IPPR

REPORT

THE DEMOCRACY COMMISSION

REFORMING DEMOCRACY TO COMBAT POLITICAL INEQUALITY

Mathew Lawrence
and Sarah Birch

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Institute for Public Policy Research

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NEW IDEAS
for CHANGE

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SUMMARY

Our democracy has become increasingly divided. The 2015 general election confirmed the growth of sharp inequalities in voice and political influence by age and class over the last quarter-century. Less than half of 18–24-year-olds voted, compared to nearly four-fifths of the over-65s, while three-quarters of 'AB' individuals who were registered to vote actually did so, against just over half of 'DE' registered voters. In 1987, by contrast, turnout inequality by class was almost non-existent and age-based differences were significantly lower.

Today's unequal electoral participation rates reflect underlying inequalities in levels of political participation more broadly, and – critically – perceptions of the fairness and effectiveness of our democracy. For example, IPPR/YouGov polling published in April 2015 (see Lawrence 2015) showed that a striking 63 per cent of 'DE' individuals think that it serves their interests badly, while 'AB' voters are evenly split. Ingrained political inequality in the UK is undermining the legitimacy and vitality of our democracy.

What we mean by 'political inequality' is the extent to which certain individuals or groups participate more in, and have greater influence over, political decision-making – and through those decisions, benefit from unequal outcomes – despite procedural equality in the democratic process. Its existence therefore undermines the democratic ideal of equal political citizenship, whereby political decision-making reflects collective, equally weighted preferences.

The purpose of this report is to present new case studies on how political inequality manifests itself in the UK and, more importantly, to set out ways in which we can begin to combat it.

Our argument is that political inequality is product of a political system whose institutions and technologies are primarily inventions of the 19th century, consolidated in the 1920s when universal suffrage finally came into force. This system has aged poorly. Given the fluidity and fracture of the 21st century – our economy post-industrial, our ways of communicating increasingly digital and more networked, our identities and relationships ever-more variegated and complex – it is inadequately representative, responsive and engaging.

The post-democratic drift of political culture, which is common across developed democracies, has accentuated the faultlines of inequality in participation and voice by age, class and region. Politics has become professionalised, class identities have weakened, and political parties have drifted from their anchors in civil society. Meanwhile, the evolution of the UK's political economy has shrunk the scope and influence of collective political action and democratic participation.

Therefore, if we accept the current institutional arrangements of our political system as the limits of our ambition, we must also content ourselves to live in a divided – and therefore inherently partial – democracy. We reject this settlement. Instead, in this report we argue for reform focussed on updating the civic, institutional and technological architecture of democracy in the UK, with the explicit goal of ensuring that all voices are heard in the political process, and with a premium placed on institutional reform that can foster and sustain powerful democratic relationships in society.

To further that goal, IPPR has previously argued for the introduction of proportional representation and compulsory voting. Similarly, reforming party funding and democratising the second chamber – the House of Lords – would help to update our democracy. However, given the results of both the 2011 referendum on the electoral system and the 2015 general election, it is clear that these are longer-term ambitions for reform. In the meantime, substantive institutional reform and innovation can deliver more broad-based participation and representation in political life. To achieve this, we need to make the electoral system more representative and participation less unequal, thereby ensuring that the voting process becomes more inclusive, with lower barriers to participation. We also need to create new institutions and reform existing ones in order to strengthen democratic relationships. To that end, we make the following recommendations.

1. **The UK's boundary commissions should be given a new duty to consider the electoral competitiveness of a seat when reviewing constituency boundaries** – a process that begins in the spring of 2016. At present these commissions have a duty to consider only the geographic coherence and electoral size of a constituency. Where these two duties can be met, the responsible commission should seek to redraw a 'safe' seat to make it a 'marginal'. 'Gerrymandering' safe seats out of existence where possible will help increase the competitiveness of elections and reduce the oversized electoral power that voters in marginals currently have, and as a result it is likely to improve participation rates.
2. **The single transferable vote system should be introduced in England and Wales for local government elections.** The proportional system is already successfully used in Scotland and Northern Ireland – introducing it to the rest of the UK would enhance the representative quality of local democracy and reinvigorate political competition in parts of the country where the first-past-the-post system grants certain parties unearned monopolies on local authority power that are not merited by their vote share.
3. **Reforms should be made to ensure that the transition to the individual electoral registration process does not disenfranchise people – and estimates suggest that those who are currently unregistered are more likely to be younger, poorer, and from a BME background than the average registered individual.** We therefore recommend that, in the short term, the deadline for registering under the new system should be extended to December 2016, and the ringfenced support to assist registration efforts that was made available to local authorities in the run-up to the 2015 election should be offered again, weighted towards authorities with higher levels of under-registration. In the longer term, greater accountability and a clearer delineation of responsibilities regarding the registration process is required. We therefore recommend new duties for electoral registration officers, through which they can improve the registration process, and new powers of oversight for the Electoral Commission.
4. **Establish a 'Democracy Commission' to facilitate democratic participation, with the goal of increasing levels of political participation and deliberation in the UK.** At present, the Electoral Commission effectively regulates elections and party funding. Democracy, however, is far richer and broader than just the electoral process. A statutorily independent Democracy Commission could support the growth of democratic relationships and forms of power in society by fulfilling three key functions:
   - conducting and publishing research into what initiatives are successful at increasing political participation
   - advising public bodies and institutions regarding how to better democratise their functioning

- providing resources and capacity-building to facilitate local, civil society-led initiatives that aim to increase levels of democratic participation or deliberation in collective decision-making processes.

The ultimate goal is to advance the fundamental ideal of political equality, whereby the preferences and interests of each person is given equal consideration, and each has equal voice and weight in influencing collective political decision-making processes. Today, under our divided democracy, this is nothing more than an ideal. However, in time, and with patient commitment, our political system can be renewed, and the goal of democratic equality advanced.

1. INTRODUCTION

> *'But what I mainly offer is this sense of the process: what I have called the long revolution. Here, if the meaning communicates, is the ratifying sense of movement, and the necessary sense of direction. The nature of the process indicates a perhaps unusual revolutionary activity: open discussion, extending relationships, the practical shaping of institutions. But it indicates also a necessary strength: against arbitrary power whether of arms or of money, against all conscious confusion and weakening of this long and difficult human effort, and for and with the people who in many different ways are keeping the revolution going.'*
> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961)

The long revolution has stalled. The growth of political inequality demonstrates that we are no longer on a journey towards a more democratic society. Inequalities in participation and influence by age, class and region have, in recent decades, become increasingly hardwired into British political processes, undermining the legitimacy and vitality of our democracy. As a new government settles into power, the risk is that inertia prevents us from addressing the still urgent need for innovation; that we accept the current institutional horizon of our political system, and its attendant inequalities, as the limit of our democratic life and potential. This is a risk that we cannot afford.

If we are to combat political inequality, however, we need a plan for democratic renewal. There have been numerous calls in recent years for this task to be taken up by a constitutional convention or a citizens' assembly, following the example of those pioneered in Ireland, Iceland and Canada – and, closer to home, in Scotland in the 1990s. However, the chances of such a convention – at least of one at the national level, with official backing – currently look remote in the UK. The government has no plans to establish one.

For that reason, in this report we propose a series of reforms to the systems and institutions of our representative democracy that might, in the current political climate, be considered plausible candidates for implementation. Alongside these, we present the case for a pluralistic, experimental and localist agenda focussed on building democratic institutions and practices that are more participatory and deliberative, and that can better disperse and democratise political power both within the channels of representative democracy and beyond it. We argue that the goal of public policy should be to help constitute new spaces in which collective expression and democratic relationships can emerge, so that the 'governed' are more 'directly, deliberately and continuously involved in the exercise of political decision-making' (Gilbert 2014).

Our political system is primarily an invention of the 19th century, consolidated in the 1920s when universal suffrage finally came into force. Given the fluidity and fracture of contemporary social life, many of the basic features of British representative democracy – our electoral system and how political parties function within it, for instance – have aged poorly, and are now inadequately representative, responsive and engaging. They also presume a level of social and political homogeneity and, by extension, representative coherence, that no longer holds true – the idea of a unitary British geopolitical space is now only barely plausible. The 2015 election further underlined the inadequacy of the UK's electoral system in this regard: as with

previous elections, the political outcome was highly disproportionate to the voting input and exacerbated regional political disparities.

One of the most important questions that this report sets out to answer is how we need to reform the totemic democratic act – voting – in order to ensure that it can better advance the fundamental ideal of political equality, whereby the preferences and interests of each person are given equal consideration, and each person has equal voice and weight in influencing collective political decision-making processes. We are particularly interested in reforming how we vote, to what effect, and in what circumstances – and how we can, in doing so, make it a modern, civic, powerful and fair process. To this end, we also explore how institutional innovation can better support the emergence of new and better democratic relationships – ones marked by passion, doubt and mutual concern, and in which, despite disagreements, we can still come together 'to create genuinely common goods out of our diverse material' (Stears 2011).

