Top five donors to largest three fundraising parties over course of 2010–15 parliament

Rank	Conservative donor		Labour donor		Lib-Dem donor	
1	Lord Farmer	£4.21 million	Unite the Union	£18.03 million	Brompton Capital Limited	£1.72 million
2	National Conservatives Draws Society	£3.97 million	Unison	£9.68 million	Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust	£1.68 million
3	JCB Research	£2.59 million	GMB	£7.86 million	Ministry of Sound	£1.06 million
4	James R Lupton	£2.17 million	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (Usdaw)	£7.22 million	George G Watson	£950,000
5	David Rowland	£2.12 million	Communication Workers Union	£3.08 million	Methuen Liberal Trust Fund	£909,624

Source: Based on data from the Electoral Commission, from May 2010 to December 2014, https://pefonline.electoralcommission.org.uk/search/searchintro.aspx

The nexus of extreme wealth and the leadership of political parties also appears problematic in terms of the type of access large amounts of money can buy. For example, at the 2013 Conservative 'Summer Party', attended by senior cabinet ministers, invited guests had a combined wealth in excess of £11 billion and paid £12,000 a table. Similarly on 9 July the following year, the Labour party held a £15,000 premier table event at the Roundhouse in Camden (Mathiason et al 2014). More recently, the 'Black and White Ball' fundraiser of the Conservative party raised £3 million for the party through auctioning off a series of luxury prizes to wealthy donors (Mason 2015). The close proximity between politicians and the very wealthy that these events and fundraisers demonstrate is indicative of how money has the ability to purchase political access in our democracy.

Similarly, the link between party political donations and entry to the legislature suggests money can ease access to membership of the Houses of Parliament. For example, in August 2014, 22 peers were appointed to the House of Lords who collectively had donated nearly £7 million to various political parties (Electoral Reform Society 2014). On a smaller scale, but equally prohibitive in many ways, recent research has suggested running for a seat in the House of Commons costs on average £34,400, in foregone salary, travel costs and the like (Hardman 2014). Clearly, the influence of organised money on organised politics in a myriad of ways remains a clear example of the unequal nature of the UK's political system, even if the legislative firewall between money and politics is stronger than in the United States.

4.5 Non-party forms of political participation

Membership or financial support of a political party is only one way of participating in the civic or political life of a community. Broader indications of participation suggest that at least on the level of involvement, the UK is less unequal politically than measures of party participation would suggest, at least concerning involvement and action. Moreover, the mass mobilisation of Scottish society at the time of the 2014 independence referendum, reaching all social classes and demographics, suggests a diagnosis of the terminal nature of potential mass political activity is misplaced.

There is evidence of widespread participation in various forms of political action. For example, the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement, one of the most detailed surveys of political engagement conducted in the UK, asks a series of questions each year examining the extent of political participation in the country, with the most recent audit published in 2014 (see table 4.4). It suggests that almost half of British citizens have been involved in at least one form of trying to influence decisions, laws or policies in the past year while only a quarter indicate they have no desire to participate or influence the political process at all. Indeed, evidence suggests that UK levels of political participation beyond elections and parties are relatively high by European standards (Stoker 2006). However, much of this is concentrated: only 11 per cent of adults can be classified as 'political activists', defined as having participated in at least three political activities over the past few years.

