# Social change and public engagement with policy and evidence

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# Acknowledgements

# Foreword by Professor Tom Ling

This is a good time to step back and reflect on how the public engage with policy and evidence. In the UK there is something of a moral panic, an anxiety that we now have a public that delights in rejecting experts and 'elite projects'. This has been brought into focus by a particular interpretation of the vote to leave the European Union. According to this view, Brexit is part of a wider global shift to a more demagogic, populist and erratic form of politics. Politics is thought to be becoming not only post-technocratic but also post-deliberative.

And yet, is this not a partial view? At the very least, does it not lack the social imagination that allows us to understand how others might simply frame the evidence in a very different way? It suggests we have been banished from a previous golden age of evidence-based policymaking. But this heralded return to a new dark age seems improbably pessimistic.

In reality, we all turn complexity and evidence-gaps into a meaningful story that provides a springboard to action. It is part of what makes us purposive humans. However, in the discussion document that follows we see how the social contexts in which shared ways of making sense of the world have changed. We can also see that this coincides with a great increase in the variety of sources of information and evidence. Somewhere in this, gaps have appeared.

It is clear that public discourse can be poisoned by misinformation as much as by wilful distrust. However, neither people nor politics are immovable. Can we not curate the evidence better and acquire and spread more curiosity and inquisitive habits? The following paper does not set out to answer these questions. Rather, its purpose is to support conversations that can reinvigorate deliberation and create spaces where public policy can be debated through the prism of balanced evidence.


*Professor Tom Ling*

# Executive Summary

The public square is changing, and changing fast. Recent years have seen a significant redefinition of the relationship between the public and the policymaking process, both in the UK and globally. This has been the result both of sustained social and demographic changes, and of unforeseen and disruptive events.

The impact in the UK has been profound. While minority voices and increased avenues for public engagement have been brought to the fore by new technologies and social change, so too have concerns about the impact of such changes on our relationship with expert opinion and evidence in the policymaking process. Recent polarising debates on the UK and global stage have led some to question whether our public discourse has become 'post-fact'; others celebrate the role of the Internet as a leveller through its function as a platform for marginalised voices and its potential for mass education. As with all major social shifts, the impact of these developments is unlikely to be uniform, and the consequences are difficult to predict.

However difficult to anticipate, it is nonetheless crucial that policymakers attempt to understand the possible implications of these changes. The changing nature of our engagement with evidence and argument, and the extent to which people trust the evidence being communicated to them – either by the state or by other figures of authority – are key factors shaping the nature both of political narratives in the public sphere and public engagement in the political process. Such engagement is important for ensuring a relationship of accountability between the state and its citizens, as well as public influence in policy development. Public engagement may be active – for example, individuals may write to their MP, or participate in a consultation regarding local service provision. Alternatively, it may be expressed less through participation than in political 'spectatorship'; for example, there are some indicators that, following recent years of intense constitutional debate, UK citizens are more interested in politics, more knowledgeable about political institutions, and more likely to discuss politics with their friends and acquaintances.

Nor can changes in the political sphere be considered in isolation. Our relationship with different forms of information is governed by a complex set of cognitive biases and personal circumstances which influence the extent to which we are receptive to argument, claims and counter-claims. Any analysis on this topic must go beyond simple exposure to the 'facts' to instead consider the *context* in which that evidence is communicated, received and debated by the public – and how this context is changing.

In this regard, our review considered three thematic areas of change: **socio-economic, technological** and **political** trends which may impact on public engagement with policymaking, and with information, argument and evidence within this process.

In terms of the **socio-economic changes** that are affecting public engagement with evidence and policymaking, **demographic changes**, the continued growth of urban centres and both migration and *perceptions* of migration are having a profound impact on traditional communities. As the communities we live in and relate to are changing, **shared and individual identities are becoming increasingly**

**plural, flexible and fragmented.** Increasing social diversity within physical communities and the development of online identities and communities are both broadening and, conversely, perhaps limiting the scope of our interactions with others in the UK and across the globe. The new contact points and interactions arising from these changes are affecting dominant political narratives and conventional sense-making. Meanwhile, increased instability in the labour market and **continued uncertainty in the economic outlook** are likely to continue to affect policy priorities and people's satisfaction with the political system, with potential implications for public engagement.

As mentioned, **key technological developments** are underpinning many of these social changes. The **spread of social media** has led some to question whether the Internet may be fragmenting into a number of individual 'spheres', potentially affecting the range of opinions to which we are exposed. The resulting **impact on the traditional media** has been similarly wide-ranging, with traditional titles struggling to compete for advertising revenue with newer online competitors – with potential consequences for editorial standards. While **digital penetration and skills have increased**, key groups (in particular older generations and disabled people) remain underrepresented.

The increasingly digital nature of our society, together with the aforementioned socio-economic shifts, has had important implications in the political sphere. **Political changes** include **increasing political pluralism** and the growing prominence of 'fringe' parties that are reshaping debates. Digital platforms have opened up **new avenues for state–public communication and participation**, and social media platforms and the growth of online advertising have enhanced the ability of political actors to **micro-target voters** by targeting adverts at particular profiles or demographics. Looking at the effect of these changes on civil society, **digital campaign organising** has become a prominent means of citizen activism and journalism, giving previously marginalised individuals across the political spectrum a public platform and voice. However, a lack of curation of online news and social media platforms may be exacerbating the spread of **rumours and misinformation**.

These trends are not necessarily linear in their progression nor uniform in their impact. While we have divided the trends into socio-economic, technological and political drivers for ease of narrative, it is important to bear in mind that the trends outlined are in fact highly interconnected. Some may prove transient; some may interact with one another in unexpected ways; and some may be counteracted by further disruptions yet to take hold in the public sphere. Just as the growth of apps and on-the-go computing is reshaping the way we conceptualise and interact with the web, so too may new inventions and changes affect our understanding of the likely trajectory of other social changes.

Nonetheless, while long-term forecasts may be tenuous, the impact of these dynamics on our current political process is real, if complex. While these are by no means exhaustive, we briefly discuss several questions emerging from the themes covered in this paper:

- Firstly, an increasing diversity and pluralism in our identities, lifestyles and day-to-day experiences may have consequences for our shared political and cultural understanding.
- Secondly, the sheer amount of information sources, the increasing role of social media as a media platform and diminished reliance on a few key media platforms mean that we have each gained enhanced control of our personal media experience. On the one hand, this has given a voice to

historically marginalised communities across the political and social spectrum; on the other, the extent to which this may exacerbate our tendency towards confirmation bias, limit our exposure to alternative opinions, and facilitate the spread of false or biased information is unclear.

- Thirdly, the policymaking process is in theory a reciprocal one, and the proliferation of online platforms has opened up valuable new avenues for state–public and public–public communication; however, the emergent nature of social media, the ability for groups to co-opt online tools to drive single-issue campaigns, and the differences in use across different social groups mean that the loudest voices online should not necessarily be considered representative of public opinion more broadly.

- Fourthly, the expanded scope for engagement between the state and the public may not necessarily translate into increased active participation in national and local decisionmaking by citizens. While public desire for *involvement* in decisionmaking is strong, actual levels of influence and participation are not necessarily consistent with these preferences, and may depend in part on individual confidence in navigating the arguments and evidence in different policy areas.

For those seeking to centre the role of independent analysis and evidence in the policymaking process, understanding this changing context will be crucial to determining the success or failure of engagement strategies. So, too, will understanding the extent to which the voices of certain social groups are excluded from the conversation. The trends presented here are necessarily eclectic in scope; but our intention is to offer them as a point of departure for further discussions around the factors that are shaping national conversations on policy, now and into the future.

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# 1. Approach to this paper

Sense about Science and the Nuffield Foundation commissioned RAND Europe to provide an overview of emerging trends and social changes which may affect the ways in which the British public understand and engage with policymaking, politics, services and information sources, and the role of evidence and expert opinion within this. The report was intended to offer background context and inspire further discussion and thinking at a workshop on influencing the policymaking environment to support initiatives on the use of evidence, hosted by Sense about Science and the Nuffield Foundation on 17 October 2016.

Although several sources provide regular data on key indicators of political engagement (e.g. the Hansard Audit of Political Engagement; the British Social Attitudes survey), the complex nature of the topic means that there are no systematic efforts to directly measure attitudes towards evidence during the policymaking process in the UK. Research which has sought to explore this issue has often focused on specific policy fields (e.g. public engagement with climate change claims) or, by nature of the study design, focused on specific sub-populations (e.g. users of a particular social media platform).

The trends presented here are the result of a journey. They have been compiled based on a series of conversations within and between RAND Europe, Sense about Science and the Nuffield Foundation, in addition to an iterative, non-systematic review of literature and commentary in this area, conducted through targeted online searches as well as a snowballing approach. Despite our use of three separate categories, the trends outlined below are in fact highly interconnected, and the ways in which they interact are difficult both to disentangle and to predict. Our intention here is not to venture firm conclusions, nor to posit causal relationships between trends and specific outcomes. Rather, we aim to pose questions and spark conversations by calling attention to emerging social changes which may be of increasing importance for public engagement with the political process, and the role of evidence and expert opinion within this. In this regard, the trends presented below are necessarily eclectic.

## 2. Why this matters: trust, political engagement and evidence

Our world is undergoing widespread social, technological and political change. In addition to unexpected and largely unforeseen developments, such as economic turbulence after the 2008 crash and the ongoing migrant crisis, longer-term technological and social changes are having a profound impact on the way we live and the communities with which we associate. For those who wish to advance the cause of evidence in policymaking, this matters. We do not process evidence and information in a vacuum; rather, it is filtered through the past experiences, narratives and material conditions which determine our day-to-day lives. If our political institutions are explicitly and normatively structured to include elements of public dialogue and input into policymaking, then understanding the ways in which different elements of society receive, frame, process and act upon information and evidence – and the ways in which these may be affected by changing social dynamics – is key.

This conversation has been granted new potency by a series of political events that just years ago were considered unthinkable by many observers, including the UK's vote to leave the European Union and the support for non-traditional parties and candidates in elections, such as Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the USA and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK. In the drive to understand the provenance of these 'black swan' events,[1] commentary has focused on the concern that, at best, an increasing social fragmentation is leading to a gulf in understanding between different elements of society,[2] and, at worst, we are moving towards a state of 'post-truth politics' in which a perceived proliferation of political untruths and spin, facilitated by new communication platforms, has diluted and corrupted the way in which we engage with fact in our political debate.[3]

A large body of literature has examined the ways in which we, as humans, engage with evidence, information and politics in this regard. A broad body of work in the psychology field has demonstrated that we are not strictly rational in our approach to argument and counter-argument.[4] Rather, a complex set of cognitive biases influence the way in which we understand the world and, consequently, our political outlook. Some of these, such as our proneness to reverting to stereotypes and our tendency towards confirmation bias, are well known and widely understood, and attempts are made to mitigate them in decisionmaking and research processes. Others have only been tentatively demonstrated: studies have indicated, for example, that familiarity with or repeated exposure to erroneous claims could reinforce their acceptance as true, to the point where even repeating the claim *in the context of counter-evidence* could actually serve to reinforce it.[5] Similarly, an emerging field of research into 'cultural cognition' has sought to examine the extent to which our existing values can influence the way in which we engage with

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[1] See Taleb (2007).
[2] See for example, Fraser (2016).
[3] See, for example, Viner/The Guardian (2016) and The Economist (2016b).
[4] See Sunstein (2002) and Kahnemahn (2011) for an overview of research in this field. See also the bodies of work by Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, and Dan Kahan.
[5] See Schwarz et al. (2008) for an extended discussion of this 'familiarity' bias. See Parsons (2016) for a discussion of the implications of this and other biases for the way in which we contest the practice of lying in elections.

evidence during the policymaking process.[6] Neither are the relationships straightforward ones of education levels: recent research by Dan Kahan into risk perceptions of climate change, for instance, showed an association between higher scientific literacy levels and *increasing* polarisation between those on the 'right' and 'left' of the ideological spectrum.[7] While the nature of the psychology field means that representative, large-scale studies are difficult to produce and reproduce, the way in which we engage with 'facts', experts and policy is anything but straightforward. What is clear, however, is that *who we are* may have a large influence on *what we believe*.