Of course, reforming the ballot box alone will not nearly be enough to reduce political inequality and revive our democracy. It can be argued that, for example, the way in which political parties are funded and operate, the concentrated nature of the UK's media, and the structure of the UK's second chamber all undermine political equality. In these areas, the challenge is not necessarily to come up with new ideas for reform, but rather how to construct political coalitions that are capable of delivering that reform. Building political will, rather than continuing to focus on questions of policy efficacy, is key.

By contrast, much less work has been done on how reforming and experimenting with both representative and participatory democratic practices could contribute towards reversing political inequality and ensuring that all citizens are fully, properly and regularly considered in the political decision-making process. The purpose of this report is to help address this gap. Its structure is as follows.

First, in chapter 2 we briefly analyse the drivers of growing political inequality in the UK, building upon the comprehensive overview set out in IPPR's recent report *Political inequality: Why British democracy must be reformed and revitalised* (Lawrence 2015). To demonstrate the extent to which our democracy is divided we then, in chapters 3 through 6, present four new case studies of the voting experience in the UK which respectively focus on the disproportionality of the electoral system; the impact of regional inequalities on representation; inequalities in electoral participation by class, age and region; and the relationship between fiscal austerity and political participation. Finally, we set out three key themes for reform, and within them recommend means by which we can reanimate our democracy and reduce political inequality. These are summarised below.

Make the voting system more representative

Our democracy suffers from stark inequalities in participation and voice by age, class and region that the current electoral system magnifies. IPPR has consistently advocated for the adoption of a more proportionate electoral system for Westminster elections and the introduction of compulsory voting (provided that a 'none of the above' option is added to ballot papers). However, given the result of the 2011 referendum on the electoral system, and the outcome of the 2015 general election, it is clear that these must remain more long-term ambitions for reform.

Nonetheless, the first-past-the-post system by which we elect MPs could be made more electorally competitive by ensuring that there are fewer 'safe seats'. **We recommend that the various boundary commissions of the UK be given the additional responsibility of considering the electoral competitiveness of a seat.** They currently have a duty to consider only 'the number of electors and geographical size of each constituency… [although additionally,] subject to these compulsory requirements … [they also seek] to have regard to the other factors

specifically mentioned in the legislation' such as local ties or geographical features.[1] In practice, this means that each constituency must not exceed 13,000 square kilometres, and the numerical size of the electorate must be no more than 5 per cent larger or smaller than the UK electoral quota, which is based on the average number of electors per constituency (72,400 in England, 69,000 in Scotland, 66,800 in Northern Ireland and 56,800 in Wales).[2]

However, when considering its recommendations for revised constituency boundaries during the current parliament – a process that will begin in the spring of 2016 – the commissions should also, where it complies with their other duties, seek to reduce the number of safe seats in the UK. These constituencies typically have lower turnout rates and poorer rates of contact between political parties and the general public than marginal seats do. Therefore, if the commissions were to 'gerrymander' a more competitive electoral map, it would help make the political system more responsive, lessen the disparity of voting power between voters who live in marginal and safe seats, and improve participation rates.

Second, we recommend that the single transferable vote (STV) electoral system is introduced for local government elections across the UK. Already used in Scottish and Northern Irish local government elections, the introduction of STV across the country would allow the UK's pluralistic political culture to be better reflected in local government and help revive political competition in areas of the country where one party tends to dominate out of proportion to their vote-share. It would thereby help reduce a rarely discussed form of electoral inequality: local government representation across the UK is often just as disproportionate, in relation to vote shares, as Westminster elections are. It is also possible that the introduction of STV at the local level could act as a beachhead for the introduction of proportional representation in national elections in the future.

Make the democratic experience more inclusive and civic: reform the electoral registration process

Public policy should seek to reduce unnecessary barriers to political participation, and expand and protect democratic public spaces in which collective action can take place. Central to this is ensuring that all who have the right to vote can vote. Therefore, as the new individual voter registration system beds in, we recommend that a number of steps are taken to ensure that no one is unfairly denied the right to vote.

Particularly important is that the original December 2016 deadline for individual electoral registration – which the government has brought forward by a year – is reinstated, to allow more time for efforts to ensure that the significant numbers of young people, renters and ethnic minorities who are currently not registered on the new system are not disenfranchised when the new December 2015 deadline passes. To support efforts to ensure a full franchise, the £6.8 million of funding made available to local authorities' electoral registration officers (EROs) in January 2015 'to support the costs of activities aimed at increasing the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register' (White 2015: 3) should be repeated in 2016, and be allocated to authorities proportionally based on their level of under-registration as of December 2015.

To improve the way in which the electoral register is maintained in future, the Electoral Commission should be given a lead role in developing a robust, clear outline of the responsibilities of EROs, local government, devolved government and national government in terms of ensuring that the register is as complete and accurate as possible. Furthermore, to improve transparency, local authorities'

1 http://boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/general-information-what-we-do-and-how-we-do-it/

2 http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/elections-and-voting/constituencies/

performance in terms of voter registration rates should be published annually in an easily accessible format. The way in which each local authority is 'ranked' in such a publication should be weighted to reflect its particular demographic makeup – for example, those that typically have a more transient population should have this taken into consideration. The Electoral Commission should be given powers to intervene where local authorities are consistently underperforming or EROs are failing to meet agreed performance standards.

Finally, to improve the accuracy and ease of registration, the Electoral Commission and the government should examine how data-matching techniques could be extended to improve registration accuracy rates in future. Generating an electoral register from other sources of data held by government agencies is routine practice in most European democracies, which employ so-called 'automatic electoral registration'. The UK, by contrast, has long had a hybrid system whereby the electoral register is compiled partly on the basis of existing information, partly from the annual canvass, and partly from information that people voluntarily supply when, for example, they move house. The use of data from sources such as the Department for Work and Pensions to match and verify that on the register is, therefore, not a dramatic departure from current practice. The Electoral Commission should examine which data sources could be added in order to improve the accuracy of the registration roll. It should also consider the broader issue of whether our hybrid system could be improved and made more efficient by creating a single, national registration database to improve the accuracy and completeness of the electoral register.

Build institutions that can strengthen democratic relationships: create a Democracy Commission

At present the Electoral Commission is charged with protecting the integrity of the electoral process and regulating party funding – duties that it fulfils successfully. However, democracy is far richer, broader and stronger than electoral politics and its regulation. To support the growth of democratic relationships and forms of power in society, a Democracy Commission should be established. Its remit should be to facilitate democratic participation with the goal of increasing levels of broad-based political participation and deliberation in the UK. As with the Electoral Commission, the Democracy Commission should be an independent statutory body that reports to parliament.

The Commission should have three key functions. First, it should conduct research into what institutions and policies are effective at increasing political participation, and advise the government on decisions relating to the health of British democracy more broadly. The Commission should support both national and devolved governments in this regard.

Second, the Commission should make its services available to partners who want to commission research or capacity-building initiatives which aim to increase participation and deliberation rates in public decision-making processes. These could be within government – for example, the Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish governments could collaborate with the Commission to design more effective public consultation procedures. Similarly, the Commission could be hired by public organisations or institutions – NHS Trusts, for example – that want to engage more effectively with citizens in their localities and democratise their decision-making structures.

Third, the Commission should have an engagement and experimentation function, with the resources and capacity to support local initiatives, by any group or body, that aim to increase public participation and substantive influence in the political process – not only in formal political structures, but also in informal political spaces. For example, the Commission could work to help facilitate local deliberative bodies or citizen assemblies, support local authorities to conduct effective participatory

budgeting exercises, and experiment with new means for the public to engage in political decision-making processes in more direct and sustained ways.

This is an ambitious agenda that has the potential to change our democracy for the better, making it more representative, participative and pluralistic. It also goes with the grain of public opinion: 69 per cent of voters felt, in 2013, that the UK's system of government needed significant improvement (Chwalisz 2015) – a figure that may well be higher today given the continued rise of populist sentiments on both the left and right against 'Westminster', and the broader constitutional controversy and electoral tumult of the intervening two years. However, to deliver upon this agenda we will need to radically update the infrastructure and technologies through which our democracy operates, and which the 2015 general election again showed to be inadequate in terms of fairness, representativeness and broad public engagement.

Digital and networked technologies may have the potential to undermine existing political, social and economic hierarchies and help a more equitable democratic culture to emerge, but it is not pre-ordained that they will do so. What we also need is public policy and institution-building that patiently nurtures and strengthens democratic relationships to reduce political inequality in our society. This will not be easy. However, the alternative – inaction leading to a permanently divided democracy, with stark and entrenched inequalities of class, age and region in terms of who participates, has voice and exercises political influence – is unconscionable.

2.
THE UK ELECTORAL SYSTEM: OUT OF TIME

The UK's democratic structures, institutions and practices are primarily inventions of the 19th century. From the first-past-the-post electoral system to the way in which parliament is organised, and from the Burkean ideal of representation to the model of the political party, the institutional underpinnings of British democracy are, for the most part, an inheritance from an age before universal suffrage.