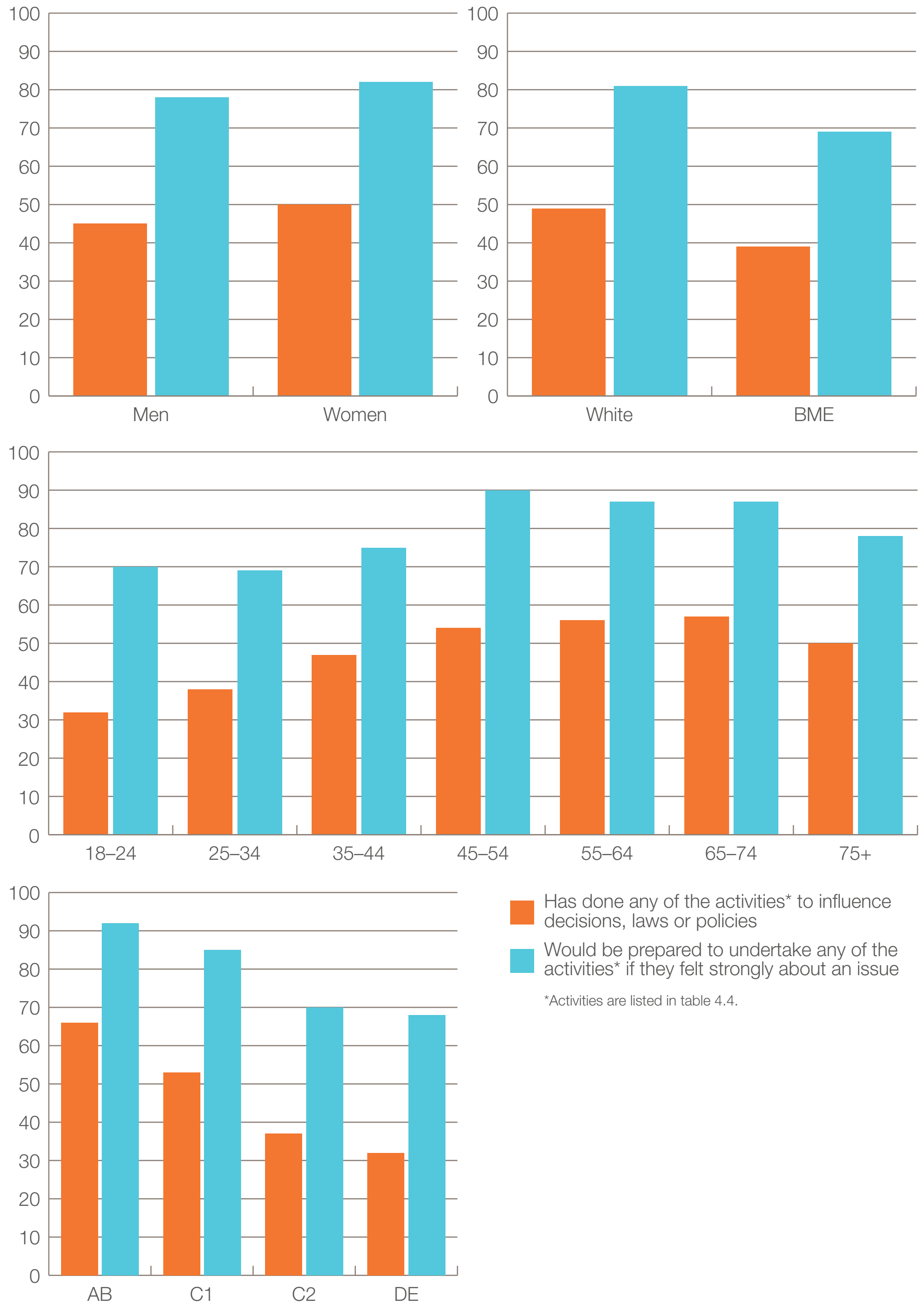
Table 4.4
Non-party political participation

In the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence decisions, laws or policies?	2013 (APE 10)	2014 (APE 11)
Contacted a local councillor or MP/MSP/Welsh assembly member	8	12
Contacted the media	2	3
Taken an active part in a campaign	2	7
Created or signed a paper petition	8	16
Created or signed an e-petition	9	15
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation	20	20
Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	6	10
Attended political meetings	2	3
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party	1	2
Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march	1	2
Voted in an election	27	18
Contributed to a discussion or campaign online or on social media	3	6
Taken part in a public consultation	4	6
Net: Any of the above	**50**	**48**
Net: None of the above	**50**	**52**

Source: Hansard Society 2013, Hansard Society 2014
Note: APE = Audit of Political Engagement.

Less positively, though reflecting the broader pattern of political inequality, levels of participation are sharply differentiated by class and demography. As figure 4.4 demonstrates, social class has again the most significant impact on levels of political participation.