While tentative correlations can be identified between different demographic factors and political outlooks, the relationships are cross-cutting and complex. While the recent UK referendum vote to leave the European Union debate has been analysed in terms of social grade, age and geography, one of the strongest variables correlating with a stated intention to vote leave was support for the death penalty.[8] Supporters of the English Defence League (EDL), while more likely than the national population to be pessimistic about their prospects and out of employment (with 30% unemployed, compared to 6% nationally), show similar levels of trust in parties and parliament to non-supporters.[9] Even for those who remain aligned to mainstream parties, more subtle relationships of trust and the perception of the motives of political actors may affect public receptivity to different arguments and policies.

The way in which we live, the people with whom we associate, the nature of the information we receive and the news to which we are exposed may all serve to shape the way in which we approach arguments. And as the way in which we live changes, so too will the way in which we absorb, understand and engage with the policymaking process. Understanding the current and future social landscape – and the way in which this may be affected by changing social dynamics – may go some way towards helping us understand the ways and extent to which this will affect political and civic engagement in the years to come. It is in this regard that we present the below trends.

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[6] See, for example, research from the Yale Law School-hosted Cultural Cognition project: The Cultural Cognition Project (homepage). (n.d.).
[7] Kahan et al. (2012). See also Sharot et al. (2016).
[8] See Kaufmann (2016); and Goodwin et al. (2016). See Westlake (2016) for a wider discussion on the interplay between economic and cultural factors in the EU referendum vote.
[9] Bartlett et al. (2011).

## 3. Where we are: cynicism, influence and trust in the public sphere

The extent to which people trust the political system, feel that their needs are met through it, and have confidence that their views will be reflected in it, are important factors when considering the nature of public engagement with policymaking.[10] Those who feel that their voice is not heard in the public sphere, or that the formal political processes are unresponsive to them, may choose to withdraw from the conversation or turn to forms of expression outside of formal democratic channels.

However, in terms of getting a grasp on public attitudes towards and engagement with politics, no clear or comprehensive narrative emerges. Distrust of politicians and government is high, but satisfaction with other key state institutions is much healthier. Voter turnout is low, but other indicators of day-to-day interest in politics, such as discussions of political issues with friends, relatives and colleagues, suggest that public engagement with political arguments may be growing. And despite feeling that they have little influence over political decision-making, especially at a national level, people want to be involved – or at least want to feel able to have a say, whether or not they choose to personally participate in any decision-making processes.

Nonetheless, increasing interest in – and engagement with – political life may yet prove to be an effect of greatly increased exposure to politics in years that have seen a referendum on electoral reform, followed by a Scottish vote on independence, followed by a general election, followed by a further referendum on membership of the EU. Moreover, the electorate is far from homogenous, and different demographics may be responding in diverse ways to current socio-economic and political trends. In particular, there are certain groups in society whose disaffection runs deep and who therefore represent a considerable challenge for policymakers. After taking stock of the current situation, in subsequent sections (4–5) we will explore the social, technological and political changes which may be contributing to these mixed and perhaps ambiguous outcomes.

### 3.1 Trust in politics and political institutions is low

Public trust in British politicians is low. According to the 2015 Ipsos MORI Veracity Index,[11] only 21% of people said that they would trust a politician to tell the truth. This figure has never risen higher than 23% in the 33 years that the question has been posed to the British public. Rather, it has fluctuated around the 20% mark, sinking as low as 13% in 2009 in the wake of the MPs' expenses scandal.[12] These figures rank politicians below estate agents, journalists and bankers in terms of overall trust levels, and stand in stark comparison to public trust levels of 68% for the ordinary man/woman in the street.[13] When

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[10] These insights relate to broader academic discussions of the interrelations of trust, democracy and social capital; for one such example, see Warren (1999).
[11] Fieldwork was conducted between 5 December 2015 and 4 January 2016. See Ipsos MORI (2016a).
[12] Ipsos MORI (2011); Ipsos MORI (2016b).
[13] Ipsos MORI (2016b).

asked to judge British politicians' standards of honesty and integrity, two-thirds of the population rated these 'very' or 'somewhat' low, with fewer than one in ten respondents judging politicians' integrity and honesty to be high.[14]

Trust is also subject to fluctuations around political events: just as trust in politicians plummeted after the parliamentary expenses scandal, before gradually returning to the current pre-2009 levels, temporary upsurges in trust sometimes follow a general election, particularly in the case of a change of government, a trend attributed to voters' satisfaction at having ejected the 'bad guys' from power and replaced them with politicians in whom they have – initially, at least – more confidence.[15]

Furthermore, although there is strong belief in the importance of democratic government among the British public,[16] a significant proportion of the population does not feel that Britain is governed democratically: 26% of those surveyed for the 2012/13 European Social Survey rated Britain's democracy 5 or less out of a possible 10 when asked how democratic Britain is overall.[17] In terms of public satisfaction with what democratic government in Britain delivers, only one in three people report being satisfied with the way in which the country is governed, while three in five believe that the system needs to be improved.[18] There are also areas in which large numbers of people are frustrated by their interactions with the state and democratic institutions. In 2014, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey reported that almost a fifth of the population feel that the courts do not live up to their expectations in terms of treating everyone fairly (18%). Fifteen per cent feel that the quality of information that the media provides is inadequate. Twenty-four per cent think that it is extremely important that the government explains its decisions to voters but think that this is not done adequately in Britain. Finally, nearly a quarter of people (24%) believe that the government fails to protect all citizens from poverty.[19] [20]

NatCen Social Research, which runs the BSA survey yearly, analysed these data in order to explore any associations between people's dissatisfaction with democracy in Britain and their levels of political engagement.[21] While there was some evidence supporting the hypothesis that a perceived 'democratic deficit' may actually encourage political participation (those that felt least satisfied with some key aspects of participatory democracy in Britain were more likely to have participated in protest activities in the past year, or to have voted in the 2010 general election, and those that felt least satisfied with key aspects of liberal democracy were also more likely to have participated in protest activities), those that felt let down by what they thought democratic government should provide in *material* terms (reduced income

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[14] Seyd (2013).

[15] Ibid.

[16] The European Social Survey 2012/2013 found that when asked 'How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically', where 0 means 'not at all important' and 10 means 'extremely important', 84% of Britons rated the importance of democracy as 6 or above, and 57 percent gave it a score of nine or ten. See Park et al. (2014, 3).

[17] Ibid.

[18] The Hansard Society (2016, 44).

[19] Park et al. (2014, 14).

[20] These figures represent the proportion of respondents who rated each particular characteristic as being extremely important for democracy (i.e. they gave it a score of nine or ten out of ten) but who evaluated each characteristic as poorly delivered by British democracy (i.e. they scored it five or less on an 11-point evaluation scale where 0 means that they do not think that it applies in Britain at all and 10 signifies that they think it applies completely).

[21] Park et al. (2014, 15).

inequality; protection from poverty) may be more inclined to political disengagement and disaffection.[22] The more that people felt the government was failing to protect citizens from poverty or to reduce differences in income levels, the less likely it was that they voted in the 2010 general election.[23] This was the case for citizens across the political spectrum: although individuals on the left felt most disappointed by the government's efforts to ensure equality, a 'democratic deficit' in terms of material outcomes was also felt by those in the centre and on the right.[24]

Finally, it is important to consider that trust per se may not necessarily imply a strong democracy in which citizens are engaged in policymaking. Might it be that uncritical, or indeed unwarranted, trust could risk slipping into the kind of deference towards authorities and political institutions that might undermine democratic decisionmaking?[25]

## 1.1 But other forms of political engagement are growing

Cynicism directed at politicians may be entrenched in British public attitudes, but there are indicators that political participation and interest may be on the rise. Electoral participation has not increased at recent general elections: turnout at the 2015 general election was fairly low at 66%, only one percentage point higher than at the 2010 general election, and also low relative to previous turnout rates, which, between 1922 and 1997, never fell below 71%.[26] However, when recently faced with key constitutional questions, UK voters have shown up: turnout in the 2014 Scottish Independence referendum was an impressive 85%, and 72% of voters cast their ballot in this year's UK referendum on EU membership.

However, democracy is not just about elections: other forms of political engagement not expressed through voting have seen growth. Despite the low turnout, there has been an increase in the number of people who feel they have a 'duty' to vote in a general election, from 61% in 2010 to 66% in 2015.[27] Equally, the 2016 Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement reports that for the first time in the history of the survey (which was first published in 2004), net knowledge of Parliament is positive (i.e. +5% more people than claim to know 'not very much' or less are saying that they know at least 'a fair amount' about Parliament).[28] Similarly, the declining sense of attachment to any political party has shown signs of a reverse: while the number of people who say they feel 'no attachment' to any political party shows no real change since five years ago, those who report a 'very' or 'fairly' strong attachment to a political party represented 41% of respondents in 2015, up from 36% in 2010 and 35% in 2005.[29]

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Concerns have been raised about the extent to which trust in political institutions and representatives is useful or desirable. See, for example, Warren (1999).
[26] Curtice et al. (2016a, 12–13).
[27] Ibid. (13).
[28] The Hansard Society (2016, 24).
[29] Curtice et al. (2016a, 14–15).

Informal day-to-day engagement with politics also seems to be gaining ground. The number of people saying that they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics climbed steadily between 2010 and 2015, from 31% to 36%, the highest level reported since 1986, when the figure stood at 29%.[30] In 2015, the BSA survey reported that half of the British public say that they 'sometimes' or 'often' discuss politics with friends, relatives or colleagues – a proportion five percentage points higher than a decade ago.[31] Sixty-five per cent of people are also accessing political news through newspapers, radio, TV or the Internet on a daily basis, with 83% of people doing this at least once a week.[32] Although not necessarily active participants in the political sphere, it seems that the public are nonetheless paying regular attention to it.