This model functioned relatively effectively, within its own parameters, in the postwar era of mass industrial democracy. Buttressed by settled social structures and what was effectively a two-party electoral duopoly, the UK enjoyed high rates of participation in political life across age and class groups. In this context, the first-past-the-post electoral system was better able to deliver results that were politically representative of the public than it is today. Nonetheless, clear limitations remained. The emergence of the New Left, for example, with its argument for the renewal and widening of democracy's scope and its attack on bureaucratic managerialism, suggests that even at its moment of greatest strength the postwar order fell short of democratic aspirations.

The limitations of the UK's democratic inheritance have become clearer over time. Our economy is increasingly post-industrial, our ways of communicating increasingly digital and more networked, our identities and relationships ever-more variegated and complex. Our political system is failing to keep pace with the fluidity and diversity of contemporary culture and technologies.[3]

Indeed, while modern culture and technology have enabled more dense, rich and broad relationships between citizens to emerge, representative democracy has retreated; the politics of participation and mass deliberation has gone into decline. In part this is due to the well-analysed 'post-democratic drift' that is occurring in many developed democracies. Politics has become professionalised, class identities have weakened, and political parties have drifted from their anchors in civil society – and the political class is seemingly left, in Peter Mair's phrase, 'ruling the void' (2003). The result is that:

> *'…while the forms of democracy remain fully in place – and today in some respects are actually strengthened – politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times; and that one major consequence of this process is the growing impotence of egalitarian causes.'*
> Crouch 2004

The consequences of this post-democratic drift have already been far-reaching. An influential school of analysis has argued that the changing nature of capitalism and its relationship to democracy has made political decision-making increasingly immune from popular pressure, and has reduced the scope and influence of collective political action (see for example Streeck 2014 and Brown 2015).

3 See, for example, Gilbert J and Fisher M (2014) *Reclaiming Modernity: Beyond markets, beyond machines*, Compass. http://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/reclaimingmodernity-beyond-markets-beyond-machines/

Moreover, as developed economies have become increasingly financialised and public debt levels have risen, the tension between states' social and democratic responsibilities towards their voters and citizens on the one hand, and the demands of their creditors on the other, has become increasingly acute. In the process, the always-contested locus of political sovereignty has gradually shifted away from democratic institutions and towards depoliticised market-based institutions: *homo economicus* has increasingly – though not decisively – trumped *homo politicus* as the key political agent in developed democracies.

One result of these developments has been the growth of democratic disengagement, with sharp, ingrained and interrelated inequalities in participation in political life by age, class – and to a lesser extent – region and ethnicity. Critically, the evidence suggests that in many parts of the country this is a structural rather than a secular decline. There is a cycle of disaffection and underrepresentation among those groups whose participation rates are already falling – a phenomenon confirmed by turnout at the recent general election, as we will analyse in the next chapter – one effect of which is that politics, in turn, seems to have less and less to say to them, which further reduces the incentive to participate in the political process.

We are at risk of allowing a permanently excluded political cohort to emerge within our society. In other words, without action, we may become – and remain – a divided democracy. In the following four chapters we present new case studies of voting patterns and behaviour that suggest that the UK has already travelled some distance down that road.

3. DISPROPORTIONALITY AND MARGINALITY IN THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTION

Disproportionality

Between the mid-1970s and 2010, the UK had a relatively stable 'two-and-a-half' party system, made up of two large parties and one mid-sized party. During this time, only the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberals (latterly the Liberal Democrats) polled more than 5 per cent at a general election, or won more than 5 per cent of parliamentary seats. The 2015 general election, however, exploded this two-and-a-half party system and ushered in an entirely new configuration of political parties. In doing so, it has starkly exposed the shortcomings of what was already a clearly outmoded and disproportionate electoral system. Table 3.1 sets out the headline results of the election by vote- and seat-share.

Table 3.1
Shares of votes and seats won, by party, in the May 2015 general election

Party	Votes	Seats (%)	Seats won
Conservatives	36.9%	50.9%	331
Labour	30.4%	35.7%	232
Ukip	12.6%	0.2%	1
Liberal Democrats	7.9%	1.2%	8
Scottish National Party	4.7%	8.6%	56
Greens	3.8%	0.2%	1
Democratic Unionist Party	0.6%	1.2%	8
Sinn Fein	0.6%	0.6%	4
Plaid Cymru	0.6%	0.5%	3
Ulster Unionist Party	0.4%	0.3%	2
Social Democratic and Labour Party	0.3%	0.5%	3
Other	1.2%	0.0%	1

Source: Authors' calculation based on BBC News 2015a

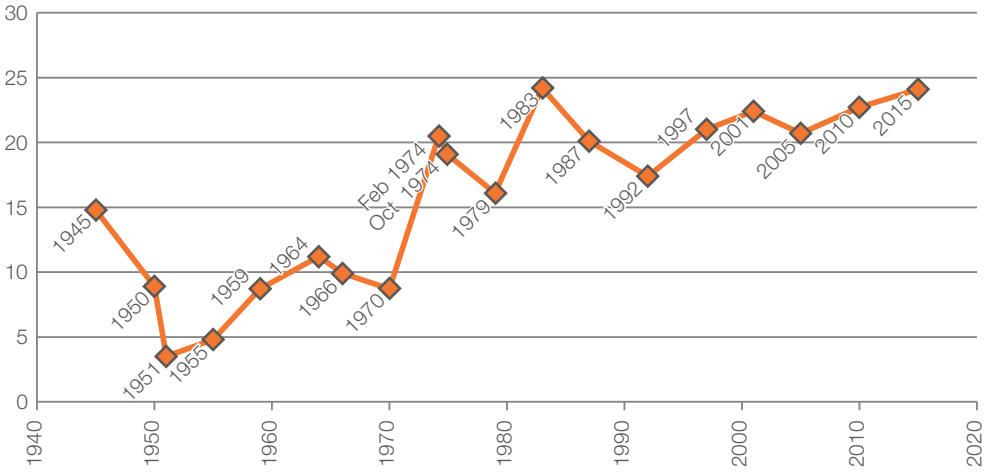
In this election, as in others before it, the first-past-the-post electoral system failed to deliver a parliament that is representative of the will of the British electorate. At the level of vote-shares, we now have what we might describe as a 'two-and-two-halves' party system: Ukip now nestles alongside the Liberal Democrats as a mid-sized party, having won 12.6 per cent of the vote to the Lib Dems' 7.9 per cent.

Yet at the level of seats the picture is completely different. Neither of those two 'mid-sized' parties won more than a dozen seats, whereas the Scottish National Party (SNP) – which by its nature is necessarily a 'minor party' in terms of the UK-wide vote count – now holds an 8.6 per cent share of parliamentary seats on 4.7 per cent of the vote. The Green party (including its Scottish and Northern Irish sister parties) received 3.8 per cent of the vote share, not far off that won by the SNP, yet won only one seat. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), meanwhile, is the joint-fourth largest party in parliament, with eight times as many MPs as either the

Greens or Ukip (and just as many as the Lib Dems), despite securing a significantly lower vote share than both. And of course, most significantly, the Conservative government itself has a majority of seats despite securing only 36.9 per cent of the vote – a fact which underscores the tendency of the first-past-the-post system to exaggerate the seat-share of the largest party.

It is well established, then, that the relationship between parties' vote-share and the composition of the House of Commons is not a direct one. Figure 3.1 illustrates changes in the 'deviation from proportionality' score of each UK election since 1945. This score is a measure of the proportion of the seats won at each election that would, if seats were allocated on a strictly proportional basis, have been filled by a different party.[4] Figure 3.1 illustrates the fact that by this measure, the 2015 election was more disproportionate than any election in the past 30 years. It also shows that the electoral system has become increasingly disproportionate over time, illustrating the transition from the near-duopoly of the 1940s and '50s – when deviation from proportionality was at its lowest – to the multi-party political system we have today. From today's vantage point, it is difficult to see how our current electoral system could ever deliver results that are significantly more proportionate than they were in May 2015.

Figure 3.1
Deviation from proportionality in UK general elections since 1945



Source: for elections held between 1992 and 2010, deviation from proportionality figures are taken from Dunleavy 2012; all other figures are the authors' calculations based on reported election results from the House of Commons Library (http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/commons/commonslibrary/); 'General Election Results 1885–1979' (http://www.election.demon.co.uk/geresults.html); and BBC News 2015a.

It is important to stress that the problem of disproportionality was not unique to 2015. This is not a glitch but a consistent programming error in our electoral system, albeit one that is growing ever more stark, given the increasingly pluralistic nature of our political culture. In 2005, for example, a Labour government was returned to office with a 66-seat majority – significantly higher, indeed, than the present government's majority – despite securing only 35.2 per cent of the vote on a turnout of just 61.4 per cent. In other words, Labour secured a significantly stronger majority than the current government on a *worse* electoral performance.