Figure 4.4
Political activities, actual and potential by demographic group (%)

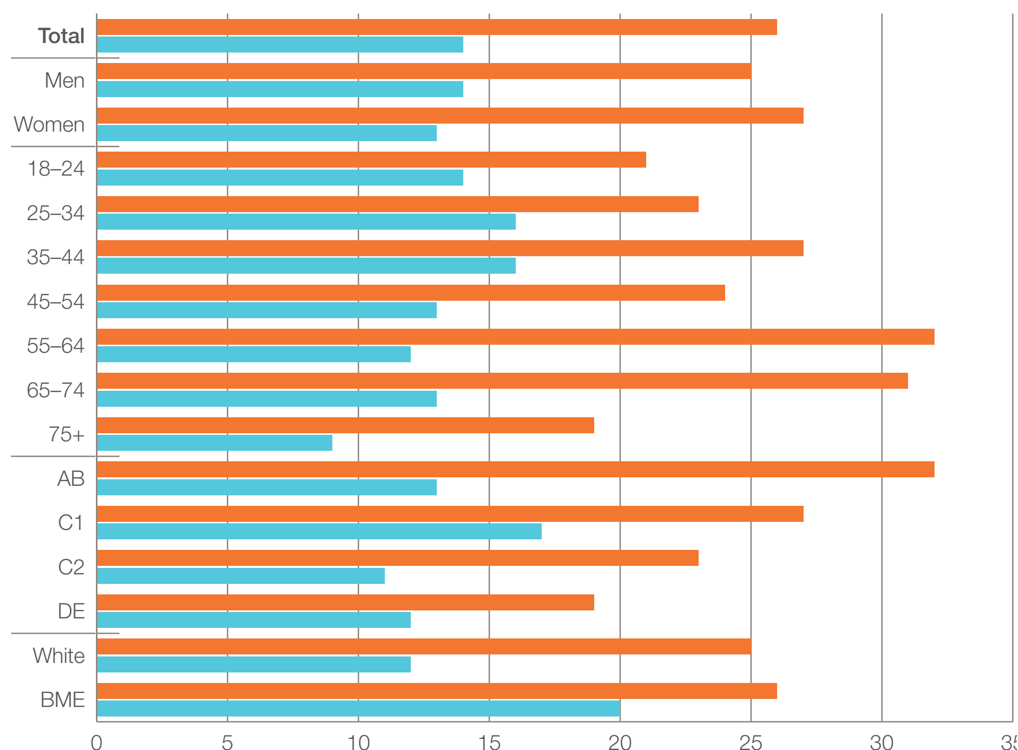


Source: Hansard Society 2014: 48

Of AB voters 66 per cent have participated in an attempt to influence the political process in the past year compared to only 32 per cent of DE voters. The sharp differential in participation indicates underlying patterns of political inequality: different people and groups are significantly more involved in attempting to influence the political process than others, with implications for who is heard, how decisions are made and who eventually benefits. Nonetheless, the fact that across all demographic and class groups a strong majority would be prepared to participate in political activity if they felt strongly about an issue, suggests that politics retains the potential to engage the population if the issues contested are felt to be of relevance.

If broad-based political participation is a crucial indicator of a relatively equal political system, the relative efficacy of that participation is also important. By this measure the UK appears to do poorly. For example, over a number of years it is clear that most people do not feel they have much influence over the decision-making process, both locally and nationally – with 26 per cent feeling they have at least some influence over local decisions and only 14 per cent feeling the same over national decisions (see figure 4.5). Moreover, these figures mask sharp differences in terms of people's perceived influence over decision-making in the country as a whole, with people living in the south feeling significantly more influential than those living in the north (Hansard Society 2014).

Figure 4.5
How much influence, if any, do you feel you have over decision-making in your local and national area? (%)



Source: Hansard Society 2014: 58

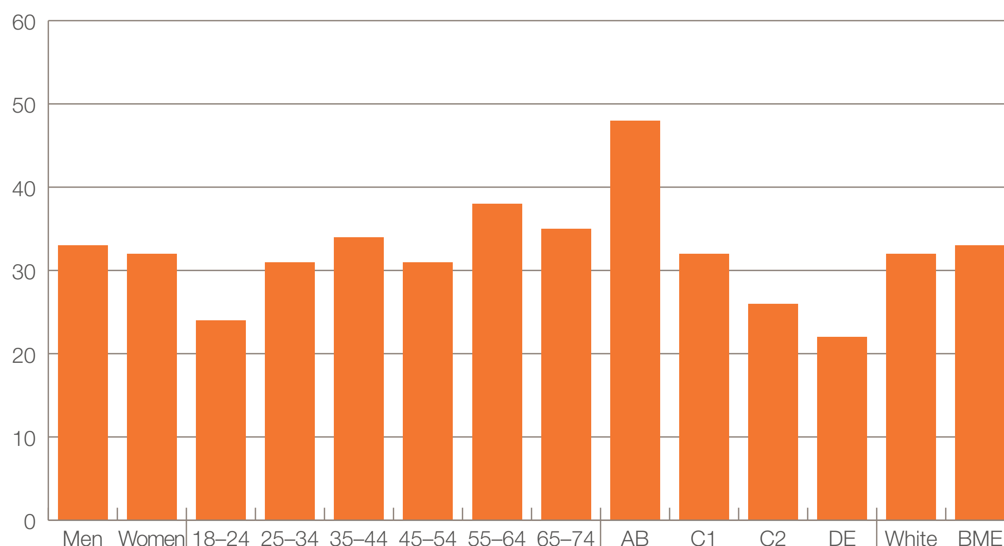
The evidence also suggests that people in the AB social classes are, perhaps unsurprisingly, far more likely to feel they can influence national decision-making, with 32 per cent suggesting they have the ability compared to only 19 per cent of DE individuals. It also suggests that where decision-making processes are located