**Figure 1. Voter turnout (%) in general elections by interest in politics, 1997–2015**
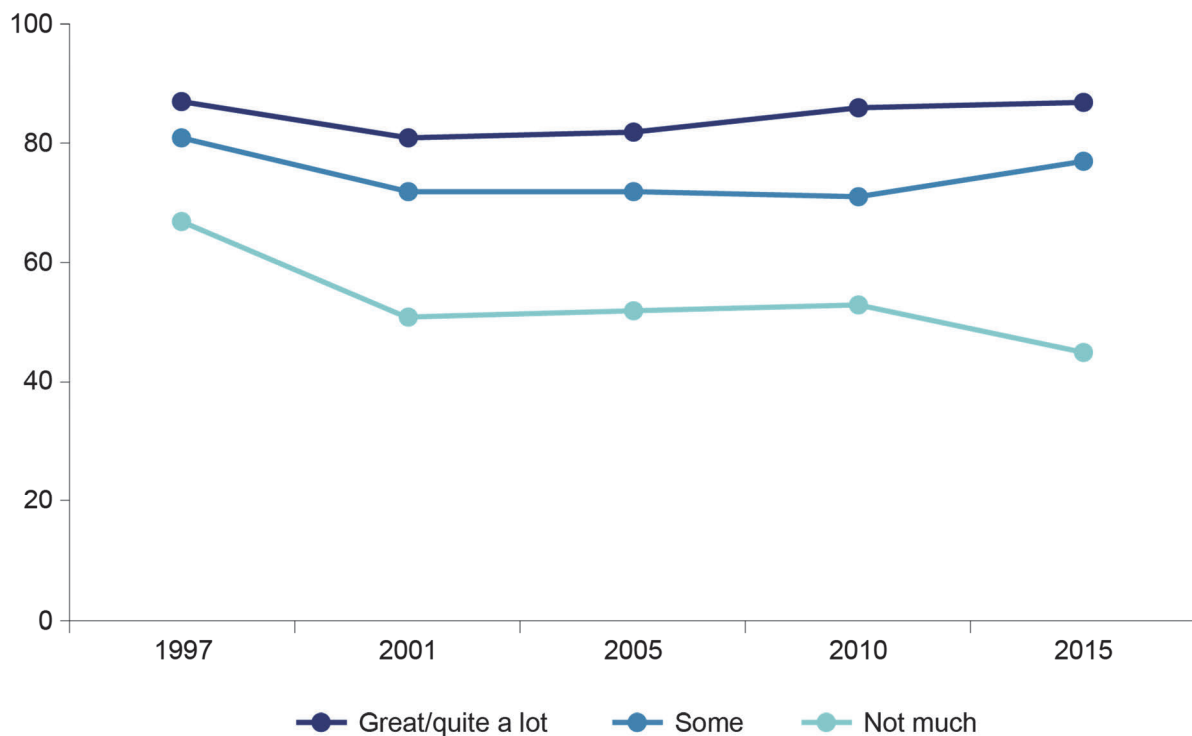


*Source: Curtice et al. (2016a). 1997: British Election Study (in Curtice, 2016a).*

However, increased engagement in politics in the period immediately following an election is an observable pattern around election cycles due to increased exposure to political debate,[33] and it therefore remains to be seen whether any recent increase in engagement following the 2015 general election and 2016 EU referendum are sustained in the longer term.[34] Moreover, interest in politics does not necessarily

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[30] Ibid. (14).
[31] Curtice and Ormston (2015, 127).
[32] Ibid. (128).
[33] The Hansard Society (2016).
[34] At the time of writing, interesting figures from a recent poll following the British public's vote to leave the European Union show that people are more likely now to think that government is focusing on delivering the right things than they were in 2014: there has been an increase of eight percentage points in those who think that politicians are 'implementing the policies they think are best for Britain'; a seven-percentage-point increase in those that believe that politicians are prioritising 'decisions about the long-term direction of the country'; and a five-percentage-point rise in those who think politicians are prioritising 'running the

translate into active participation and contributions to political life; as the 2015 BSA survey suggested, we may be 'political spectators, not activists.'[35] This is perhaps where any temporary shifts get caught on underlying issues – in this case a general scepticism and lack of trust in the political system. When asked whether they think that politicians would take any notice if people turned their interest into action, only 16% of respondents believe that if they made an effort to influence a political decision, such as by opposing an unjust or harmful law, the issue would be given serious attention by parliament.[36]

## 1.2 The public relationship with state institutions and public services is strong

It is important to remember, of course, that the government is not the state. Despite broad public distrust of politicians, outright trust in key state institutions remains relatively high. In the 2015 Ipsos MORI Veracity Index, 86% of people would trust teachers to tell the truth; 80% would trust judges; 68% would trust the police; and, at 79%, trust in scientists is also high.[37] Civil servants are trusted by 59% of the population, and managers in the NHS by 49%.[38] Similarly, public perceptions of local government representatives are more favourable than those of politicians: 42% of the population trust local councillors, and 37% trust managers in local government.[39]

Generic 'trust' in key public institutions is also positive,[40] with the NHS, universities and the police ranking highest in the 2015 Britain Uncovered survey.[41] More striking is the public's loss of confidence in the banking sector: whereas 90% of the population thought that the banks were well run in 1983, in 2012 only 19% felt the same.[42] Although confidence in the banking sector did suffer a slight decline over the course of recent decades, a sharp drop followed the financial crisis of 2008, suggesting the extent to which public perceptions are vulnerable to sudden events and the degree to which trust based on ignorance regarding the workings of an institution can lead to a sudden crisis of confidence.

It is therefore also worth considering that trust in institutions might depend, at least in part, on public understanding of and confidence in the regulatory mechanisms in place to hold institutions to account. Indeed, although not questioned on any regulatory body in particular, respondents to a 2014 survey of

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government professionally.' Regardless of these improvements, however, the largest proportions of respondents still feel that politicians prioritise political point-scoring and getting re-elected – and only 11% think that politicians prioritise representing their local area, a figure which shows no change since 2014. See Institute for Government (2016).

[35] Curtice et al. (2015, 122).
[36] Ibid. (131).
[37] Ipsos MORI (2016b).
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Respondents were asked, 'Thinking about each of the following organisations, institutions or sectors, how much, or how little trust do you have in each one?'. The list of options included the NHS, UK universities, the police, the judiciary/courts, TV news programmes, the monarchy, broadsheet newspapers, trade unions, banks, the government, politicians in general and tabloid newspapers. Net trust scores for each were calculated by subtracting the percentage of people saying that they had low levels of trust in a particular institution/organisation/sector from the percentage of people who expressed high levels of trust. The NHS scored highest, with a net trust score of +54, UK universities had a net score of +38, and the police had +25.
[41] Mann/ The Guardian (2015).
[42] Park et al. (2013, xv).

public attitudes towards conduct in public life expressed little confidence in the effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms: 61% of people said that they were 'not very' or 'not at all' confident that 'the authorities will generally uncover any wrongdoing by people in public office', and 63% were not confident that, when discovered, wrongdoers in public office would be punished.[43] On the other hand, respondents to the survey expressed much greater certainty that the media would uncover instances of such wrongdoing.[44]

Also of relevance is that public knowledge of regulatory bodies seems to be very limited, which may have implications for the robustness or resilience of public trust. A recent report into the regulation of charities, following last year's public outcry around bad management and practices in the voluntary sector,[45] concluded that 'the public on the whole know very little about how charities are regulated.'[46] In a report on the role of the ombudsman, with particular reference to the functioning of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, the author argues that building trust in ombudsmen may help to strengthen public trust in the services which they seek to regulate.[47] However, evidence on public engagement with regulators and its effect on trust is limited. Moreover, research into the role of the ombudsman in building public trust in government in Belgium and the Netherlands suggests that, because it is typically only educated, politically engaged citizens that seek redress through ombudsmen, ombudsmen are unlikely to help to restore confidence in government for those who are already alienated from and disinterested in public affairs.[48]

It is also important to note that in practice the regulatory function is performed not only by official state regulators and watchdogs (although this is not to say that the combined regulatory capacity of the patchwork of organisations and individuals who have taken up the mantle of regulation is necessarily an effective or comprehensive one). While the list of official regulators includes some which are well known, such as Ofcom and Ofsted, many others – for example, Ofwat, the water services regulation authority – do not have a significant presence in the public sphere, and remain obscure to many members of the public. Meanwhile, self-appointed watchdogs such as *Which?* are considered a household name, both generating strong engagement from consumers who contribute to *Which?* reviews and campaigns and influencing government policymaking – for instance, in 2013 the *Which?* 'Fixed Means Fixed' campaign was used as evidence to inform Ofcom's introduction of new rules to protect consumers against mobile phone price hikes in fixed-term contracts.[49] Other organisations, such as Shelter, similarly combine inquiry and investigation with regulatory-like reporting, campaigning and advocacy. Moreover, individuals such as Martin Lewis of MoneySavingExpert have become figures of authority in debate; Lewis was a 'trusted' voice for many in the pre-referendum Brexit debate,[50] and has recently launched and is personally financing an investigation into the government's change to student loan repayment terms, which will seek to question the legality of the government's decision.[51]

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[43] Prosser et al. (2015, 15).
[44] Ibid.
[45] See, for example, Sussex / The Guardian (2015).
[46] Hogg (2016, 4).
[47] Brehens (2015).
[48] Hertogh (2012).
[49] See Ofcom (n.d.) and *Which?* (2016).
[50] Morris (2015).
[51] Connington / The Telegraph (2015).

A lack of confidence in current regulation seems to extend beyond regulation of the public sector: in a recent survey of public and parliamentarian views on industry regulation, it was observed that members of the general public tend to trust industry less and believe that more regulation of industry is needed than do MPs.[52] Interestingly, older generations tend to prefer greater levels of regulation than younger generations, but this trend is reversed with regard to the regulation of newspapers and magazines, where younger people want more regulation than older people.[53]

Nonetheless, our relationship with state institutions and vital public services cannot easily be distilled into a matter of trust or lack thereof. The reality is more complex. In a 2010 study by Ipsos MORI, which explored attitudes towards and priorities for public services, local control and personalisation of services were considered important, but as second-order priorities relative to providing services of a particular standard in a fair way.[54] Public desire for influence is high, with 58% wanting some form of influence over decisions regarding local public services;[55] however, the study noted that this did not always correspond to a desire to be actively involved in decisionmaking, but rather that 'the feeling they can influence services if they need to may be more important to the public than actually getting involved in practice.'[56] Interestingly, the study also found a 'perception gap' between respondents' views of local and national services, in particular revealing much greater levels of confidence in the services provided by the local NHS and the way in which crime is dealt with on a local level than the corresponding national level.[57]

## 1.3 Trust, engagement and feelings of influence vary considerably across demographic groups

Overall national confidence in – and engagement with – politicians, politics and state institutions may fluctuate over time, but striking discrepancies can be observed between people of different genders, social classes, ages and ethnicities. Of these differences, recent trends relating to social class and age are particularly notable.