4 The conventional measure of deviation from proportionality 'subtracts parties' vote shares from their seats shares, adds up the absolute values of the resulting difference (the deviations) ignoring the positive or negative signs, and then divides the resulting total by 2' (Dunleavy and Margetts 2004).

This demonstrates one of the central flaws in the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system: it does a very bad job of translating what people vote for into what they actually get in terms of representation. For example, of the nearly 31 million votes cast in the 2015 general election, 63 per cent were cast for losing candidates. Indeed, over half of MPs – 331 of 650 – were elected with less than 50 per cent of the vote in their constituency; 191 were elected with less than 30 per cent of the vote (Electoral Reform Society 2015a).

Another way of looking at the proportionality question is to consider, on a party-by-party basis, the average number of voters per elected MP (see table 3.2). This gives an indication of the electoral 'cost' of each seat. At one extreme, the DUP only needed to attract 23,033 voters for every seat it won. At the other extreme, Ukip had to convince 3,881,129 members of the electorate to place an 'X' in its box in order to win its single seat. That is, one party had to win a staggering 169 times as many votes as another in order to secure a seat in the House of Commons. This certainly fails the equal opportunities test as far as hiring procedures go. Moreover, it is corrosive to the idea of democracy as a procedurally fair process in which elections are a mechanism for translating voter preference into government formation.

Table 3.2
The electoral cost of a seat in parliament,* by party

Party	Cost of a seat (in terms of votes)
Conservatives	34,244
Labour	40,290
Scottish National Party	25,972
Liberal Democrats	301,986
Democratic Unionist Party	23,033
Plaid Cymru	60,564
Social Democratic and Labour Party	33,270
Ukip	3,881,129
Greens	1,157,613
Average	*47,211*

Source: authors' calculations based on BBC 2015a
***Note: The 'cost' of a seat for each party is calculated by the number of votes cast for that party divided by the number of MPs it won.**

It is important to stress that the issue at hand here is the underlying flaws of the electoral system that make such a result possible, not who temporarily benefits from its distortive outcomes. In this regard, what is clear is that the UK electoral system has proven itself to be consistently unproportional and uneven in the way it operates, granting some voters, by accident of geography, far greater power than others. Without significant electoral reform, these inequalities in political influence will remain embedded.

Marginality

Another related and well-known feature of the UK electoral system is the fact that election outcomes are often decided in a handful of marginal or 'swing' seats, where parties consequently tend to concentrate their campaigning efforts.

This pattern was arguably less in evidence at the 2015 election than it has been in many years, though this is largely due to the electoral earthquake that took place in Scotland, where even seats where the incumbent was elected with majorities of over 50 per cent in 2010 (such as Glasgow North East and Kirkcaldy and

Cowdenbeath) fell to the SNP. A total of 111 seats changed hands across the UK, fully half of which were in Scotland – even though fewer than one in 10 of the 650 seats in the Commons are located north of the border. Yet even in these unusual circumstances, the tendency of the UK electoral system to effectively give extra powers to electors living in marginal seats was clearly evident (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3
A breakdown of results in marginal seats in the 2015 general election in England, Scotland and Wales*

	All seats	England and Wales only
Ultra-marginals: 2010 majority of less than 1%		
Number of seats	22	21
As a proportion of total seats	3.4%	3.7%
As a proportion of total electorate	3.5%	3.7%
Number of those seats that changed hands in 2015	7	7
Proportion of ultra-marginals that changed hands in 2015	31.8%	33.3%
Ultra-marginals as a proportion of all seats that changed hands in 2015	6.4%	11.9%
Marginals: 2010 majority of less than 5%†		
Number of seats	86	82
As a proportion of total seats	13.2%	14.3%
As a proportion of total electorate	13.6%	14.2%
Number of those seats that changed hands in 2015	27	25
Proportion of marginals that changed hands in 2015	31.4%	30.5%
Marginals as a proportion of all seats that changed hands in 2015	24.8%	42.4%
Semi-marginals: 2010 majority of less than 10%‡		
Number of seats	194	183
As a proportion of total seats	29.8%	32.0%
As a proportion of total electorate	30.3%	31.4%
Number of those seats that changed hands in 2015	46	40
Proportion of semi-marginals that changed hands in 2015	23.7%	21.9%
Semi-marginals as a proportion of all seats that changed hands in 2015	42.2%	67.8%

Source: Authors' calculations based on BES 2015
*** Note: For reasons of data availability, the table excludes Northern Ireland.**
† Including ultra-marginals; ‡ including marginals and ultra-marginals.

Overall, 16.8 per cent of seats fell to a different party in 2015 than in 2010. About a third of all marginal constituencies (those with majorities of less than 5 per cent in 2010) saw such a change, as did a quarter of all seats with majorities of less than 10 per cent ('semi-marginals'). If we exclude Scotland from these calculations, the disparity between marginals and non-marginals becomes starker still. Two-thirds of all the seats that changed hands in England and Wales in 2015 were those that had been won by majorities of less than 10 per cent in the 2010 election, even though such seats are home to less than a third of the English and Welsh electorate. Clearly, voters in these seats were given outsized electoral influence.

The over-importance of marginal seats in deciding the outcome of elections is illustrated by the fact that if 901 Conservative votes, across the seven Conservative-won marginal seats in which the contest was closest, had instead been cast for the party that placed second in each of those seven constituencies, it could have denied the party an overall majority.[5] This starkly highlights how dramatic shifts in the balance of political power can hinge on only small

5 Those seven seats were: Gower, majority 27; Derby North, majority 41; Croydon Central, majority 165; Vale of Clwyd, majority 237; Bury North, majority 378; Morley and Outwood, majority 422; and Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, majority 523.

differences in voting patterns in particular marginal seats. Of the 390 non-marginal constituencies in England and Wales, by contrast, only 19 changed hands – fewer than one in 20.

This means that the vast majority of the British electorate live in areas that are unlikely to become a focus for serious party competition in the foreseeable future. Safeness is, of course, never certain, as the dramatic results in Scotland attest to. However, long periods of control by a single party can lead to large swathes of the electoral landscape becoming politically neglected. For example, one of the consequences of the unequal amounts of attention that parties pay to different constituencies is that electors in safe seats have less reason to vote, which – as the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's recent examination of voter engagement in the UK suggested (PCRC 2014) – often translates into lower turnout and participation, such as contact with political parties. Though this effect is slight, it is nevertheless statistically significant, and is an indication of the impact that the existence of safe and marginal seats has on electoral participation rates, and on the UK's political culture more broadly.

4.
ELECTORAL INEQUALITY AND THE EXAGGERATION OF REGIONAL DISPARITIES

Disproportionality and the outsized influence of marginal seats is undoubtedly of considerable concern to democratic theorists, but does this have practical implications for politics? The 2015 electoral results suggest the answer to this question is 'yes'.

That the UK is increasingly fragmented along geographic lines is evident in the electoral results delivered in different parts of the country. This is perhaps to be expected. The first-past-the-post system typically over-represents the leading party and diminishes the presence and position of smaller ones – a tendency that undermines the plural nature of the party system and potentially aggravates and over-amplifies political and territorial differences. So today, the over-representation of particular blocs could have major territorial-political implications in the current parliament, and may indeed pave the way for the break-up of the UK.

For example, at the level of the regions and constituent nations of the UK, the Conservatives and Labour each won five regions in England and Wales (with the SNP and the DUP pulling in the largest shares of the seats in Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively). Yet beneath this rough balance between the two main parties at the national level lurk severe distortions that generate two distinct problems.

The first is the so-called 'Scottish problem', whereby a region or constituent nation of the UK is ruled for long periods by a Westminster government controlled by a party that has little local purchase. When the Conservative party is in power, this is and has in recent decades been true not only in Scotland but also in the North East, the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber and Wales. Conversely, during periods of Labour rule, the South East, the South West and the East of England suffer the same fate.

The second problem thrown up by the emerging pattern of seat distribution is a situation in which a single party controls virtually all the seats in a region or nation, despite securing less than half the vote share there. In only one – the South East – did more than half the electorate vote for the same party in 2015: nowhere else did the regional winner top the 50 per cent mark. Yet in four regions – the East of England, the South East, the South West and the North East – and in Scotland, the winning party made a near clean-sweep of over four-fifths of the seats. In all five, the difference between the vote- and seat-shares of the largest party exceeded 40 per cent (see table 4.1). The electoral system has therefore helped to dramatically exacerbate both the disconnect between political representation and voting intentions, and regional divides.

Table 4.1
Regional patterns in electoral system effects

Region	Party with the most votes in the region/nation	Winning party's vote share in the region/nation	Winning party's seat share in the region (per cent)	Percentage point difference between winning party's seat and vote shares
London	Labour	43.7%	61.6 %	17.9
East of England	Conservative	49.0%	89.7%	40.7
South East	Conservative	51.6%	94.0%	42.4
South West	Conservative	46.5%	92.7%	46.2
East Midlands	Conservative	43.5%	69.6%	26.1
West Midlands	Conservative	41.8%	57.6%	15.8
North East	Labour	46.9%	89.7%	42.8
Northwest	Labour	44.7%	68.0%	23.3
Yorkshire and the Humber	Labour	39.2%	61.1%	21.9
Scotland	SNP	50.0%	94.9%	44.9
Wales	Labour	36.9%	62.5%	25.6
Northern Ireland	DUP	25.7%	44.4%	18.7
UK overall	**Conservatives**	**36.9%**	**50.9%**	**14.0**

Source: BBC News 2015a, and authors' calculations.