can affect how they are perceived. However, overall, the main conclusion is that the majority of all people, regardless of age, background, ethnicity or occupation, feel that they have at best only a weak influence over decision-making, suggesting an absence of perceived popular involvement at the heart of British democracy.

The lack of influence people feel, as suggested by these figures, most likely contributes towards the public's response to how effectively they think the system of governing in the UK works: only 33 per cent of people think that it works 'extremely' or 'mainly' well. Moreover, the more disengaged people are from the mainstream political process, the more likely they are to feel it works poorly. For example, just 17 per cent of those with no party allegiance claim the system works at least 'mainly well' compared to 60 per cent for Conservative supporters, 42 per cent for Liberal Democrats, 31 per cent for Ukip and 27 per cent for Labour (ibid).

Similarly, as expected, the Hansard Society's audit shows that the higher the social class people belong to, the more satisfied with the system of governing they are – though interestingly, gender and ethnicity do not appear to be associated with differing satisfaction rates. However, the scale of difference between those in social classes AB and the rest is particularly stark: ABs have a net satisfaction rating of -3 per cent; C1s score -34 per cent; C2s -42 per cent; and DEs have a net satisfaction score of -53 per cent (ibid: 50) The sharp differences in satisfaction (as evident in figure 4.6) suggests material inequality undoubtedly reinforces inequalities of the experience of participating in the political system.

Figure 4.6
Satisfaction with the present system, by demographic group (%)



Source: Hansard Society 2014

4.6 Political representation

Unequal representation in public life reflects and accentuates political inequality: the narrower the background, gender, sexuality, class or ethnicity found in elected representatives, the narrower the range of interests and experiences that are potentially brought to bear in political decision-making, and the more exclusive and unresponsive the political system appears. A more representative political system would therefore benefit from greater legitimacy and effectiveness. Given this, the fact that the UK suffers from deeply unequal representation in political positions is

highly problematic in terms of political inequality. The political establishment remains drawn from a narrow pool. For example, the recent Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report *Elitist Britain?* (2014) found that:

- 71 per cent of senior judges, 53 per cent of diplomats, 50 per cent of members of the House of Lords and 45 per cent of public body chairs attended independent schools (compared to 7 per cent of the UK population as a whole)
- 75 per cent of senior judges, 59 per cent of the cabinet, 57 per cent of permanent secretaries, 50 per cent of diplomats, 47 per cent of newspaper columnists, 44 per cent of public body chairs and 38 per cent of members of the House of Lords attended Oxbridge (compared to less than 1 per cent of the population)
- 59 per cent of the cabinet and 33 per cent of the shadow cabinet attended Oxbridge (compared to less than 1 per cent of the population).

More broadly, despite only 7 per cent of the school population attending independent schools, 37 per cent of MPs elected in 2010 were independently educated (see table 4.5), which marked a 3 per cent increase compared to the previous parliament (Sutton Trust 2010). However, it should be noted that while this is high, it remains significantly lower than in other elite institutions.