Perhaps most concerning is the widening gap in trust in institutions between people of different socio-economic levels. The Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual global study, makes a distinction between the 'Informed public' (characterised by university-level education, high income and significant engagement with news and politics) and the 'Mass population', who account for the remaining 85% of the total population. Results published in 2016 indicate an accelerating disparity in terms of the levels of trust in institutions reported by the social elite ('Informed public') and the rest of the population: in 2016 this gap was 17 percentage points, an increase of 10 percentage points since 2012 and a disparity which makes the

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[52] Chwalisz et al. (2016).
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ipsos MORI (2010).
[55] Ibid. (32).
[56] Ibid. (9).
[57] Ibid. (18).

size of the UK's 'trust inequality' second only to that of the United States.[58] Looking at income alone, the average difference between high-income and low-income respondents in the UK when asked to 'indicate how much you trust [each institution listed] to do what is right' was 19 percentage points.[59]

Lower levels of confidence in the state may translate into higher levels of political disaffection. The extent to which people feel that they have political influence, or desire political involvement, is much more limited for those from lower social grades and with lower education levels. As regards decisionmaking at both a local and national level, it is the more affluent and better educated who are more likely both to feel that they have influence and to want influence.[60] Also significant are the turnout differences between different segments of the workforce: 80% of those employed in a professional or managerial role are likely to vote, in contrast to 60% of people engaged in routine or semi-routine occupations.[61] Similarly, certainty to vote varies by a gap of 37 percentage points between people belonging to social grades AB and DE, with those in the higher classes expressing much greater certainty in their likelihood to cast their ballot.[62]

Young people remain significantly less likely to vote than older members of the population. However, recent increases in political engagement have been most significant in the younger age groups: the percentage of people aged 18–24 saying that they would be certain to vote in the next general election increased from 16% to 39% as reported in the 2015 and 2016 Audit of Public Engagement.[63] Likewise, identification with political parties has also grown substantially among the youngest age group: 38% of young people aged between 18 and 24 report being strong supporters of a political party, compared to 13% the previous year.[64] The 'Corbyn Effect', whereby Jeremy Corbyn's participation in the 2015 Labour leadership contest rallied the support of large numbers of young people, who registered with the Labour Party in order to elect him, can be seen to have raised the profile of a generation of young voters eager to get behind a political cause with which they identify.

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[58] Edelman Trust Barometer (2016).
[59] Ibid.
[60] The Hansard Society (2016).
[61] Curtice et al. (2016a, 18).
[62] The Hansard Society (2016, 18–19).
[63] Ibid. (18).
[64] Ibid. (17).

**Figure 2. Voter turnout (%) at general elections by age group, 1997–2015**
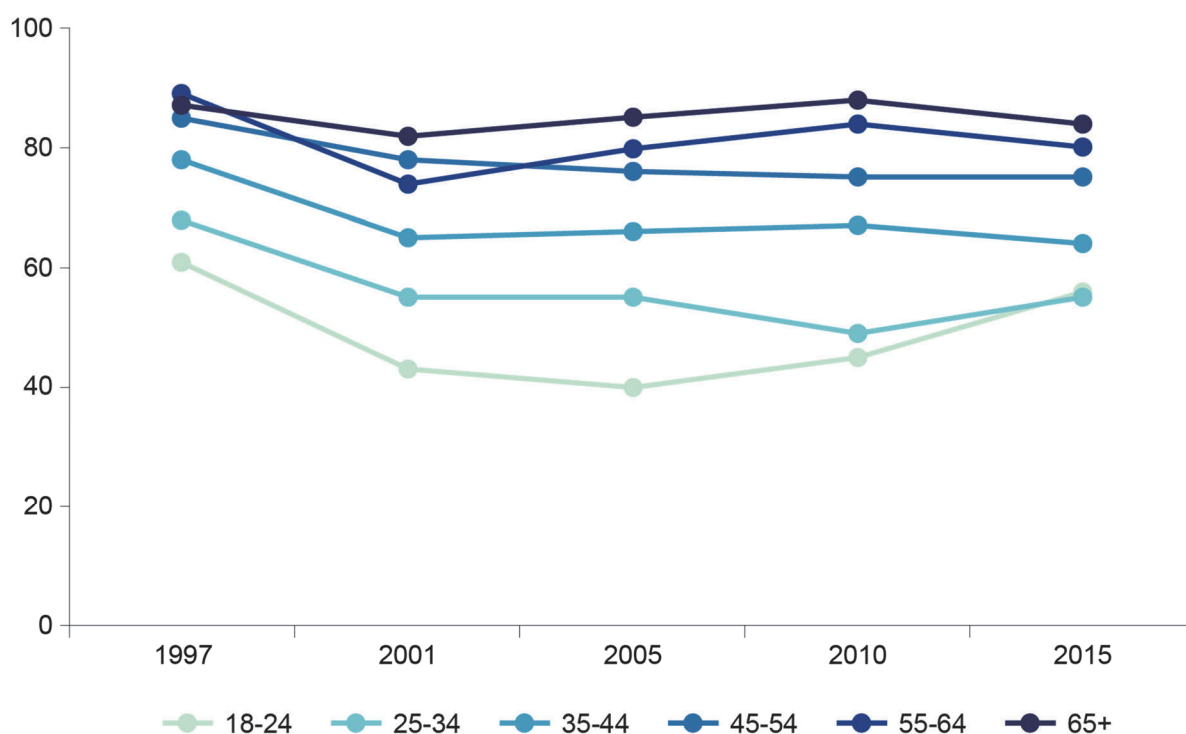


*Source: Curtice et al. (2016a).*

## 1.1 Relationship to 'experts' and authority figures

Trust in the political process and engagement in political decisionmaking may also depend on the ways in which people relate to experts and authority figures. Few people have either the time or the scientific/technical literacy to engage closely with the evidence behind multiple policy decisions, and appeal to expertise – whether directly to practitioners and scientists, or to actors in the media or political institutions – can play a strong role in the public acceptance (or otherwise) of technical policy issues. As routes for active public engagement with complex policy issues are diversified and the number of information sources proliferates (discussed more fully in section 4), the role of the 'expert', able to curate and present the consensus of experts in a policy or scientific field, has taken on new meaning.

Just as trust in politicians, politics and state institutions varies across demographic groups, so too does the relationship between the public and other traditional sources of authority in public life. In a recent YouGov poll exploring trust in public figures, young people aged 18–24 were more likely to trust academics, trade union leaders and EU and US officials than were older age groups, but less likely to trust military leaders, religious leaders and people they meet in general. Academics were trusted by 70% of respondents of social grades ABC1 compared to 56% of those in social grade C2DE, and by 74% of the

18–24 age group compared to 58% of the 65+ group (with figures of 14% and 35% for lack of trust respectively).[65]

Nevertheless, the public still expects that political decisionmaking should be based on expert opinion. When recently asked whether it is important that politicians consult a wide range of professionals and experts when making difficult decisions, 85% of people agree.[66] Similarly, 83% agree that it is important that politicians demonstrate that decisions are made based on objective evidence. These figures show a small increase since the question was asked in 2014. When asked if citizens should also be involved in difficult decisionmaking, 86% of respondents agreed that this was also important.[67]

However, when it comes to the importance of public opinion *relative* to the views of experts, there is no clear consensus or easy answer for policymakers. When asked in a separate poll whether, in the case of an expert consensus differing from mass public opinion, the government should 'do what [experts] suggest even if it goes against what a majority of the public would prefer', there was a fairly even split between those who would privilege the views of the public over those of experts (32%) and those who would rather that the views of experts were observed above those of the public (29%), with the remaining respondents split between not knowing and preferring neither option (18% and 21%, respectively).[68] Notably, significant differences were apparent between the preferences of men and those of women: almost twice as many men than women (38% compared to 21%) said that experts' views should be prized above those of the public.[69]

Nonetheless, research into public attitudes towards science by Ipsos MORI noted that public trust in scientists has increased in recent years, although it remains in part dependent on perceptions of scientists' willingness to follow the norms and regulations of their field, with higher levels of trust in scientists working for universities (90%) and charities (88%) than in those working for government (74%) and private companies (60%).[70] Public confidence in feeling informed varied across scientific topics, with 78% feeling 'informed' about climate change and 77% about vaccination, but only 35% about clinical trials and 8% with regard to synthetic biology.[71] People of social grades DE were less trusting of scientists and more likely to feel less informed about the various scientific topics than those of grades ABC1C2, while differences by age and gender varied across the various scientific topics, with younger people showing higher average levels of trust.[72]

Meanwhile, feelings towards science journalism are more sceptical. In line with concerns which have been raised over the potential role of the media in spreading incorrect or unreliable information,[73] 71% of people believed that the media tends to 'sensationalise' science, with 50% thinking that journalists only

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[65] *YouGov Survey Results* (2016).

[66] Institute for Government (2016, 4).

[67] Ibid.

[68] Livesey (2015).

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ipsos MORI (2014, 87).

[71] Ibid. (60).

[72] Ibid. (61).

[73] For a humorous expression of such concerns, see http://dailymailoncology.tumblr.com/

'occasionally' check the reliability of scientific findings before reporting.[74] This too differed across demographics, with younger people showing less concern about media sensationalism. Respondents suggested that articles which laid out the pros and cons, or were written by trusted scientific organisations, could help to increase trust.[75]

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[74] Ipsos MORI (2014, 84)
[75] Ibid. (86).

## 2. Winds of change: shifts in the public relationship to the policymaking process

Britain, Europe and other parts of the world are undergoing significant changes. Some of these changes may be marked by sudden, striking disruptions to daily life; others may be gradual and the extent and true nature of their impact are perhaps yet to be understood. Some may be the drivers of fundamental and lasting change, while others may prove to be more elastic and temporary. Perhaps of most importance for the policymaking process are the ways in which these shifts are creating new points of contact – and new distances – between different perspectives, people and opportunities. This is having a profound impact on societal cohesion and connectedness, as individuals are invited to reflect on their own identities, place in society and relationship to the state.

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### 2.1 Socio-economic drivers of change

Aspects of our social existence – the way in which we live, the people that we interact with, and the material conditions of our lives, especially relative to those of others – may greatly affect the views that we are exposed to and the ways in which we relate to the evidence offered to us. Economic trends, changes to the structure of our society and communities, and the way in which our identities are evolving are therefore key elements in influencing our engagement with the political and policymaking process.

#### 2.1.1 In our interconnected global economy, technological innovations are changing the world of work and economic crises in one part of the globe risk spreading quickly

The world has become more interconnected. The breaking of product value chains across national borders has transformed manufacturing sectors; a crisis in the subprime mortgage market in the USA can spread contagion and cause lasting instability throughout Europe's largest economies; and technological innovations have disrupted sectors of the labour market, whether by automating jobs or tasks previously performed by humans, or by cutting out traditional 'middle-man' jobs by connecting consumers directly with service providers on peer-to-peer platforms (the 'collaborative economy').

While the impact on the labour market has been – and will continue to be – significant, it is also unpredictable. Some long-term trends have been identified, such as the automation of certain roles (for example in retail) and the declining demand for jobs requiring 'middle-level' qualifications, leading to a 'hollowing out' of the labour market as job growth is concentrated in highly qualified or low-qualified occupations.[76] Other trends, such as the impact on the taxi industry of new online platforms such as Uber, have disrupted traditional occupations with little or no warning.

Meanwhile, Britain is recovering from what has been popularly termed the 'Great Recession'; debates over the impact of austerity in recent years are, at the point of writing, giving way to widespread uncertainty about Britain's economic future outside of the EU. Economic inequality has grown[77]; wealth disparities in Britain compared to other developed countries are particularly pronounced.[78] So too has intergenerational inequality. Younger generations are burdened with increasing levels of student debt and are struggling to get on the property ladder, with predictions that young people now will be poorer in terms of real wealth than previous generations at every stage of life.[79]

Economic outlook has major implications for political engagement, as people's material conditions and satisfaction with the economic situation in their country may be a significant factor with regard to trust in government and public institutions.[80] Economic pessimism can be a driver of increased and disruptive activism – as has been witnessed in many European countries in the wake of the crash – or may lead to disengagement. In this context it is interesting to note that while most Britons were feeling 'cautiously optimistic' about their household finances (prior to the Brexit vote), UKIP voters were the exception to the rule – in 2015 they were the only group of voters who reported deteriorating household finances and the expectation that things would only get worse in the next year.[81]

Technological change and global economic developments will bring both opportunities and challenges for society. But of more immediate concern, perhaps, is the uncertain and unpredictable nature of such changes – and the potential impact on specific demographics. Navigating these dynamics, and ensuring that social protection systems are adequately structured to account for unforeseen economic trends, is likely to be a key challenge for policymakers in the coming decades. Politicians have grappled with such challenges, but proposed solutions – for example, the idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) – have yet to find broad acceptance.[82]

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[76] Skills Panorama (2015).

