

The state of British democracy

The latest *State of the Nation* poll measuring public opinion on democracy in Britain has thrown up challenging new findings whilst confirming consistent public support over time for democratic reform. The poll, carried out by ICM Research*, reveals substantial support for state funding for political parties and widespread demand for making the Prime Minister's war-making powers subject to Parliamentary approval. The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd has been measuring public opinion on issues of democracy, human rights and constitutional reform through the *State of the Nation* polls since 1991. The latest in this major series of opinion polls found that virtually every person interviewed (99%) wanted one or more democratic reforms. The 2004 poll found:

- The public have little faith in the way Britain is governed. Nearly two thirds (63%) agree that it needs 'quite a lot' or a 'great deal' of improvement. Over half (55%) believe Britain is becoming less democratic.
- There is overwhelming support (80%) for a written constitution that would set clear legal rules within which government ministers and civil servants must operate. Even more people (83%) say the Prime Minister should be bound by law to seek approval from Parliament before committing Britain to war.
- Three fifths (62%) support public funding for political parties to reduce their dependence on donations from wealthy individuals, businesses and trade unions.
- Two thirds (67%) want a wholly elected House of Lords or a mixed second chamber with a majority of elected over appointed members. Almost as many favour proportional representation for elections to Westminster (63%) and local councils (62%).
- Post 9/11, the public will accept some restraints on traditional civil liberties, but most people (55%) oppose the suggestion that British terror suspects should be tried at least partly in secret and prevented from hearing some of the evidence against them.
- People want more say in government policies. Nine out of ten (90%) believe ordinary voters should have 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' of influence over government policies. Only a third agree that ordinary voters actually have such influence.

* ICM conducted 2,373 on-street interviews during the recent local and European election campaign, between 26 May 2004 and 4 June 2004

The governing system

Faith in the existing system of government is very low. When asked for their views on the present system of governing Britain, only 3% of people agreed that it 'works extremely well and could not be improved'. In contrast, 63% said Britain's system of government 'could be improved quite a lot' or 'needs a great deal of improvement'.

The public also have a bleak view of the future of British democracy. Twice as many people (55%) believe that this country is becoming 'less democratic' as believe (24%) that Britain is getting 'more democratic'.

Table 1: Opinion on the present system of governing Britain

It works extremely well and could not be improved

3%

It could be improved in small ways but mainly works well

31%

It could be improved quite a lot

41%

It needs a great deal of improvement

22%

Don't know

3%

Limiting government power

The British people want a written constitution to ensure greater accountability in government. Since 1991, the *State of the Nation* series of opinion polls has found consistently high support for the adoption of a written constitution, providing clear legal rules within which government ministers and civil servants must operate. In this latest poll, support for a written constitution has reached a new high, with 80% in favour. More than a third 'strongly agree' with this proposal.

Following the war in Iraq, there is also overwhelming support for making the Prime Minister more accountable to Parliament by requiring the Prime Minister in future to seek approval from Parliament before committing Britain to war or other military action.

Table 2: Power to make war

As now the Prime Minister should retain the power to decide whether or not to commit Britain to war or other military action

16%

The Prime Minister should be bound by law to seek approval from Parliament before committing Britain to war or other military action

83%

Don't know

1%

Funding of political parties

Three quarters (73%) find the current system for funding political parties 'unfair' because of the risk that wealthy individuals, businesses and trade unions 'can buy influence' over the parties with their donations. As Table 3 shows, a majority would be in favour of public support for the parties through state funding to reduce their dependence on large donations.

Three quarters (74%) believe there should be limits on how much people can donate to political parties. This is consistent with the high levels of public concern about sleaze under both Conservative and Labour governments found in earlier *State of the Nation* polls.

Table 3: Support for public funding of political parties

Agree strongly

25%

Agree slightly

37%

Disagree slightly

16%

Disagree strongly

11%

Don't know

12%

Appointments to quangos

In 2003, the Public Administration Select Committee recommended that the government begin opening up membership of quangos by experimenting with choosing some members by lot. The government rejected the idea, but the public approve. Two thirds of respondents think some members should be selected at random from the electoral register and

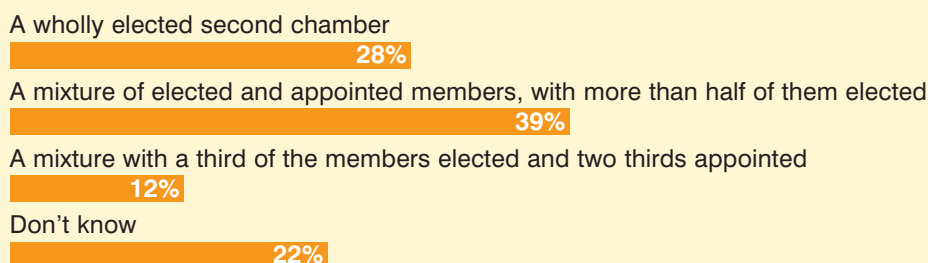
invited to serve on the boards of local quangos, like NHS Foundation Hospitals and police authorities, and nearly as many (61%) think some members should be chosen for national quangos in the same way. More than half (56%) say they would accept an offer to serve on a local board (50% on a national board).

Reform of the House of Lords

The *State of the Nation* and other polls financed by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust have consistently shown that the British people want a wholly or substantially elected House of Lords. This remains the case today.

Asked to choose from a range of options for who should sit in a reformed House of Lords, 28% of people back a 'wholly elected second chamber', while 39% support a 'mixture of elected and appointed members, with more than half of them elected'.