Table 4.5
How the proportion of independently educated MPs from the three main political parties has changed over recent parliaments

	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
MPs of the main parties	**49%**	**51%**	**47%**	**41%**	**30%**	**31%**	**34%**	**37%**
Conservative	73%	70%	68%	62%	66%	64%	60%	54%
Liberal Democrats	55%	52%	45%	50%	41%	35%	39%	40%
Labour	18%	14%	14%	15%	16%	17%	18%	15%

Source: Sutton Trust 2010

Meanwhile, professional backgrounds are significantly overrepresented in the House of Commons, making up nearly 14 per cent of the total number of MPs. Similarly, in 2010, 25 per cent of elected MPs came from a business background, the largest percentage since 1987. By contrast, the number of former manual workers in parliament has collapsed to just 4 per cent in 2010 from nearly 16 per cent in 1979, though the number of manual workers within the economy has also fallen in this period (Cracknell and McGuinness 2010). Reflecting concerns about the professionalisation and narrowing of the political class, and therefore arguably more problematic than the decline in former manual workers, it is also noticeable that the number of MPs who have previously worked in politics now stands at 14.5 per cent, a figure that has quadrupled since 1979.

Nor is the type of people represented in parliament skewed simply by educational or class background. In the current parliament there are 502 male MPs compared to only 147 female MPs. Strikingly, as table 4.6 demonstrates, even this very poor performance marks a significant historical improvement; prior to 1987, women had never made up more than 5 per cent of MPs (Keen and Cracknell 2014). While things are slightly better in local government, with women making up 31 per cent of local authority councillors in England in 2010, representation remains deeply skewed (LGA 2010).

Similarly, the number of MPs coming from a black or ethnic minority background (BME) has increased from just four in 1987 to 27 in 2010. Yet despite this increase, parliament is clearly failing to reflect the social make up of Britain, with 9 per cent of the British population of BME background compared to only 4 per cent of MPs. Similarly, while one in five people acknowledge some sort of impairment, the experience of disability is poorly reflected in parliament, with few MPs identifying as disabled (House of Commons Speakers Office 2010).

Table 4.6
The representative nature of parliament over time

	University-educated MPs (%)	Oxbridge-educated MPs (%)	Public school-educated MPs (%)	University-educated citizens in UK population (%)	Ratio of % of university-educated citizens to % of university-educated MPs	MPs with manual working backgrounds (%)	Female MPs	Female MPs (%)	Total MPs
1929	38.0	26.5	43.0				14	2.3	615
1931	51.0	39.5	66.0				15	2.4	615
1935	46.5	37.0	59.5				9	1.5	615
1945	49.4	33.0	39.6			25.9	24	3.9	615
1951	53.9	36.5	39.0	2.3	23.4	17.7	17	2.7	625
1955	52.7	36.7	51.8	2.6	20.3	15.8	24	3.8	625
1959	51.7	37.2	49.9	3.1	16.7	14.5	25	4.0	630
1964	52.9	35.4	45.6	3.5	15.1	16.7	29	4.6	630
1966	58.3	36.9	44.1	3.7	15.8	12.4	26	4.1	630
1970	59.1	39.3	47.5	4.0	14.8	14.7	26	4.1	630
1974	60.6	36.6	45.6	4.6	13.2	15.0	23	3.6	635
1974 (2)	62.5	39.5	44.9	4.6	13.6	16.5	27	4.3	635
1979	62.8	36.2	48.2	5.4	11.6	11.8	19	3.0	635
1983	64.9	36.2	50.9	5.9	11.0	11.0	23	3.6	650
1987	65.1	32.9	47.5	6.6	9.9	10.0	41	6.3	650
1992	67.9	32.1	41.5	9.1	7.5	8.9	60	9.2	650
1997	70.0	25.4	31.0	12.3	5.7	8.9	120	18.4	651
2001	71.3	25.1	30.5	15.2	4.7	8.4	126	19.2	659
2005	70.7	26.5	33.3	17.7	4.0	6.2	128	19.8	646
2010	79.7	26.5	36.0	22.0	3.6	4.0	143	22.0	650

Source: McGuinness 2010
Note: Data on MP education between 1918 and 1935 excludes Northern Ireland; data on MP education and occupation between 1945 and 1955 includes the Labour and Conservatives parties only; data on MP education and occupation between 1959 and 2010 includes the Labour, Conservative and Liberal (Democrat) parties only.

In short, the UK's political system fails to adequately reflect the varied textures of British life. White, upper-middle class men still disproportionately dominate. While our representatives in parliament are of course capable of reflecting and advocating the interests of those different in personal circumstance to themselves, the unrepresentative nature of the political system nonetheless suggests political power and decision-making is far too narrowly held in the UK.