[77] Keeley (2015).

[78] Treanor et al. / The Guardian (2014).

[79] See, for example: Crawford et al. (2015, 2) and Barr et al. / The Guardian (2016).

[80] See for example, Eurofound (2013).

[81] Mann / The Guardian (2015).

[82] Indeed, a recent referendum on the introduction of UBI in Switzerland was rejected by the electorate. See BBC News (2016). For a discussion about shaping the policy debate on UBI in the UK see Taylor (2016).

## 2.1.2    Communities are changing – but local culture is still a significant factor

Population growth, ageing and migration are also changing the composition and cohesion of communities across the UK. Communities can have a potent impact on lifestyles, opportunities and the views and opinions to which we are exposed, and local culture on the views we adopt. As *The Economist* notes, voters in a high income bracket in the north are more likely to vote Labour than those of a lower income bracket in the South, a divide which remains potent even when controlling for factors such as education, age and unemployment.[83] Analysis of the Brexit referendum vote by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed that the support for the Leave campaign among voters of a particular education or skilled background differed significantly depending on whether they lived in a generally high-skilled or low-skilled area, a trend the authors suggest may relate to economic opportunities on offer.[84]

As communities change, therefore, this raises questions about the potential impact on our day-to-day interactions with others in society, and the different experiences and perspectives with which we come into contact. On the one hand, improvements in public transport networks and the increasingly mobile way in which young people re-locate for study and employment may widen social networks and the potential for interaction with others outside of our direct community. Conversely, concerns have been raised that patterns of 'gentrification' driven by housing price dynamics and a growing age disparity between rural and urban areas, and between different neighbourhoods within cities, may serve to decrease day-to-day contact between different social groups and demographics.[85]

While all regions will see a growth in the population aged 65+, the working-age population (those aged 16–64) is expected to decline in the North-East and North-West regions over the coming decade.[86] These communities may face challenges as the old-age dependency ratio increases, with fewer working-age people available to support elderly dependants. London in particular is expected to continue to see significant population growth of 13.7%, of which 10.2% is expected as a result of international migration,[87] although projections of future net migration have been thrown into uncertainty in light of the vote to leave the EU.

Immigration too has proven a potent political issue, as some communities have perceived the influx of new arrivals as a threat to their jobs, income, provision of local services, and culture. Neither is it simply *numbers* of migrants that is of relevance, but also the resulting *perceptions* of migration; although estimates based on the 2011 UK census put the current proportion of people born outside of the UK at a little over 13% of the total population, the average Briton puts this figure at 31%, with 17% of respondents saying that immigrants account for more than half the current population.[88] Attitudes towards immigration may not be driven by numbers alone. Analysis by *The Economist* has shown that, contrary to the understanding that more ethnically diverse communities tend to be more accepting of immigrants, it is perhaps the *pace*

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[83] The Economist (2016a)
[84] Goodwin et al. / Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2016)
[85] Kingman / The Intergenerational Foundation (2016)
[86] ONS (2016b).
[87] ONS (2016b). Figures calculated before the decision to leave the European Union.
[88] Mann / The Guardian (2015).

of change that is key to understanding public preferences regarding immigration.[89] Those communities which have undergone rapid increases in the proportion of their foreign-born population are more likely to have voted to leave the European Union, suggesting that they favour tighter restrictions on immigration.[90]

### 2.1.3    Our identities are becoming more pluralistic

Research by the BBC as part of its Great British Class Survey was widely cited in the media, and offered a new typology of class for the 21st century.[91] By considering different demographic groups in terms of their cultural and social capital, as opposed to the traditional income- or profession-based analysis, it ventured seven separate 'social classes' to describe the social landscape: the *elite*; an *established middle class,* with relatively high incomes and high cultural capital; a *technical middle class*, with low social and cultural capital scores but relatively good incomes; *new affluent workers*, younger service workers with high cultural and social scores but mid-level incomes; the *traditional working class*, with low incomes and social and cultural capital, but access to resources in part due to high levels of home ownership; *emergent service workers*, with low incomes but high social and cultural influence; and the *precariat*, the class with the lowest income and low cultural and social capital. While these are not rigid categories, and the typology (and methodology) itself have been challenged[92], the conversation generated by the study is indicative of the difficulty of ascribing clear descriptive categories to what is an increasingly pluralistic Britain.

Nor are people's own perceptions of how they fit into contemporary British society necessarily consistent with how they might be externally categorised: while those in working-class occupations (described as manual, or 'routine and semi-routine' occupations) are now thought to account for only a quarter of workers in Britain,[93] 60% of the population still identify as 'working class' when asked to express their own class identification.[94] Moreover, according to the same 2016 BSA survey, people with middle class occupations are much more likely to identify as working class if they perceive British society as divided by extreme inequality between a small privileged elite and a much larger disadvantaged group that represents the rest of the population.[95] Meanwhile, increasing choice in consumer goods and opportunities opens new avenues for this self-identification and self-expression via the clothes we wear, the places we go, and the experiences we cultivate.

Identity has thus become increasingly flexible and less dependent on traditional indicators such as birthplace, trade, religion and family, and been thrown into a relationship of greater relativity to the diverse and emergent forms of identity to which we relate in modern multicultural society. In a foresight study considering the likely development of individual identities over the coming decades, the Office of

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[89] The Economist (2016a).
[90] Ibid.
[91] Savage et al. (2013).
[92] See Mills (2014) and Savage et al. (2015).
[93] Curtice et al. (2016b, 2)
[94] Curtice et al. (2016).
[95] Ibid (11). The authors caution that the small sub-samples used in this analysis may limit the validity of these findings.

Science and Technology concluded that increasing social diversity, the ease with which people can seek out online communities and maintain contact with friends and acquaintances across the globe, and the coming of age of the 'digital natives' generation has led to a 'pluralisation' of personal identities.[96]

This, the report noted, has been facilitated by increasing connectivity. The ability to remain more or less anonymous on the Internet also means that the way that individuals choose to express their identities as part of online communities can be radically different to the way they express the 'offline' identities they have as part of their more traditional social networks. However, as people make more and more of their personal information publically available online, this may in fact lead to an increasing blurring of public and private identities.

These opportunities are not exclusive to the younger generations. The population is ageing; the average age will rise from 40.0 years in 2014 to 40.9 years in 2024 and to 42.9 years by 2039.[97] The sea change, however, will likely come down to more than just numbers. As a generation which came of age in the 1960s, ageing 'Baby Boomers' are likely to expect a quality of life underpinned by individual autonomy and consumption, and may attribute more value to 'experiences' than preceding generations might have.[98] Moreover, many people in this generation are also likely to enjoy much greater wealth compared to younger members of the population.[99] Mean gross pensioner incomes increased by an estimated 50% in real terms between 1994/95 and 2010/11 (although it is important to note considerable variation in the incomes of poorer and wealthier pensioners),[100] and the value of wealth holdings of people aged over 50 has shown growth since the start of the financial crisis. Rising spending power on the part of older generations has lent increased significance to the 'grey pound' in Britain[101]

## 2.2 Technological drivers of change

In the context of this discussion, technological advances transforming our communications and social networks represent the most radical and disruptive driver of change. Unlike other social and political trends, which tend to evolve in cyclical patterns and find precedents in other places and in the past, technologies such as the Internet and connected devices have come upon us suddenly and, for better or worse, often with significant disruption to existing social norms and practices.

With few examples of the prior use of these technologies, anticipating their role and consequences for society is difficult. The rate and volume of the information exchanged on online platforms is unprecedented, and its impact on how we engage with information, especially in the context of our political engagement, remains ambiguous.

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[96] Foresight Future Identities (2013).
[97] ONS (2015).
[98] Higgs et al. (2015).
[99] Kingman (2012).
[100] ONS (2012b, 4).
[101] Kingman (2012, 5)

### 2.2.1 Internet penetration is rising, but certain social groups remain underrepresented

Few developments have had as significant an impact on our political and social dynamics as the increasing penetration of the Internet. In addition to connecting the global citizenry, the Internet has become a prominent new avenue of communication between the government and the public, both in the delivery of public services and for political campaigning (explored more fully in section 3.3).

While the impact of the Internet on society has been profound, it has not necessarily been uniform. Internet use is on the increase overall – every age group has seen a sustained increase in the number of recent Internet users in recent years, and the number of people in the general population who have never accessed the Internet has fallen from 11.4% in 2015 to 10.3% in 2016.[102] However, the rates of use, and activity on the Internet itself, are not evenly distributed across demographic groups.

Not unsurprisingly, older age groups are the least represented among Internet users, with only 38.7% of the 75+ age group classed as recent users in 2015, a figure falling to 32.6% for women aged over 75.[103] While Internet use among the 75+ age group has risen from 19.9% in 2011, it still stands in stark comparison to the 98.8% of 16–44 year olds who were frequent users.[104] Indeed, only 53% of houses with a single occupant aged 65+ had an Internet connection.[105]

Similarly, 25% of disabled adults in 2016 had *never* used the Internet (in comparison to 10.3% of the general population), although among those who had, numbers of recent users were only marginally lower than those of the general population.

Neither can Internet use itself be understood as a uniform activity. Even with increasing overall use, different demographics continue to access the web in different ways. The use of smartphones to access the web has increased from the 2011 figure of 36% of users to 70% in 2016 (although only 26% of those aged 65+ own a smartphone)[106]; 75% of adults had accessed the Internet 'on the go'.[107] Sixty-six per cent of 16–24s and 76% of 25–34s had used the Internet to access news, compared to 34% of those aged 65+. Notably, there is a large disparity in the use of social media: 91% of 16–24s and 89% of 25–34s use social media, compared to just 23% of those aged 65 and over.

As can be expected, digital skills are lower among Internet users aged over 45+, with problem-solving skills in particular ranging above 90% for the age bands under 44, but only 48% for those aged 65+.[108] Digital skills are correlated with income; research by Ipsos MORI noted that the percentage among those of social grade ABC1 who had achieved a Basic Digital Skills level was 87%, compared to 65% of those of

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[102] ONS (2016a).

[103] It is also important to note that those without direct Internet access may however have access through a proxy user, with 70% of non-users reporting in 2013 that they had access to the Internet via a proxy user, although only a third had used this access in the preceding year. See Black (2013).

[104] Ibid.

[105] ONS (2016c).

[106] Ipsos MORI (2015).

[107] ONS (2016c).

[108] Ipsos MORI (2015).

social grade C2DE, while unemployed persons had the lowest digital skills level (72%) of the working-age population. The level of Basic Digital Skills amongst people renting from housing association is 71%, and 57% amongst those renting from local authority.

Regional disparity is also evident, with achievement of Basic Digital Skills ranging from 84–90% in Scotland, the South and Greater London to 62% in Wales, 65% in Northern Ireland and 63% in the West Midlands. Indeed, regional levels of digital skills are correlated with levels of Internet access, with rural areas – with only 84% Internet penetration – having levels of achievement of Basic Digital Skills of 74%, compared to 90% in suburban and metropolitan areas.