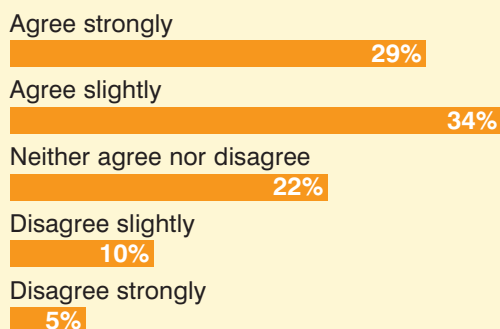
Table 4: Composition of the House of Lords



Electoral reform

There is widespread support for a referendum on changing the voting system used to elect MPs to Westminster. Nearly two thirds are in favour of proportional representation for both national (63%) and local (62%) elections. There is also a two-to-one majority in favour of the proposal that local councils and their communities should be given the power to choose the electoral system for local elections in their area.

Table 5: Support for the adoption of proportional representation for national elections

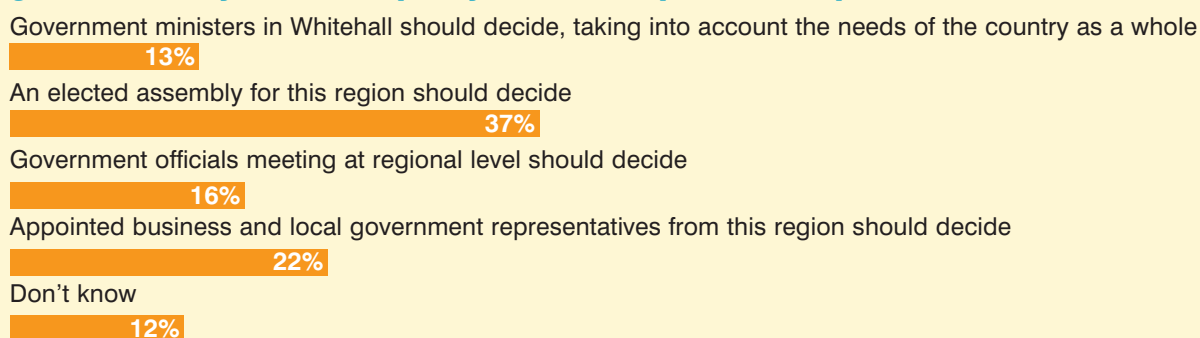


Devolution

More people would prefer to see decisions on employment, roads and public transport being made by elected regional assemblies than by government officials in Whitehall or regional offices, or by appointed bodies. Perhaps surprisingly, and for the first time, the South East recorded the strongest support (45%) for an elected regional assembly. It is also the preferred option in most English regions, including the North East (40%), North West (39%) and Yorkshire and Humberside (33%).

The existing devolved institutions are very popular and there is no desire amongst the people of Scotland, Wales or London to hand power back to central government. In Scotland 66% would like to see more powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament, while 49% of people in Wales and 30% of Londoners would like more powers to be given to their respective assemblies.

Table 6: Which of the following options do you think is the best way of deciding how to generate new jobs, develop major road and public transport, and other similar issues?



Civil liberties and human rights

Support for civil liberties and human rights remains strong, but people are willing to accept *some* restraints on civil liberties to deal with the threat from terrorism. Large majorities believe that a Bill of Rights should include the right to a fair trial (93%); the right to privacy in phone, mail and e-mail communications (85%); the right to know what information government departments hold about you (84%); and the right of free assembly for peaceful meetings and demonstrations (78%).

However, there is majority support for imprisoning foreign terrorist suspects without trial and two thirds agree that evidence gathered by 'electronic eavesdropping' should be admissible in court. Although there is a majority in favour of compulsory identity cards, this is still opposed by one in four people (24%) and barely half those polled in Scotland are in favour of ID cards.

The majority of people (55%) are against the idea of allowing British terror suspects to be tried partly in secret and prevented from hearing some of the evidence against them, and the public remain unconvinced by proposals to lower the standard of proof required for conviction in terrorism cases (only 46% are in favour). This is consistent with the public's strong support for the right to a fair trial.

Popular influence over government

Support for demonstrations has increased since the last poll in 2000. In 2004, nine out of ten people agreed that peaceful protests were a 'legitimate way' of expressing popular concerns when governments wouldn't listen (in 2000, the figure was also high, at 81%). Over three quarters of people (78%) said the protests against the war in Iraq were justified, and 55% said that they should have had a 'great deal' or 'fair amount' of influence on government policy.

The support for peaceful protest probably reflects popular frustration with the perceived lack of public influence over government policies. Nine out of ten people believe that ordinary voters should have a 'great deal' or a 'fair amount' of influence over government policies, but only one third agree that they do in fact have this amount of influence.

In contrast, as Table 7 indicates, approximately 80% believe that the media and large companies exercise 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' of influence over government policies, but only one in three of those polled think these groups *should* have this much influence.

Table 7: Who should have a great deal/a fair amount of influence over government policies

	Should	Do
Ordinary voters	90%	33%
The media	31%	79%
Large companies	35%	79%

Political parties

Although the public appreciate the roles that political parties play in representing strands of public opinion and giving people the opportunity to choose between different sets of policies, people on balance dislike the parties. The only exception is in Scotland, where more people like the SNP than dislike the party.

The Conservatives are the most unpopular of the three main parties, with 44% disliking and only 24% liking the party (30% were neutral). However, the British National Party is easily the most unpopular party overall, with 72% disliking against only 7% liking the party.

The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd

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How to get further information

The main findings of the 2004 poll are available at www.jrrt.org.uk

There is also a full report on the findings of the *State of the Nation* polls between 1991 and 2000 in *Voices of the People* by Dunleavy, P, Margetts, H, Smith, T and Weir, S, *Politico's*, 2002.

Further information can be obtained from the Trust's Project Adviser, Mark Ross, at:

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