4.7 Unequal access: lobbying and 'revolving doors'

If political inequality reflects a disparity of power in the political process in which different people have different abilities to influence government decision-making, unequal levels of access to policymakers in the UK is highly problematic. Access

can bring influence that is often weakly accountable, beyond public scrutiny and only available to powerful economic interests. A consideration of government lobbying, corporate access and the so-called revolving door issue of individuals rotating between government and the upper echelons of the private sector suggests this remains a problem for British democracy.

Lobbying, the act of seeking to influence a legislator and/or legislation, usually on a specific issue, is something all individuals and groups should have the right to exercise. As a 2007 Hansard paper stated:

> *'The British policy-making process is dynamic, fragmented, and subject to a great many influences from a diverse range of organisations hoping to shape policy decisions by communicating with Parliament, government, and one another in the interests of promoting (or resisting) change. This direct or indirect lobbying of policy-makers and other stakeholders is widespread and deeply ingrained in our democratic system. Indeed it is symbolic of a healthy pluralist democracy.'*
> Parvin 2007

However, in practice, lobbyists are generally not ordinary citizens but rather members of a professionalised lobbying industry representing the interests of often wealthy clients from the private and not-for profit sectors. They are paid to influence the decisions of the government in favour of the people that have hired them, seeking to change public policy. The UK's commercial lobbying industry is particularly large: at a size of £1.9 billion per annum it is the third largest in the world (Parvin 2007). As Colin Crouch and others have argued, this leads to a situation where corporations and others who have paid for lobbying services are able to access a parallel network of influence, conferred by their economic power, that allows them to directly access the political structure and government, bypassing normal democratic processes. For example, a recent comprehensive report by Transparency International (2015) found 39 examples of lobbying loopholes in the UK where the rules allow behaviour that can open the door to corrupt activity and lobbying abuses, while it argues 14 major lobbying scandals have emerged since David Cameron stated lobbying was 'the next big scandal waiting to happen'.

Of course, more widely, the charity and wider NGO sector also represents a significant source of political lobbying. Moreover, it is increasingly well resourced: the UK charity sector employs around 600,000 people in total and the total annual income of all charities registered with the Charity Commission is roughly £38 billion. While only a tiny fraction of that is employed on directly lobbying government for policy, it nonetheless remains an area where certain actors are allowed privileged access to political decision-makers.

An obvious example of how certain parts of the charity sector are able to exert a disproportionate influence on the political process is think tanks. Typically they are effective at formulating policy and are well connected politically. Moreover, many are opaquely funded; of the major think tanks and pressure groups, only Compass, New Economics Foundation, IPPR, Progress, Resolution Foundation and Social Market Foundation disclosed publicly all their funding resources in 2014.[7] Of course, many think tanks contribute to a culture of democratic debate, yet the extent and nature by which they can influence public policy debate in the UK and their 'insider status' is arguably another sign of unequal access into – and influence over – the political process.

Nonetheless, it is the connection between corporate bodies and government decision-making processes that is more troubling in terms of political inequality. An excellent example is the Strategic Relations Initiative, launched in July 2011, which

7 See the website Who Funds You for up to date funding records: http://whofundsyou.org/

gives a number of companies a direct line to a specific government minister. It was expanded in 2013 to include 76 corporations paired with nine minsters to 'improve the coherence and focus of major investors' relationship with Government'. The ministers are from across the government and are matched based on professional interests. By the beginning of 2013, the companies involved in the scheme had enjoyed 698 face-to-face meetings with ministers (Ball and Taylor 2013). Such a scheme is hugely problematic if we are interested in political equality; by virtue of their economic status, a certain number of actors have been granted privileged access and potentially influence over policymakers in their commercial area. As the total value of public services outsourced continues to grow – with the value of public sector contracts outsourced having doubled to £88 billion since 2010 (Plimmer 2014) – the exceptional influence corporate entities enjoy suggests a lack of democratic accountability or fair process will be the end result.