### 2.2.2 Social media use has dramatically increased, but the impact on political engagement is unclear

While Internet use may be increasing on the whole, the ways in which we engage with websites, people and issues on the web are not necessarily converging. Notable in this regard has been the influence of social media, both on the way in which we access the web and on the content to which we are exposed once online.

In 2015, UK social media users spent an average of 1 hour 40 minutes accessing social media sites each day, with users managing an average of four social media accounts each.[109] The use of social media to access news is also increasing, particularly through use of features such as Facebook's news function and Twitter's Twitter Moments. The number of people using Facebook as a source for online news has risen from 17% of all online news users in 2014 to 29% in 2015, with 16% of those aged 16–24 using social media as their sole source.[110]

Content that is featured on our personalised social media homepages is primarily determined by algorithms, which automatically feature content that sites predict individual users will be interested in, based on previous activity on the site and elsewhere on the web. The result is that different individuals may be exposed to widely different types or frequencies of news stories and content, depending on their personal networks and past activity. Humans, we know, are prone to confirmation bias, in that we attribute more legitimacy to arguments that align with our existing views. Concerns have been raised that the act of interacting with the web through a closed, algorithmically driven social platform and the proliferation of specialised and alternative media sites could bolster this tendency, thereby decreasing the opposing opinions or even the type of news to which we are exposed – a theme popularly dubbed the 'filter bubble'.[111][112][113] Similarly, the nature of social networks, in which (as in the real world) individuals may connect primarily with those who reflect their own characteristics, may in some respects act as an

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[109] Davidson / The Telegraph (2015).

[110] Ofcom (2015, 7).

[111] First termed as such by Eli Pariser – see Pariser (2011) and (2016) for a more recent discussion.

[112] See, for example, an in-depth discussion of these trends from a journalistic perspective by Guardian editor Katharine Viner: Viner / The Guardian (2016).

[113] The fear of global *physical* Internet fragmentation or 'balkanisation' – understood as a wider trend towards the localisation of data storage and Internet infrastructure – has also been raised as a concern that may affect the global flow of ideas and web-based business in the longer-term future. See, for example: Meinrath / TIME (2013).

'echo chamber' for political opinions, with the effect of reducing challenges to incorrect or false information and giving biased or niche opinions the appearance of widely held views.[114] The role of Facebook in the distribution of news has led to concern from some quarters over the company acting in what is effectively an editorial role, but without the associated journalistic traditions and standards, with the editor of Norway's *Aftenposten* newspaper recently accusing Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg of misusing his position as the 'world's most powerful editor'[115]

Commentary on the matter to date has primarily warned of the consequences of such closed spheres for political debate. However, the question is not resolved; evidence on the way in which online habits affect exposure to and selection of different forms of content is mixed,[116] and the open platform of the Internet may indeed open up channels to voices and arguments that individuals may not otherwise encounter. Similarly, tentative evidence has been ventured that social media may also be associated with other forms of civic and political activism, although the causal direction is unclear.[117]

Ultimately, this is an emerging field of research, and the nature of social media – nominally private platforms governed by agreements with users regarding use of data submitted – means that comprehensive, cross-platform research is difficult to conduct other than at an aggregate level.[118] The long-term effects of social media on political engagement and receptivity to argument remain unclear, and indeed may differ across demographic groups.

### 2.2.3    The rise of online news has dramatically changed the media sector, although traditional brands remain popular

In addition to changing the way in which we consume and share news, the move towards consumption of online news and the platforms on which we interact with the web have also fundamentally altered the way in which the traditional media – once the gatekeepers of political news and commentary – themselves interact with information flows.

Use of traditional media platforms has decreased in recent years. While television, with a select number of news channels, remains the most popular source for news, the number of adults consuming news from this source fell from 75% in 2014 to 67% in 2015.[119] Newspaper readership stood at 31% in 2015, compared to 40% in 2014.[120] Notably, 20% of the 16–24 age group rely *solely* on the Internet for news, compared to just 2% of the over-55 age group.[121]

Meanwhile, the number of online news sites has significantly proliferated, meaning traditional newspapers now compete for readership (and, consequently, advertising revenue) with dedicated 'alternatives' to

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[114]  Viner / The Guardian (2016).

[115]  See Preston / The Guardian (2016); Hansen / Aftenposten (2016)

[116]  See for example Flaxman et al (2016). Garrett et al. (2013), for example, indicates use of partisan online news may be positively correlated with consumption of opposing opinions.

[117]  Boulianne (2015).

[118]  For examples of the potential of Twitter analytics to judge sentiment, see reports on this theme by the think-tank Demos.

[119]  Ofcom (2015, 2).

[120]  Ibid.

[121]  Ibid. (3).

mainstream news like RT (Russia Today) and The Canary; sites aimed at particular demographics such as PinkNews (aimed at the LGBT community); and sites such as Buzzfeed, which contain a mix of traditional news and investigative reporting and informal, humorous and lifestyle content. Competition for per-click advertising revenue has also driven the growth of 'clickbait' – sensationalist articles and content, sometimes of dubious truthfulness, designed to be shared easily on social media and consumed swiftly.

It is unclear whether these competitors have necessarily drained the *influence* of the traditional media. Traditional news sites continue to dominate the top 10 UK online publications, as ranked by individual pageviews (BBC, MSN, Daily Mail, Guardian, Telegraph, Polish-language sites Wp.pl and One.pl, Sky Sports, News Now, and the Mirror, with Buzzfeed and the Independent ranking 11 and 12 respectively).[122] Indeed, the sheer amount of new sources may in fact serve to reinforce the position of 'trusted' brands such as the BBC as reliable sources for news above the cacophony.[123]

However, even for larger brands, the changing market incentives and patterns of access and readership may be altering editorial and dissemination practices. Moving to an online model of news distribution, with most sites primarily funded through online advertising, has significantly changed sources of revenue in the media sector. The purchase of daily hard copy newspapers has declined sharply in recent years,[124] with readers increasingly accessing content online – often for free.[125] However, due in part to competition from data-rich sites such as Facebook and the popularity of ad blockers, prominent brands have found it difficult to replace declining revenue from newsstand sales with reliable digital advertising income,[126] with *The Guardian* facing, at the time of writing, a severe funding shortfall and *The Independent* moving to an online-distribution-only model.[127] The consequential cost-cutting measures across the sector have been, according to some commentators, an enhanced focus on recycling content from news agencies and press releases (dubbed 'churnalism') at the expense of retaining traditional staff reporters.[128]

Meanwhile, the 24-hour nature of the news cycle has changed the way in which sites themselves curate, display and disseminate breaking news stories. Live blogs offering constant updates on events – and drawing widely on both verified and unverified sources (with appropriate caveats) – have become the default setting in response to significant breaking news stories. Twitter has gained prominence as a source of updates as events unfold – with the associated problems of brevity in reportage. In a study for the Oxford University Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, former BBC journalist Nik Gowing argues that the result of this has been to reduce the credibility of leaders during crises by generating a 'public expectation of official omnipotence and perfect knowledge', which leaders cannot meet when forced to navigate an asymmetric media landscape with imperfect information.[129]

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[122] Schwartz / SimilarWeb (2016).
[123] Beckett (2012).
[124] Sutcliffe / The Media Briefing (2015) and Jackson / The Guardian (2015).
[125] With some notable exceptions: for example, readership of *Private Eye*, which does not distribute its content online, has risen: Ponsford / PressGazette (2016).
[126] Sweney / The Guardian (2015, 2016)
[127] Gapper / The Financial Times (2016).
[128] Although the term 'churnalism' has entered the popular lexicon, it has in particular been associated with *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies and his commentary on the topic: Davies (2008).
[129] Gowing (2009).

## 2.3 Political drivers of change

Developing well-informed and inclusive policy is not a top-down activity. Policymakers' and institutions' understanding of public opinion and preferences may have a significant effect on the way in which they choose to develop and communicate policy; the strength of the relationship depends in large part on the willingness of both parties to engage with this reciprocal process. New platforms and channels of communication offer new possibilities – and challenges – for representation, advocacy, participatory democracy and the direct, peer-to-peer exchange of information, with particular benefits for previously marginalised voices across the political and social spectrum. Yet the broadening of the public square may also result in a cacophony of competing voices, and it is unclear whether the messages that each individual receives are informative, unbiased and, if incorrect, adequately refuted.

In the following section, we explore the effects that social changes and communications technologies may be having on the public sphere and policymaking, drawing on examples from digital campaigning, online electioneering and day-to-day interactions on social media platforms: to what extent are the aforementioned trends redefining the relationship between citizen and state?

### 2.3.1 Increasing political pluralism and appetite for new forms of representation are new political realities

Britain's traditional two-party politics has come under increasing pressure as the old determinants of voting habits – such as social grade, family, and income – have broken down and political identities become increasingly fragmented and plural. Whereas in 1951 97% of votes went to either the Conservative or the Labour Party, in the 2010 general election this figure fell to 65%, resulting in no clear majority for either party and the formation of Britain's first peacetime coalition government since the 1930s.[130] Although the 2015 general election returned power to the hands of a single party, it is significant that the 'other' political parties won a 24.8% share of the vote.[131] Although these 'other' parties may not currently be winning elections, or even gaining substantial numbers of seats in parliament, divisions between and within parties are nevertheless changing national conversations and influencing the political agenda.

The recent EU referendum is an illustrative example of how the influence of a fringe political party has motivated a historic and wide-reaching constitutional change; UKIP's long-running campaign to mobilise the electorate (and some backbenchers in other parties) in support of leaving the European Union arguably contributed to the decision to promise and deliver a referendum on European Union membership. On the other side of the political spectrum, contestation of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership from different ideological factions within the Labour Party indicates a re-emergence of strongly polarised

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[130] Lodge et al. (2011, 4–5).
[131] Garland et al. (2015, 8).

views within the party. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the United States, where increasing political polarisation between Democrat and Republican voters on key issues has arguably contributed to fragmentation within both parties to varying degrees, as they struggle with the need to appeal both to independent swing voters and those on the far side of the party's ideological spectrum.[132]

In spite of these recent shifts away from two-party politics, public preferences regarding the electoral system remain unclear. Public debate in the UK focusing on the inadequacy of the first-past-the-post system in a climate of increasing political pluralism[133] was dampened by the 2011 referendum on the alternative voting system (AV), in which only 32% of voters voted for AV and turnout was low, at 41%.[134] The loss of support for electoral reform was held by many to be the result of a backlash in public opinion against the political compromises made by the Liberal Democrats when sharing power with the Conservative Party.[135] Nonetheless, dissatisfaction with the current electoral system has since rebounded, and in 2015 the BSA survey reported support for electoral reform to be at its highest ever, at 45%.[136]

However, the British public's growing desire for an electoral system that allows more proportionate representation does not necessarily translate into greater endorsement of coalition government. An inconsistency can be observed between increased public support for changing the electoral system to one that is fairer to smaller parties (at 45% in 2015) and majority support for single-party versus coalition government (59% compared to 33%).[137] Of those who prefer single-party government, 39% would like to see electoral reform, while 38% of those who prefer coalition government would like to keep the electoral system as it is.[138] NatCen Social Research, who compiled these data, conclude that these seemingly contradictory preferences on the part of voters suggest that the implications of electoral reform are not yet well understood, and could account for the fairly rapid and temporary shifts in public attitudes towards alternative electoral systems.[139]