5. INEQUALITIES IN PARTICIPATION RELATED TO AGE, INCOME AND CLASS

Inequalities in electoral participation by age and class has dramatically increased in recent decades, with older and more affluent groups turning out at greater rates on average than their younger and poorer counterparts. IPPR's analysis of the 2010 general election found that only 53 per cent of those within the lowest income quintile voted, compared to 75 per cent of those in the highest income quintile (Birch et al 2013). Importantly, the electoral participation gap between rich and poor has grown: turnout among all income quintiles was above 80 per cent in the 1980s, yet by 2010 turnout among the lowest-income quintile was 23 percentage points lower than that of the highest income group, whereas it was only 4 points lower in 1987. This meant that someone in the highest-income quintile was 43 per cent more likely to vote in 2010 than someone in the lowest-income quintile, resulting in inequalities of influence between rich and poor at the ballot box (ibid).

Similarly, IPPR's analysis of the 2010 election suggested that there is a clear and growing age divide in terms of who votes: turnout rates fell progressively lower for age cohorts born in 1970, 1980 and 1990, both in terms of the number that voted in the first election they were eligible to vote in, and also, crucially, in subsequent elections. For example, in 2010, turnout rates for those aged 18–24 slumped to just 44 per cent, compared to 76 per cent of those aged 65 and over – whereas, by contrast, the turnout rate differential between these two age-groups was just 18 per cent in 1970 (Birch et al 2013).

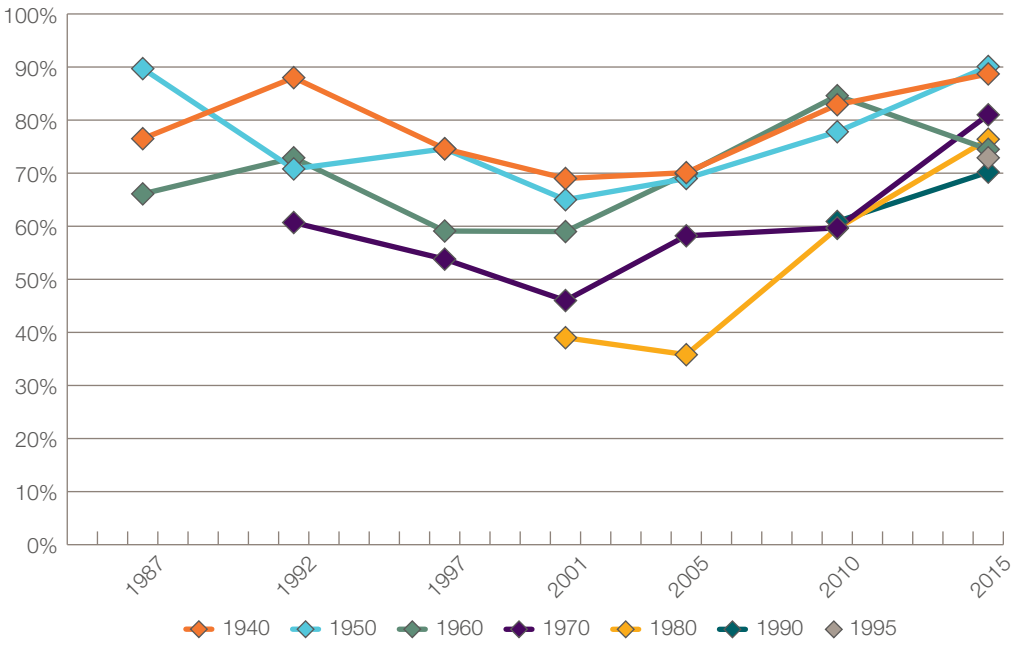
The new analysis presented in this report suggests that age and class remain important determinants of who participates and has influence in electoral politics. Analysing the British Election Study (BES) survey data – the gold standard of election data – allows us to break down participation by relevant demographic groups for the 2015 election. Figure 5.1 illustrates projected turnout for the 2015 general election[6] by age cohort. It shows that cohorts born after 1950 are considerably less likely to vote than their older counterparts, and that there is little evidence of convergence in these patterns over time. This means that older groups are better represented than younger groups, and that politicians have a greater incentive to cater to their needs.

In addition to age-related electoral inequality, inequalities in income are also important: richer members of the electorate are more likely to vote than poorer ones. This can be readily seen in figure 5.2, which charts the estimated turnout of different income quintiles in UK general elections between 1987 and 2015.[7]

6 The 2015 figures are from the last pre-electoral wave of the British Election Study, and they pertain to respondents who reported that they were 'very likely' to vote. This accounted for 80.8 per cent of the sample surveyed, whereas in the event, recorded turnout at the election was only 66.2 per cent. Exaggeration of the probability of voting is likely to have been highest among those groups with the lowest probability of voting, which means that actual demographic discrepancies are likely to be compressed in these data. The post-electoral data wave of the British Election Study is not due out until October 2015.

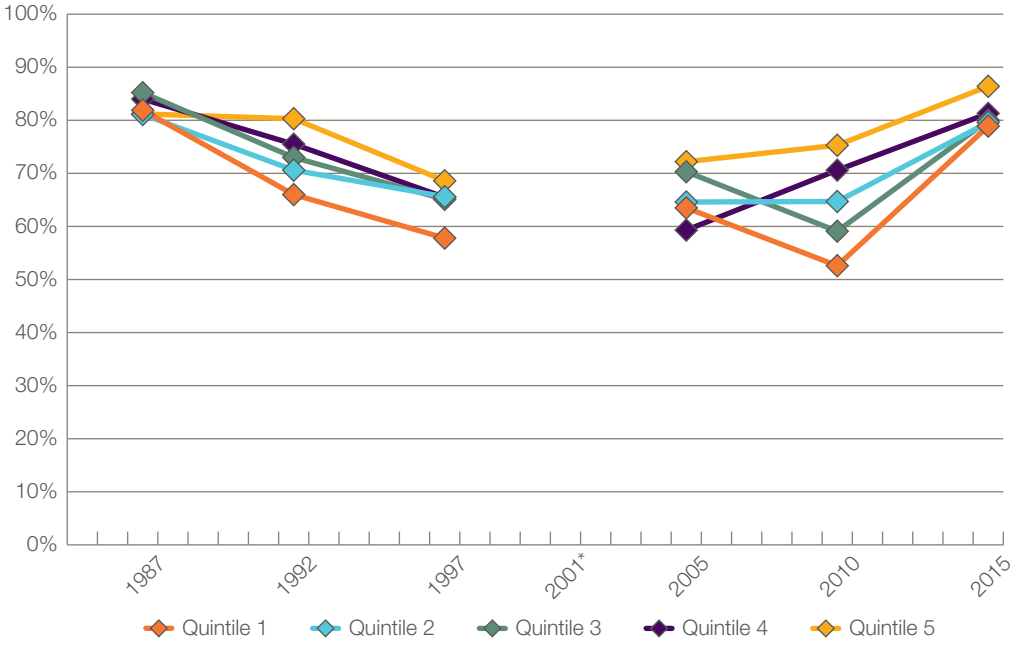
7 See the previous footnote.

Figure 5.1
Estimated turnout (%) by age cohort in UK general elections, 1987–2015*



Sources: BES 2015
*** Note: turnout at the 2015 election is based on British Election Survey estimates.**

Figure 5.2
Estimated turnout (%) by income quintile in UK general elections, 1987–2015*



Source: BES 2015
*** Note: turnout at the 2015 election is based on British Election Survey estimates.**

In virtually all cases, higher-income groups are more likely to vote than those that are less well off. This means that age-related electoral inequality is compounded by socioeconomic inequality, and that different groups within the electorate make distinctly different contributions to electoral outcomes.

The BES data's suggestion of extensive levels of unequal electoral participation was confirmed in Ipsos MORI's 'How Britain Voted in 2015' survey (2015), which also found sharp differences in turnout by age, class, ethnic group and housing tenure.[8]

Table 5.1
Predicted voter turnout in the 2015 general election by age, social class, ethnic group and housing tenure

Group	Predicted turnout
Age cohort	
18–24	43%
25–34	54%
35–44	64%
45–54	72%
55–64	77%
65+	78%
Social class	
AB	75%
C1	69%
C2	62%
DE	57%
Ethnic group	
All BME	56%
White	68%
Housing tenure	
Owned	77%
Mortgage	69%
Social renter	56%
Private renter	51%

Source: Ipsos MORI 2015
Note: Base: 9,149 GB adults aged 18 and over (of which 6,202 were 'absolutely certain to vote' or said that they had already voted), interviewed between 10 April and 6 May 2015. 3,196 interviews were conducted by telephone, and 5,953 face-to-face.