Another worrying example is the 'revolving door' phenomenon where top civil servants and former politicians migrate between public and business life. For example, Stuart Wilks-Heeg (2014) suggests that some 400–800 former civil servants seek permission to take up outside appointments each year, and cites Mara Faccio (2006) who found that just under half of the top 50 publicly traded firms in the UK had a parliamentarian as either a director or major shareholder. Looking in the other direction, a freedom of information request in 2011 revealed EDF, alongside other energy companies such as npower and Centrica, 'had at least 50 employees working within the government on energy issues over a four-year period, including drafting energy policy' (Jasiewicz 2013). Large corporations were involved in shaping the rules and contracts which they would have to live with, giving them very significant, non-democratically won influence. Nor is it just government where corporate involvement in politics has become steadily more apparent; figures from the latest PwC annual report suggest that in the last financial year the firm provided 6,004 hours of 'free technical support' to parties in drafting their policies, an increase of almost 4,000 per cent from 2005. Of this, 4,493 hours were provided to Labour, a figure most likely higher due to it being in opposition (PwC 2014: 37).

What these examples suggest is that the policymaking process often becomes insulated from democratic oversight and direction, with private economic actors having an increasingly greater role in shaping public policy. This has obvious implications for political inequality, as those with greater resources are able to gain far greater access and influence over government decisions than would otherwise be the case. More broadly, our analysis of a wide range of forms of political participation, voice and influence suggests that there are clear and systemic incidences of political inequality in the UK.

4.8 Shaping the debate: the role of the media

Political power is not constrained to direct relationships between elites and politicians. Influence can also take the form of the setting of news agendas and the dissemination of information to both policymakers and the public through the media or other third party institutions. How we receive our news and information, and the context in which it is presented, contributes to our perceptions of the wider political and social world. Assuring the media's independence and vitality is integral to guaranteeing a healthy democracy. Yet if only certain voices are heard or interests advanced, then this is likely to lead to some groups having far more influence in setting the political agenda than others.

In this context, the UK's lack of media plurality is of concern regarding unequal influence on the broader political process. For example, 70 per cent of the national newspaper market is controlled by just three companies (News UK, Daily Mail and General Trust, and Trinity Mirror), while figures on media ownership found that

nearly 40 per cent of all media consumption comes from the BBC and a further 22 per cent comes from Sky News and News Corp. While the BBC is a publicly owned corporation, News Corp is largely retained by a single owner who controls roughly a 40 per cent voting stake in the corporation (Media Reform Coalition 2014). Moreover, other large media outlets in the UK are also characterised by single owners or families controlling media corporations for generations, with a small number of individuals and media actors having the means and resources to influence government by dissemination of information to the public through traditional media sources.

More recently, the resignation of Peter Oborne from the *Telegraph* over his lack of confidence in its coverage of HSBC has shone the light on concerns that corporations influence the content of major newspapers, suggesting powerful private companies can have a disproportionate sway over public discourse (Oborne 2015). Of course, technology has increasingly created new forms of news and commentary sites that are far less concentrated in forms of ownership or control, particularly online. A good example is the website that published Oborne's statement of resignation, *OpenDemocracy*,[8] which is owned and published freely through a non-profit foundation. Nonetheless, the ownership concentration of traditional media and its relationship with corporate interests remains problematic in terms of who is the gatekeeper of public debate in traditional media sources.

There are also serious concerns about the diversity of voices we obtain our news and commentary from. According to Alan Milburn's report, *Elitist Britain?*, a majority of those presenting us our daily news and analysis have more privileged educational experience than the great majority of the public. Nearly 54 per cent of the top 100 media commentators attended an independent school for their secondary education – comparatively independent education only represents 7 per cent of the total secondary school student population. When looking at the educational background of all newspaper columnists 43 per cent have attended independent schools while a further 23 per cent attended comprehensive schools. This trend also continues through university where nearly half of all newspaper columnists (47 per cent) attended either Oxford or Cambridge. Moreover, it is not just the background but the content of the media that is increasingly unrepresentative: business representatives now receive 11 per cent of airtime on the BBC's 6 o'clock news, up from 7 per cent in 2007, while trade unionists have received 0.6 per cent, falling from 1.4 per cent (Berry 2013).

When most commentators do not share the same social backgrounds with the greater public it can be problematic for political inequality in terms of whose voice and experience dominates public discourse. Social background will influence the way the social and political world is interpreted, however directly or otherwise, which can shape which stories are chosen for 'news' and influence how articles are presented. For example, whereas in the past, industrial correspondents operated at most newspapers and news channels, today reporting on industrial matters is typically presented by economic or business reporters, who are likely to present a different slant compared to industrial correspondents. The narrow background of many, though not all, opinion-formers – and who owns the institutions in which their views are disseminated – therefore is troubling in terms of ensuring a broad, rich, representative public debate in which all sections of society have an opportunity for their interests to be reasonably presented and debated.