### 2.3.2 Digital platforms have opened up new avenues for transparency, accountability and state-public communication

Government in the 21st century has come under increasing pressure to be more transparent and accountable in its decisionmaking. Tony Blair introduced the Freedom of Information Act in 2005 to allow the British public access to information held by public authorities, as part of a commitment to embed a culture of openness and transparency in the public sector. A good example of the effect of this is the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal, in which details of expenses claims made by MPs came to light while the information was being prepared as part of a Freedom of Information Request.[140] Although

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[132] See research by Pew: Pew Research Centre (2016).
[133] See, for example, White, Isobel (2010).
[134] BBC News (2011).
[135] Curtice et al. (2016a, 3–4).
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid. (5).
[139] Ibid.
[140] The Telegraph (2010).

leaked before the information was officially published, the scandal was illustrative of increased government transparency accompanied by plummeting levels of public trust in politicians (as discussed in section 2.2) but resulting in only modestly punitive consequences for the MPs implicated (these lost on average 1.5% of the vote share compared to those MPs not implicated in the scandal), perhaps due to the fact that the UK electoral system offers little flexibility to voters wishing to express a party preference at the national level.[141]

Whatever the impact of increased public access to government records, the increased emphasis on the need for a more open and reciprocal relationship between government and the public has been sustained. In 2010 the UK government launched a 'Digital Revolution', with the intention of moving government information and services online in order to build a new relationship between citizens and the state. In this new model of 'Digital Government' interactions with the state are designed to be as convenient and user-friendly as private sector services might be. A language of open collaboration and eager receptiveness to ideas from the public has accompanied this drive towards digital, evidenced for example in the words chosen by Digital Economy Minister Ed Vaizey in 2015 when inviting participation in a public consultation on the UK's Digital Strategy: 'So challenge us – push us to do more.'[142]

Political parties and individual politicians have also tried to capitalise on the direct means of communication with voters offered by online platforms. The 2010 general election was notable for the innovative use of alternative communication channels that have since become standard campaign tools: online campaign activity increased substantially and live televised debates allowed party leaders to engage directly with audience members drawn from the general public. Following this trend the 2015 general election was forecast to be the first 'social media election.'[143] Indeed, social media did play a prominent part in the election campaigns, with politicians and political parties using Facebook and Twitter daily in order to share their campaign experiences, broadcast their political manifestos and criticise the actions and claims of other parties. Four hundred and fifty thousand tweets were sent by candidates from the six largest parties in the month before the election.[144]

However, reflections on the use of social media by the political parties have raised questions over whether the social media campaigns were as decisive as was forecast by some. Rather than harnessing the power of online platforms and networks to encourage debate and engage directly with voters, politicians and their parties' official online accounts tended to use social media platforms to broadcast campaign headlines to their followers in a traditionally top-down, one-sided way that has been accused of failing to communicate a sense of the individual personality behind an account or respond to other users in a way that would take advantage of social media's conversational tone and possibilities.[145] With the exception of the prominent online presence of Nicola Sturgeon, and the Green Party, which attained some level of 'viral' success with a comedic video portraying the other political party leaders as a homogenous and outdated boyband, the parties' online campaigns were deemed by commentators to be preaching to the converted rather than

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[141] Eggers et al. (2011).
[142] Vaizey (2015).
[143] BBC News (2015b).
[144] Margetts et al. / OII(2015).
[145] See Fletcher / The Guardian (2015) and Bright et al. / OII (2015).

winning new voters over through personable and responsive interactions.[146] Analysis of the 2010 general election innovations showed that the high levels of public engagement with the televised leaders' debates (which 51% of survey respondents claimed to have watched) and with online election campaigns (which 31% of respondents took part in) masked the fact that it is was mainly those who were already interested in politics who engaged in these new forms of political participation; the rise in engagement levels among people who said they did not have much interest in politics was much smaller.[147]

An additional challenge for politicians wishing to engage online communities was – and is likely to continue to be – the unpredictable nature of social media trends, whereby a message intended one way may be picked up on and shared by users to wholly different (and often humorous or derisory) effect. Politicians often 'lose control' of messages on social media, as evidenced, for example, by the creation of memes relating to the 'EdStone' which were widely shared during the 2015 general election.[148] Consequently, online political party campaigns are often carefully curated and controlled in a top-down manner in order to mitigate the risk of messages being distorted or 're-purposed' by online users, thereby limiting the ability of these campaigns to develop organically, as might an effective grassroots social movement.[149]

### 2.3.3 Data science and online participation have transformed the ability to target voters

The emergence of online networking platforms has made possible the 'micro-targeting' of voters during election campaigns. Rather than investing heavily in traditional means of communications, such as billboards, leaflets and newspapers, online advertising has allowed parties to target a select demographic in a particular geographical area. The result has been that political messages may no longer necessarily be broadcast to the public at large, but instead carefully targeted at key swing or marginal voters.

This strategy was used to particular effect by the Conservatives during the 2015 election campaign, who spent approximately £100k a week on Facebook advertising. Voters reported more in-person contact from Labour representatives,[150] and Labour candidates on the whole sent more tweets than their Conservative, Green or UKIP opponents.[151] Meanwhile, in addition to a prominent on-the-ground campaign in marginal seats, the Conservative Party invested in carefully targeting key demographics through Facebook, arguably to greater effect.[152]

However, while analysis of Twitter and other platforms has offered some opportunities for research on mass reaction to events, behaviour on platforms is often of an emergent nature and commentators still

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[146] Fletcher / The Guardian (2015); Bright et al. / OII (2015); Green Party broadcast: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPgS7p40ERg
[147] Park et al. (2012, 12-16).
[148] BBC News (2015a).
[149] Cooper / The Guardian (2015).
[150] Cooper / The Guardian (2015).
[151] See Bright et al. / OII (2015) and Margetts et al. / OII (2015).
[152] Ibid.

struggle to interpret big data from social media in order to reach *specific* conclusions about which party's campaign might be gaining most ground among voters.[153] It is hard to tell what kind of impact messages communicated through social media have, and what is actually happening on the ground – a problem exacerbated by increasing questions over the accuracy of opinion polling. Changing patterns of landline use and willingness to engage in telephone surveys have affected the ability of the opinion polling sector to contact sufficiently representative samples in order to produce reliable estimates of public opinion, as evidenced by the failure of any mainstream poll to correctly predict the result of the 2015 general election, partly due to a failure to sample enough Conservative voters.[154] Renewed efforts have been made to add weights to address demographic imbalance in poll data, and online panel surveys have emerged as an alternative form of gathering information (with most public opinion polls now relying both on online and telephone poll data). However, as seen during the recent pre-referendum debate, the result has arguably been to further confuse, not clarify, the reading of public opinion on political issues.[155]

### 2.3.4 Digital campaign organising has become a prominent means of citizen activism and citizen journalism, giving previously marginalised individuals a public platform and voice

The ability to create or upload content which could potentially then be viewed by people the world over has given a voice to marginalised individuals and communities, and has allowed individuals who might share something in common but who otherwise would not necessarily even been made aware of each other to unite around an issue. Social movements such as Black Lives Matter have made the journey from Twitter hashtag to off-line organising, and much discussion of transgender rights and identity has taken place on the Internet, giving visibility and a voice to individuals who might not feel able to express themselves in the same way offline or who have been to date passed over by mainstream media outlets.

Online petitions are a significant new feature of participatory democracy in the digital age. In 2010 the UK Cabinet Office developed an electronic petition platform with a direct link to Parliament, which allows anyone with a valid email address and UK postcode to both sign existing petitions and create new ones. Any petition that obtains at least 10,000 signatures will elicit an official response; reaching the threshold of 100,000 signatures will mean that the issue will be taken forward in a Parliamentary debate. These online petition platforms also provide instant feedback to users, so that signatories of a petition are informed by email directly to their inbox of any response to or outcome of the petition that they have signed.

Civil society organisations such as Avaaz, 38 Degrees and Change.org have, without the direct link to parliament, also used petition platforms to mobilise support from millions of people worldwide around a vast range of issues. The spread of social media and digital activity means that people choosing to sign an

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[153] Cellan-Jones / BBC (2015).
[154] British Polling Council (2016).
[155] Indeed, data science has been used in the US as an alternative to opinion polling to gather information about voter preferences, not just to target messages during elections. See Lepore / The New Yorker (2015).

e-petition can also choose to share information about the petition with their contacts or 'followers' in their online social networks, thus quickly mobilising their social networks around a particular issue. Signing and sharing an e-petition via social media arguably has a double appeal, in that an individual can both influence policymaking and build social capital through expressing their identification with a particular cause in front of their peers/online community.

Indeed, social media are crucial for the success of an e-petition: about 50% of e-petition participants visit the Cabinet Office petition platform via Facebook and Twitter,[156] and analysis of petitions launched on the UK Cabinet Office platform between August 2011 and February 2013 shows that only a small number of petitions mobilised a substantial number of signatures. Half the petitions only received one signature, while only 0.7% received the 10,000 signatures needed to elicit an official response and even fewer (0.1%) collected the 100,000 signatures necessary for a Parliamentary debate.[157] Analysis of the rates at which e-petitions garnered support revealed that early mobilisation around a petition was crucial for attracting a large number of signatures in the longer term; those petitions that eventually attained 100,000 signatures after three months had already collected an average of 3,000 signatures within the first ten hours of their launch.[158] Research shows that individuals are more likely to sign a petition if they can see that the petition has already generated support from others, meaning the development of a feedback loop in which gaining early traction is very important in order to be amplified in increasing numbers of signatures.[159]

Online activism has also been criticised for the arguably passive way in which it encourages individuals to engage with social change. If being politically active online is as easy as entering a few personal details in an online petition, clicking 'interested' on a political rally or protest page organised through Facebook, or clicking to share or 're-tweet' content disseminated on social media feeds, then even if there is a perceived growth in political activity, the quality or depth of political engagement may arguably not have improved. The sudden and global spread of 'Kony 2012', a campaign video encouraging viewers to raise the profile of the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army rebel leader Joseph Kony, quickly faced a large-scale backlash against what critics saw as a shallow analysis of a highly complex geopolitical issue, into which those sharing the video had little insight.[160] Similarly, while success stories of online campaigns facilitated by platforms such as Kony 2012 may be seen as empowering people to influence decisionmaking in a way that they would not otherwise be able or motivated to, critics of online activism, or 'clicktivism' as it is often referred to, protest against what they see as a passive or even lazy form of engagement that displaces true engagement in a social cause.[161] Other criticisms levelled at online campaigns have dismissed them as faddish and/or ineffective, or accuse those who participate in such campaigns of being motivated by selfish reasons to indulge in 'virtue signalling'[162] in front of their peers, or of being satisfied with the 'feel good' sensation of participating rather than with real offline outcomes.

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[156] Yasseri et al. (2013, 8).
[157] Ibid. (4).
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid. (8).
[160] See Polis (2012) for an overview.
[161] See White, Micah / The Guardian (2010).
[162] Peters / The Boston Globe (2015).