Ipsos MORI's data suggests, for example, that only 43 per cent of 18–24-year-olds intended to vote, compared with 78 per cent of over-65s – almost double the proportion. Similarly, while 75 per cent of those in the A and B occupational groups said that they would be voting, the equivalent figure for those in groups D and E was 18 points less, at 57 per cent. Meanwhile, 77 per cent of homeowners stated their intention to vote, against only 51 per cent of people living in privately rented accommodation, and the (intended) turnout rate of black and minority ethnic (BME) voters was 12 points lower than that of 'white' Britons (Ipsos MORI 2015). Both the BES and Ipsos MORI data illustrate very significant and ingrained differences in terms of who participates and has voice in the electoral system. Older, better-off voters appear to come out on top.

8 As with the BES datasets, this data was compiled prior to the election and so there remains the likelihood that respondents' probability of voting was exaggerated.

Inequalities by class in electoral participation, and the perceived responsiveness of the political system, are also reflected in what different groups within society think about their own influence. The Hansard Society's most recent *Audit of Political Engagement* showed that 32 per cent of AB voters believe they have the ability to influence political decisions, compared to only 19 per cent of DE voters (Hansard Society 2014). An even larger proportion of AB voters – 66 per cent – have taken some form of activity to influence political decision-making, laws or policies in the last year, and 92 per cent say they would do so if they felt strong enough. For C1s, those proportions are 53 and 85 per cent respectively; for C2s, 37 and 70 per cent; and for DEs, 32 and 68 per cent (ibid).

One explanation for these unequal participation rates in both voting and broader political activity is differences between groups in terms of the perceived efficacy of democracy. Polling featured in a previous IPPR report (Lawrence 2015) found that, for example, while voters in the AB occupational group are fairly evenly split on the issue of whether democracy addresses the interests of people like them 'well' or 'badly', significant majorities of individuals in the C2 (-18 per cent) and DE groups (-38 per cent) think that democracy serves their interests poorly.[9] Only one in four DE individuals believes that democracy addresses their interests 'well' – a figure that is 20 percentage points higher among AB individuals. A striking 63 per cent think it serves their interests badly (ibid).

Clearly, then, despite the fact that with universal franchise everyone in our democracy enjoys procedural equality, participation in political life, and perceived influence over it, is sharply structured along class and demographic lines – and has become increasingly so in recent decades. That older and wealthier groups and individuals participate more in, have greater belief in, and have greater influence over the political process and government decision-making is both an effect and a cause of our society's political inequality.

9 Figures are from an original YouGov Plc survey commissioned by IPPR and published in Lawrence 2015.. Total sample size was 3,514 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 9 and 11 September 2014. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

6.
LOCAL AUTHORITY SPENDING SETTLEMENTS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ENGLAND

Political equality requires that all citizens contribute to political decision-making on an equal basis. The evidence set out in the previous three chapters suggests that, by this definition, we do not have political inequality in our democracy today. What, however, drives and reinforces unequal participation rates? There is evidence that changes in government spending can impact on people's propensity to take part in elections and political participation more generally, a conclusion that has worrying implications for political equality (Birch et al 2013, Clarke et al 2004). In this chapter we therefore explore the geographic distribution of post-2010 cuts in local authority spending and subsequent participation rates in local elections to ascertain, first, whether some areas of the country have suffered more from recent spending settlements than others, and second, if so, what impact this has had on the propensity of those areas' residents to take part in political life.

Background

Between 2011 and 2014, funding for local government in England was reduced by 20 per cent overall. The local government finance settlement announced in detail in 2011 included cuts to the 'formula grant' given to local authorities by central government of 9.9 per cent in 2011/12 and 7.3 per cent in 2012/13. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) estimated that when all sources of local authority income were taken into account, these cuts would lead to falls of 4.5 and 3.3 per cent in local authority spending power in the first and second periods respectively. It should be noted, however, that these cuts were 'front-loaded', in the sense that the largest reductions took place during these first two periods (2011/12 and 2012/13), with subsequent cuts being smaller in scale (DCLG 2011a, 2011b).

Several analyses carried out after the announcement of this spending settlement noted that in the initial round of cuts, local government revenue spending power fell disproportionately far in the most deprived areas (Audit Commission 2011, Hastings et al 2012). The government capped cuts in revenue spending power at a maximum of 8.9 per cent per year, so the largest reduction a local authority could experience over the 2011/12–2012/13 period was 17.0 per cent. Twelve councils 'maxed out' at this level: Ashfield, Barrow-in-Furness, Bolsover, Burnley, Copeland, Chesterfield, Hyndburn, Pendle and Preston, and three coastal areas in the East of England and South East – Great Yarmouth, Hastings and Thanet. At the other end of the spectrum, those local authorities least affected by the cuts included the Isles of Scilly and Dorset, both of which saw their spending power decline by less than 1 per cent (DCLG 2011a, 2011b).

From a political inequality perspective, the critical question here is what motivated the political decision-making process, and whether the unequal distribution of spending cuts subsequently led to differing levels of political participation.

Analysis

Local government finance in the UK is notoriously complex, as councils derive their revenue from a wide variety of sources, including tax receipts, direct grants from central government based on a complicated formula (known as the 'formula grant'), and other grants associated with specific services, including health. When the DCLG announced those local authority finance settlements for 2011/12 and 2012/13, the dataset they released included a summary measure of the predicted impact of the settlements, labelled 'revenue spending power' (DCLG 2011a, 2011b). This measure – which includes revenue from the formula grant as well as council tax, non-ringfenced specific grants, and NHS funding for health-related social care – provides a convenient means of comparing the impact of the settlement across different types of entities with different responsibilities and different levels of need (unitary authorities, metropolitan boroughs, shire districts and counties).

Using this revenue spending power data, it is possible to assess both the factors that may have determined the level of cuts experienced by different local authorities, and the impact that these cuts have had on subsequent rates of electoral participation.

Correlates of the cuts

With 2010 data as a baseline, we find, consistent with the results of previous studies, that local authorities controlled by one of the two parties in the then government – the Coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats – experienced spending settlements in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 period that were, on average, approximately 1 per cent more favourable than those authorities controlled by other parties, or those under no overall control (see model 1, table A.1 in the appendix). However, when the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is factored into the equation, the partisan effect disappears (or rather, it falls below conventional levels of statistical significance; see model 2, table A.1 in the appendix). The IMD in this dataset (DCLG 2011c) runs from a low of 4.47 in the district of Hart in Hampshire (low deprivation) to 43.45 in Liverpool (high deprivation). Our analysis indicates that a hypothetical 30-unit increase in deprivation would have been associated with a 4.8 per cent *greater* reduction in local authority spending power over the 2011/12–2012/13 period, all else being equal. The estimated results of this analysis are shown in figure 6.1.

This means that the local authority financial settlements were targeted, in the sense that they disproportionately impacted upon areas that were already most impoverished. Once this is taken into consideration, there is no evidence that the cuts were somehow designed specifically to benefit (or harm) local authorities controlled by any particular political party.

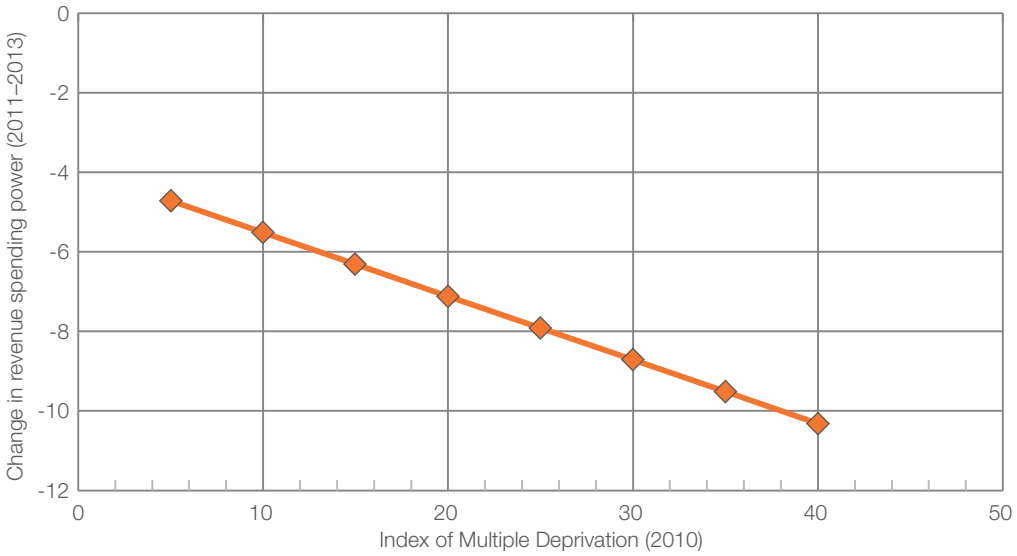
Effects of the cuts on depressing electoral participation rates

The 2014 local elections provide a good opportunity to evaluate the impact of the post-2010 financial settlements on political participation, as they took place after the two steepest reductions in local authority budgets. On 22 May 2014 the European parliament elections were held and, on the same day, approximately half of England's local authorities – including London and the metropolitan boroughs, 20 unitary authorities and 74 shire districts – held local elections. This large and varied sample enables useful comparisons to be made between the pre- and post-cuts political environments.