8 https://www.opendemocracy.net/

5.
CONCLUSION: REVITALISING OUR DEMOCRACY

Political equality is a foundational democratic principle, yet, as we have sought to show, the UK falls short of that ideal. In a clear and persistent pattern, the working class and the young have less input into political decision-making processes, with lower rates of participation and representation than older and more affluent citizens. Moreover, it is unlikely this trend will be substantively reversed in the general election. Despite procedural equality in the political process then, some individuals or groups in society have far more influence than others to affect political and government decision-making.

Such inequalities undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of our democracy. Moreover, we see its symptoms in the forms of democratic discontent that the UK is experiencing: from falling formal political participation, to growing political disenchantment and a surging 'anti-politics' populism.

Of course, all democracies are politically unequal to some extent. However, the UK is more unequal in worrying ways, particularly in terms of the unevenness of who participates in both formal and informal politics, who is represented in the political system, our distortive electoral system, and in who has access to government decision-making, especially corporate interests. Moreover, unequal input has clear consequences in terms of unequal outputs from political decision-making too, with a close relationship between economic and political inequality in the UK.

What we have learnt about the nature of political inequality and how it manifests itself therefore holds important lessons in terms of how to build a reform agenda capable of substantively reversing such inequalities. There are areas of thinking or potential action that a political inequality analysis points to, which are not prominent in the current political reform debate, and which are worth a final reiteration, as they will inform the second report in this series which sets out a strategy and a series of recommendations for tackling the problem.

1. **An agenda focussed on reversing political inequality must be far more sensitive to the effects of class and age in terms of who participates – and has influence – politically.** For example, it is not enough to have a more proportionate electoral system if the same pattern of who votes repeats itself; the same groups will retain influence over the political process through the ballot box. Similarly, the traditional terrain of reform to party funding and lobbying remains relevant to constrain the outsized influence of the powerful and well connected. However, reform should also focus more on how to explicitly boost the influence and voice of presently excluded or underrepresented groups in society. If necessary then, radical institutional intervention will be required to reverse ingrained inequality and substantively boost the influence of the presently politically excluded.
2. **Political inequality is intimately bound up in other socioeconomic inequalities**. We need to better recognise and understand the relationship between political inequality and economic outcomes, even if this relationship is sometimes difficult to prove causally. In turn, an agenda based on tackling political inequality must consider more seriously questions of political economy given its relationship to political inequality, asking how economic institutions

structure power and voice throughout the economy, and probing how power inequalities can be reduced.

3. **In this regard, devolution provides a critical opportunity to combat political inequality, potentially giving people a greater say over political decision-making in their locality and helping redress the overcentralisation of power in Whitehall.** However, it requires us to think hard not just about where to shift the locus of power to, but also how to ensure devolving decision-making also opens up the political process to greater participation among presently underrepresented groups.
4. **More broadly, the evidence presented suggests representative democracy needs a reboot.** Disaffection is not a passing phenomenon; it is deep-seated and, if anything, the forthcoming election might entrench it. Most obviously then, political parties, long the fulcrum of democracy, require revitalising so that they are better rooted in and more representative of an increasingly networked society. However, we should also consider whether – and if so, how – representative democracy could be complemented by more participatory and deliberative institutions of democratic power that offer another route to constraining the outsized influence of the politically advantaged.
5. **Finally, political inequality is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, manifesting itself in multiple spheres in society.** As such, it cannot be overcome by central diktat or the pulling of an obvious policy lever; redressing political inequality will require revitalising existing political institutions, experimenting with new channels of political influence, and mobilising civic society more widely in the contest and shaping of political power. All of this can clearly be supported by public policy. Ultimately, however, it will rely on the commitment and ingenuity of the people themselves if we are to make our democracy more substantively equal in terms of who participates, who has voice and who is represented.

Whatever the result in the general election, the stark challenge political inequality presents to democracy will remain. In the next report, due in spring, we will draw on these lessons to ask what can therefore be done to reverse political inequality, setting out a strategy for democratic renewal. Regardless of the outcome of May's election, this will remain overwhelmingly necessary. It will not, however, be easy. Nonetheless, the problem of political inequality makes the task all the more vital if democracy is to live up to its ideal.

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