There are also concerns that the consequent ease with which campaign emails can be sent en masse to policymakers can render them another form of 'spam' messaging. As a result, some British MPs have reportedly closed their email accounts, insisting that their constituents write to them instead.[163]

Such examples of public opinion may not necessarily be representative, and differences remain in who might participate in different forms of activism. An examination by the University of Cambridge and YouGov of the likelihood of particpation in different forms of online political engagement found significant differences across demographic groups: social grade was a significant predictor of participation in focus groups and responding to online consultations and petitions, with those of social grade ABC1 more likely to participate than those classed as social grade CDE; men were found to be significantly more likely than women to participate in Twitter discussions, contribute to a wiki or sign an online petition; and the likelihood of engaging with Twitter, Facebook, wikis and online petitions, and of responding to an online consultation all decreased with age.[164]

As a final note, connectivity has also brought with it enhanced opportunities for mass education. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and distance-learning university courses have grown in popularity and global spread, although the trade-off for breadth has been low MOOC completion rates and less opportunity for tailored learning strategies.[165]

### 2.3.5 Online platforms offer new avenues for the spread of rumours and misinformation

While previously marginalised voices have been given new platforms, so too have voices seeking to promote one-sided or biased arguments, or to spread rumours or conspiracy theories. Discredited political opinions and conspiracy theories have been granted new arenas, and groups such as Britain First have used social media platforms to develop strong online followings, in part by sharing content unrelated to their core messages and intended to go viral in order to gain exposure.

An Italian study on the attention paid to various news sources during a recent election demonstrated that users who were more prone to consuming 'alternative' news sources – less likely to carry news verified in line with standard journalistic practice – were most likely to share false information published by a 'troll' site.[166] In one notable case, a satirical news story involving fictitious senators proposing a law to generously fund post-election jobs for defeated politicians was shared over 35,000 times in a month, despite the obvious inaccuracies, and as the authors note, continues to be used as a rallying cry at protests as an example of political corruption.

Similarly, the immediacy of social media allows rumours to be widely spread in a short period of time, before news organisations or interested individuals have had time to verify a particular story or fact.[167] The

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[163] Howard / The Guardian (2014).
[164] Livesey (2011).
[165] Horvath et al. (2015).
[166] Emerging Technology from the arXiv (2014); Mocanu et al. (2015).
[167] See Nik Gowing for a discussion of this in the context of crisis situations: Gowing (2015).

result is that 'digital wildfires'[168] have the ability to spread and have serious real-world consequences before the facts of the event can be verified. An analysis by the Guardian newspaper and the University of Manchester of rumours spread by tweet during the London riots is instructive in this regard; while particularly sensationalist rumours concerning arson at the London Eye and the release of a tiger from London Zoo both spread and were refuted quickly, rumours that were more in line with concurrent events or less easily disproved at short notice – for example, that a Miss Selfridge shop had been set on fire – did not see the same widespread refutation, and were often repeated with no qualifying uncertainty.[169] Whereas the London Eye rumour saw mass refutation and had ceased to be retweeted a couple of hours after its inception, the rumour that the riots had begun as a result of police beating a 16-year-old girl, bolstered by alleged video evidence, were being retweeted two days later with no prominent refutations or debate as to their accuracy.

Although social media can be also used to correct and debate information, not all rumours may sufficiently catch the public imagination to warrant a widespread and sustained refutation. Similarly, while the refutation of incorrect information may be easily identified when examining the aggregate of social media data, each individual user will be exposed to different information depending on their usage patterns, networks and frequency of use, and on the prominence of other news stories, and so it is unclear the extent to which any individual user will be exposed to the refutation of even the most sensationalist rumours and mistruths.

As discussed in section 3.3, new communication platforms and lines of transparency can be seen to be expanding the informal regulatory function played by the media; the proliferation of independent fact-checking websites such as Snopes and PolitiFact in the United States and Full Fact in the UK are prominent examples of this.[170] However, the influence of fact-checking websites on public engagement with evidence and argument is far from clear. It can be hard to judge whether fact-checkers can be trusted to determine the objective truth; it is unclear whether fact-checkers can adequately deal with mistruths that 'go viral' in a timely way; and even in the cases where they are able to provide evidence, that evidence may not be reaching those who are getting their information from less reliable sources, or impacting the reputation of those who originally made the claim. There is also a question over whether fact-checking must be considered a new form of journalism rather than having legitimacy as a regulatory function.[171]

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[168] So termed by the WEF: WEF (2016).

[169] Proctor et al. / The Guardian (2011) and Richards et al. / The Guardian (2011).

[170] Snopes, notably, has significantly grown in size in recent years: Caroll / The Guardian (2016).

[171] Scriber / The Poynter Institute (2016).

# 3. Where we are going: emerging themes and key messages

The trends described above may be complex, interrelated and, in some cases, transient; other trends may at this point be difficult to foresee. Nonetheless, for the broader research and policymaking community, understanding the shifting social context will be crucial in determining engagement, policy and science communication strategies. Predicting the result of this interplay may be difficult, but it cannot be easily ignored.

Below, we offer some closing thoughts on the opportunities and challenges offered by these new dynamics and platforms. These are by no means inevitable, but offered as potential ways in which to conceptualise the changing relationships between the public, information flows, and state and democratic institutions.

## 3.1 Our cultural communities and our political community may be increasingly out of sync

We have, as one commentator has succinctly noted, 'entered the era of the mainstream bespoke'.[172] We have never before had such choice over our consumption habits, lifestyle and social circles, in both the physical and online worlds – and the ability to curate the image we present to the world accordingly.

The public *square* – that imagined space both physical and virtual in which we may come together as a *polis* – has arguably been broadened by the increasing ability for us all to publish, debate, protest and hold public figures to account. However, our *collective* cultural identity and social norms, built in part upon mutual (or perceived) understanding of one another's views and preferences, may be diminishing, as we are able to tailor our everyday experiences and media consumption to our specific and often niche interests.

It is perhaps wrong to characterise this as a fragmentation into niche-interest groups and social tribes rather than a pluralisation, in which each individual's multiple and overlapping identities and interests may come to the fore at different times and in different arenas.[173] And indeed, as noted above, a growing multiplicity of voices in political conversation may be no bad thing for democracy. However, the relationship between our collective experiences and norms and our political conversation is a close one, predicated on shared understanding of cultural and political concepts and language,[174] but also on the way in which we understand the preferences, motivations, experiences and circumstances of others in our political community.

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[172] Heller / The New Yorker (2016).
[173] As conceptualised by the OST: Foresight Future Identities (2013).
[174] See arguments on the role of public language by Nathan Heller: Heller / The New Yorker (2014 and 2016).

Similarly, our social circles, experiences and self-image may all influence the way in which we understand and process information. While the evidence on this topic may currently be thin, the consequences of change may be profound.

## 3.2 Social media and the Internet are valuable forms of state-public communication – but they are not necessarily representative of public opinion

Whereas in the past government often had to rely on formal engagement mechanisms though public consultations and through the prism of the media, the increasing use of the Internet and, in particular, of social media, both by members of the general public and by politicians have opened up valuable channels for direct state–citizen – and citizen–citizen – interaction. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offer policymakers a valuable, cost-effective and direct means of engagement with the public, while analysis of data from online platforms can 'take the temperature' of public opinion and reaction to particular issues and events.[175]

However, while appreciating the role of the Internet as a facilitator of participatory democracy, we must be careful to remember that the views and ideas expressed on social media are *not* necessarily representative of the British population. As discussed in section 3.2.1, although young people are well represented on these platforms, other groups such as older people, people with disabilities and, to a lesser extent, women, are less likely to contribute to public conversations online. Moreover, the mechanisms underlying information-sharing on social media mean that these platforms often give potentially disproportionate prominence to 'trending' conversations; wider debate and considerations can therefore often be drowned out or captured by single-issue preoccupations, rather than offering an objective view of current public priorities or sentiment. As the surprise at the result of the EU referendum and the 2015 general election have demonstrated, the mainstream reading of the public sentiment is far from impeccable, and assumptions that the public will or will not react in a certain way to events may not hold up in a changing social context.

Similarly, while digital platforms offer a potentially effective means by which to reach out to different groups and voters, it remains to be seen whether the ability to micro-target certain demographics comes at the expense of a broader, national conversation about policy and governance.

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[175] See, for example, analysis by the think-tank Demos of spikes in Islamophobia, based on analysis of the content of tweets. Nye / BBC News (2016).

### 3.3 The public square has broadened, but we are not all necessarily hearing the same debate

At the same time, the breadth of news sites means that some information flows are not subject to the same level of curation as before. Whereas the public conversation on different policy issues once took place on a handful of media platforms, curated over the course of a number of hours, the democratisation and immediacy of the news cycle has made us all – consciously or unconsciously – the editors of our personalised media experiences.

It has been argued by Charlie Beckett that the net result of this has been the increasing fragmentation of the web, away from an open, shared platform towards a 'networked public sphere' – a series of networks dominated by different media and technology platforms, each based on complex feedback loops and with its own individual culture, and with a potential 'ethical and political as well as material influence on the nature of the communications it carries'.[176] There is arguably a far greater public sphere than ever before, with citizen journalists and minority groups given platforms and exposure previously absent in the print media. But it is unclear the extent to which we are being exposed to different arguments and viewpoints, and whether mistruths, once spread, are being adequately refuted.

However, the cacophony of views and information made possible by new media channels should not necessarily mean that all content is treated equally by users. While 'clickbait' articles and content are very successful at generating high numbers of 'views', this does not necessarily mean that people engage intellectually with this content in the same way that they might with other sources of information. Does a high rate of 'views' mean that we engage seriously with the information presented, assimilating it into our understanding and opinions? Or might we perceive this information differently, appreciating it perhaps for its entertainment value, without letting it inform our worldviews?

Similarly, it is as yet unclear how the interplay between a changing media environment – such as the enhanced ability to repeat slogans and selective facts afforded by 24-hour news – and known cognitive biases that influence our receptivity to argument will affect the policy process in the longer term. Further research is needed into the impact of this increasing availability of information on people's understanding and engagement with evidence before strong predictions can be made as to the long-term effects.

### 3.4 The public are keen to engage with politics and public services – but the relationship is complex and may differ across policy issues

In a cultural climate of increased exposure to varying sources of information, trying to determine what the truth is when presented with so much contradictory evidence may become very difficult: while not a universally-held view, one participant in a focus group studied by the Lord Ashcroft Group described the

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[176] Beckett (2012, 11–12).

pre-EU referendum debate thus: "You see one argument and you think 'that sounds good', and then you see another argument and you think, 'hold on'. It's really difficult to make a choice."[177]

Involving citizens and ensuring that they feel empowered to influence decision-making represents a challenge for policymakers due to the fact that the relationship between understanding of the issues, desire for influence, feelings of influence, and active involvement is complex and may differ across policy areas. In a report exploring the relationship between the public and public services, Ipsos MORI noted that despite a desire for influence over decisions the public may want different forms of engagement on different policy issues; in a poll for the same study, 70% of people were happy for the government to take the lead on climate issues, while only 20% were happy abdicating responsibility for health and welfare.[178]

Similarly, the report noted that in some cases, feeling that the public are able to influence decisions *should they so wish* may in some cases be preferred over formal procedures for input in decision-making. The report conceptualised this as an 'adult-to-adult' relationship – one characterised by straight-talking conversation in which the public are presented with different sides of an argument, allowed to come to their own conclusions, and able to influence subsequent decisions.

Not all issues are alike, and the *type* of involvement in national and local policymaking desired by the public may differ across policy topics, social groups, and levels of decision-making. Understanding these relationships should be an important part of developing a strategy to engage the public in the process. Engagement should not be reduced to votes and referendums alone.

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[177] Lord Ashcroft Polls (2016).
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