A report by the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute noted that Labour and Ukip won control of a large number of local authorities from the Conservatives and the Lib Dems in 2014; it also found that the councils lost by the Conservative party had experienced considerably higher cuts (estimated at £93.13 per capita) than Conservative councils overall (£68.95 per capita) (SPERI 2014: 2).

This suggests that, in some cases at least, local communities were able to use their collective electoral muscle to articulate their reaction to local government cuts. Although altering the composition of the local authority is not likely to have had a significant effect on local government funding, votes against the Coalition parties will have sent a message to the government.

Figure 6.1
The estimated impact of the local government finance settlement on local authorities (% change in revenue spending power), by local authorities' Index of Multiple Deprivation score, 2011/12–2012/13[10]



Source: DCLG 2011a, 2011b and 2011c

Yet it is also possible that the cuts had a negative effect by reducing democratic participation. There is a well-known association between economic deprivation and low rates of turnout (Clarke et al 2004, Solt 2008, Skirmuntt et al 2014), which is, as we have discussed, reflected in geographic and class-based disparities in turnout (see chapter 5).

From a political equality perspective, participation matters, and there is a danger that the local government spending settlement will have exacerbated existing socioeconomic divides in political participation. In order to assess this possibility, we compared turnout at English local elections that preceded the cuts, in 2006, with that for the 2014 local elections.

As the 2010 local elections coincided with a general election, participation in these contests can be expected to have been strongly conditioned by propensity to vote in the Westminster elections; comparison between 2010 and 2014 would therefore be inappropriate. The 2006 local elections provide a better point of comparison: not only did they take place prior to the local authority finance settlement 2011/12–2012/13, but they also preceded the economic downturn that provided a justification for these measures.

Unfortunately, they are not entirely comparable due to the complicating factor of the European parliament elections that took place at the same time as the 2014 local elections. That said, turnout at European parliament elections (36 per cent

10 This graph is based on estimates from model 2 in table A.1 of the appendix.

in 2014[11]) is comparable to turnout at local elections (which ranged between 31 per cent and 42 per cent over the 2006–2014 period[12]), so 2006 and 2014 are sufficiently comparable for the task at hand. Indeed, mean turnout at the two events was very similar: 36.7 per cent in 2006 and 36.0 per cent in 2014.

The results of this analysis are presented in table A.2 in the appendix. They indicate that, controlling for the type of authority, electoral turnout fell by 0.18 percentage points for every percentage point fall in revenue spending power between 2011 and 2013, which equates to a 2.7 per cent decline in turnout for a drop of 15 per cent in revenue spending power. Though the effect is not huge, this finding is consistent with the expectation that the cuts would have depressed participation in democratic decision-making, and that heftier cuts would result in a greater reduction in turnout, and consequently a rise in political inequality.

Conclusion

The analyses presented in this chapter demonstrate that there were considerable geographic disparities in the distribution of the post-2010 cuts to local authorities in England, with poorer areas suffering far more than more affluent ones. Once socioeconomic factors are taken into consideration, the cuts do not appear to have been targeted specifically at local authorities controlled by non-government parties. However, one of the effects of these cuts and their distribution has been to increase socioeconomic inequality between local authorities. Crucially, we have demonstrated that this has in turn led to increased disparities in turnout. In other words, greater cuts were associated with greater declines in electoral turnout over the period under investigation. The cuts thus had a 'demobilising' effect, in that they made people more likely to opt out of formal politics, typically reinforcing the entrenched political under-representation of the disadvantaged. This indicates how important it is that the forthcoming spending settlements for the current parliament are designed in a way that gives their implications for *political* inequality, as much as for socioeconomic inequality, serious consideration.

11 http://www.ukpolitical.info/european-parliament-election-turnout.htm

12 http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/local-elections

7.
REVIVING OUR DEMOCRACY, ADDRESSING POLITICAL INEQUALITY

Our vision of democracy

Our argument is simple: sharp and undemocratic inequalities of voice and political influence are ingrained in our society and amplified by our electoral system. If we accept the current institutional arrangements of our political system as the horizon of our ambition, we must also content ourselves to live in a divided – and therefore inherently partial – democracy. We cannot afford to do so.

Instead, we believe in a democracy that is not reliant on crisis to affect change; which is capable of reforming the structure of society and markets so that stasis is not the political norm; and in which by pursuing pluralism and experimentation we ensure that each individual is given equal consideration and voice in collective political decision-making. Such a democracy is by its nature not weighted towards any particular demographic groups or regions, although it recognises that the devolution of appropriate powers is a critical ally of democratic rejuvenation and experimentation, as well as a means of addressing infrastructural or economic concerns.

Moreover, our democracy should place a premium on supporting the development of democratic relationships – relationships based not only on our individual interests but on an appreciation of the common good. Democratic relationships are marked by passion, doubt and mutual concern, and involve our coming together, despite often deep disagreements, 'to create genuinely common goods out of our diverse material' (Stears 2011). Fostering such relationships – which form within markets and the state but also transcend them – will require effort and sustained nurturing, space and time to develop, and means by which they can develop political agency and effect real change. It will necessitate the decentralisation and democratisation of power in society and in workplaces; active support for everyday forms of democratic participation; and, ultimately, the creation of new forms of collective power through public policy designed to support 'new ways of giving voice, of deliberating and deciding' (Gilbert 2014).

Such a democracy would require a politics based on the idea of active citizenship, on the value of collective deliberation and civic participation, of 'publicness'; a politics in which each citizen can exercise her or his voice and influence. Central to this new politics would be an insistence that democracy is not simply a dry, aggregative calculus through which individual preferences can be satisfied. The realist school is, of course, right that democracy is a mechanism for distributing political power. However, this narrow view fails to effectively account for the passion, doubt and hope that democratic life can and should foster and thrive upon. In contrast to the realists, our vision of democracy is indebted to the Arendtian concept of a politics that draws its vitality from a belief that the future is as yet undecided; that a fixed social or fiscal settlement is in fact anti-democratic; that collective deliberation and action should be capable of reimagining and enacting new institutional trajectories for society. Democratic politics, in short, offers a future that is indeterminate, contested and hopeful (Arendt 2007).

As Amartya Sen argues, democracy is public reasoning: it should be understood not just in in relation to competitive elections, but more broadly as a duty to ensure that all have the opportunity to influence political decision-making, and to hold it

accountable, through 'political participation, dialogue, and public interaction' (Sen 2010). The counterbalance to organised economic power and its disproportionate influence on our democracy is, therefore, organised *people*. For this proper balance to be established, people must have the capacity to participate, deliberate and influence political decision-making – and, crucially, these processes must not be marked by sharp differences in participation and voice by age, class, ethnicity or geography.

As we have demonstrated in this report's preceding chapters, we clearly do not enjoy this type of democracy at the moment. Our institutions, technologies and practices are largely creations of the 19th century, and they are responding poorly to the fluidity and fragmentation of the 21st. Meanwhile, the inadequacies of our political system are both reinforced by and find expression in a political economy that limits the scope for democratic oversight or direction, seemingly cramping the space in which democratic relationships can grow.

What reforms are necessary?

What steps, in our current circumstances, can we take towards achieving the vision of democracy set out above?

Central to these efforts must be a radical updating of the civic, institutional and technological architecture of democracy in the UK as part of a process that has the explicit goal of ensuring that all voices are heard in the political system, and places a premium on institutional reform that can foster and sustain powerful collective democratic relationships in society.

Longer-term problems

It must of course be stressed that this is not the only area of democratic life that is in urgent need of significant reform. Most obviously, limiting the influence of organised money on the political system would help to reduce political inequality. The UK's political parties remain overly reliant on a relatively small number of large-scale donors. For example, the largest donor to the Conservative party in the fourth quarter of 2014 was Michael Gooley with £500,000, the largest donor to the Liberal Democrats was Max Batley with £400,000, and Labour's largest donor was the trade union UNISON with £1,384,289. Together these sums represent just over 10 per cent of all donations to UK political parties over this period (Electoral Commission 2015).

Bringing the UK more into line with Europe – where political parties are predominantly funded from public sources, with stringent caps on private individual donations – in this regard would mitigate our parties' over-reliance on powerful donors and remove the risk of their gaining undue influence over the democratic process. Moving in this direction would also help break the link between appointments to the House of Lords and party donations. For example, the 22 new peers appointed to the House of Lords in August 2014 had collectively donated nearly £7 million to various political parties (Electoral Reform Society 2014). To prevent such effrontery in future, one simple measure that could be taken would be to ban anyone from entering the Lords who has donated more than a certain sum to any political party.

In the longer term, however, the existence of an unelected second chamber is itself an undemocratic aberration: any substantive agenda of constitutional reform should be committed to its democratisation, whatever form it eventually takes. For example, one interesting recent proposal recommended replacing the House of Lords with a 'citizens' senate', 'a stratified randomly selected group of citizens to approve or veto legislation' (Chwalisz 2015).

Similarly, the UK has an unusually concentrated media landscape. Even though innovative new websites such as Novara Media or OpenDemocracy have emerged, the decline of local media and the near-death of figures such as industrial correspondents have narrowed the media landscape and what it reports on (Jones 2011), despite its importance to our democratic life.

Nonetheless, although these aspects of democratic reform are important and necessary in the longer term, it is unlikely that there will be a great deal of progress in these areas in the short term, given the current balance of parliament. Therefore, if we are to reduce political inequality and recommence democracy's 'long revolution', a new reform agenda is required, one capable of commanding wider public and party political support.

A new reform agenda

It is particularly important that we reconsider the voting experience itself: how do we vote, to what consequence, and on what issues? Voting is an ingenious mechanism for ensuring that public policy broadly reflects the demands and interests of the public. Indeed, voting should be motivated by the fact that it is a means of exercising substantive influence over political decision-making, rather than by moral exhortations or the invocation of historic events. At its best, voting expresses a basic form of political equality – one person, one vote – that has the potential to counterbalance and even overcome socioeconomic and political inequalities.

However, if the 'chain' of influence between voting and political decision-making becomes too weak – because of the existence of large demographic groups who consistently do not vote, or because the electoral system translates votes into political representation in an unrepresentative manner – then clearly the effective power of voting is reduced. Our analysis suggests that this has occurred.

To revive the power of voting and to strengthen the legitimacy of the electoral system, reform is required to ensure that political outcomes better represent the preferences of the public as a whole. This in turn requires action to address each of the forms of electoral inequality that we have analysed in this report. Action must be taken to ensure that all voices are heard in our political system, including changes to the electoral system and to how we vote. More than that, it will require us to make efforts – incremental and painstaking efforts in many cases – to change cultural attitudes towards voting to make it a more inclusive and communal experience. Finally, to ensure that the political system becomes more responsive to the interests of the electorate, the type and variety of decisions that can be directly influenced through voting should be expanded by making greater use of more direct, deliberative or participative democratic practices.

This is not to say that voting is or should be the only means of participating in democratic life, or that it is always the most effective way of shaping political outcomes. Indeed, historically, it has been the combination of mass electoral democracy and an engaged, powerful civil society that has driven forward institutional and political change. For example, the postwar settlement was not achieved by the parliamentary Labour party alone. As Paul Addison's *Road to 1945* attests, it reflected the coming together of a rich ecology of cultural and class-based civic movements and organisations – from the Clarion Cycle Clubs to radical town planners and urbanists, broad-based and powerful unions and Labour clubs to mutual and friendly societies – and a broader intellectual movement that encompassed progressive Conservatives, Communists and Liberals, at what was a propitious time for collectivist ideas in Britain (Addison 1994).

Similarly, the tearing up of the postwar settlement that began in the late 1970s reflected a broad, rich civil and intellectual ferment that was committed to overturning the Keynesian economic consensus – ideas that were ultimately put into practice through an electorally successful political project.

What this suggests is that to reduce political inequality we need not only to increase the power and representative capacity of voting, but to build institutions that can support and sustain a more democratic, relational public life, and empower what Jeremy Gilbert (2014) calls 'potent collectivities' – social groups that are capable of coming together to achieve social, political or institutional change. In our proposals for how we can achieve this, presented below, we attempt to address what Bonnie Honig (2007) describes as 'the paradox of politics' – that, in a chicken-and-egg-style problem, we need an engaged citizenry to demand democratic change, but we need democratic change in order to develop an engaged citizenry. We do so by positing formal institutional change as an instrument through which political cultures can be shaped over time. As such, the intention of our reforms is to create tangible mechanisms to address political inequality.

Our recommendations are set out below in three broad themes: the first two are focussed on reforming the infrastructure of the voting process; the final one focusses on institutional reforms that can revitalise the democratic experience more broadly. These three themes, and the headline reforms within each of them, are as follows.

1. **Making voting more representative and participation less unequal:** reforming the duties of the Boundary Commission, and introducing the single transferable vote system in local government elections.
2. **Making the voting process more inclusive, with lower barriers to participation:** reforms that will strengthen efforts to ensure a full and complete electoral register.
3. **Building institutions to strengthen democratic relationships:** establishing a Democracy Commission.

Recommendations

1. Make the electoral system more representative and participation less unequal

The arguments in favour of comprehensively updating our electoral system reform are both well-rehearsed and entirely merited. The outcome of the 2015 general election demonstrated in no uncertain terms that our electoral system fails to fairly represent the views of the public, ensures that millions of votes effectively do not count, and accentuates already ingrained forms of turnout inequality. However, history suggests that the demonstrable necessity of electoral reform does not necessarily lead inexorably to actual progress towards a fairer and more proportionate voting system.

Consequently, IPPR remains committed to the introduction of a more proportionate electoral system for parliament, preferably through the additional member system, which would retain the constituency link while ensuring that the House of Commons becomes more representative, pluralistic and reflective of public opinion. Similarly, as we have argued previously (Birch et al 2013), there is a strong case for introducing compulsory voting, albeit with a 'none of the above' option available on ballot papers to ensure that all voices and views are heard.[13] Such a move would constitute a direct strike against the entrenched levels of electoral inequality by age and income that, as our analysis has shown, the UK suffers from.

If voting were made compulsory, it would shift the focus of contemporary electoral activity and debate away from registration drives and often moralistic calls to vote as a duty, and concentrate energy instead on the principal political issues at stake. It would force political parties to engage much more with groups that are

13 See chapter 3 of Birch et al 2013 for a discussion of the case for compulsory voting, of how a compulsory voting system might be implemented and of the practicalities of doing so, including who might be made eligible to opt out of voting on grounds of conscience.

currently under-represented in the process. Combined with a system of proportional representation, compulsory voting would therefore help to make our democracy more responsive, representative and pluralistic.

Nonetheless, given the current state of politics, these ambitions must be pursued over the longer term. In the meantime, targeted institutional reforms could command broad support and make our electoral system more competitive, representative and effective immediately. To that end, we make the following recommendations.

The UK's boundary commissions should be given a new duty to consider the electoral competitiveness of a seat when reviewing constituency boundaries
Given that it is unlikely that any progress will be made during this parliament towards delivering a fairer, more proportionate electoral system, in the short term we recommend a second-best approach. That is, **the Boundary Commission for England (and the equivalent bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) should be given a new duty to take electoral competitiveness into account when it creates or amends constituency boundaries**. This duty should be introduced for the next boundary review process, which begins in the spring of 2016. At present, the boundary commissions have a duty to consider the size of a constituency – in terms of the size of its electorate and its geographic size – when determining the shape of a seat. They also have to account for 'special geographical considerations', including the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency, local ties within the constituency, and local government boundaries – what we might call 'geographic coherence'.

A new duty to consider competitiveness would mean that the commissions would work to reduce the number of 'safe seats' in parliament, where this accords with their duty to ensure parity of size and geographic coherence. In 2015, the Electoral Reform Society (2015b) calculated that there were 364 safe seats, where a swing of more than 5 per cent was required for the seat to change hands. Turnout and voter engagement is typically lower in safe seats than in marginal seats, where votes have more influence (ibid). Proactively reducing the number of safe seats and increasing the number of marginals, the boundary commissions could help to gerrymander the conditions for a more competitive electoral process. This in turn would make voters more powerful – or at least reduce the outsized power of voters who live in marginal seats relative to those who don't.

In practical terms, the boundary commissions could do this by altering the boundaries of particular seats based on the aggregate outcome of the last three general elections by ward results. For instance, if two safe seats adjoin each other, and if it is possible to redistribute wards between each seat in a way that would, based on aggregate outcomes of the last three general elections, make both seats marginal or at least more competitive – and if in doing so the responsible commission can satisfy its other two key duties regarding size and geography – then the commission should redistribute those wards in that way. Giving the UK's boundary commissions a duty to proactively create more politically balanced electorates within each constituency would thus help to reduce those dimensions of political inequality that are associated with the existence of large numbers of safe seats in a first-past-the-post voting system.

Of course this approach has clear limits as a route to a more proportionate system, and in many cases it would be all but impossible to engineer more competitive constituencies while also meeting the commissions' other two duties of size and geographic coherence. Nonetheless, given that the present government is committed to substantial boundary reform in the coming years, such a measure would go with the grain of the electoral reforms that are already in motion.

As a step towards a more representative electoral system, the single transferable vote (STV) system should be introduced for local elections in England and Wales

Just as it does in Westminster elections, the first-past-the-post system typically produces disproportionate and unrepresentative local election results – indeed, they are often worse in this regard than general elections. For example, the Electoral Reform Society estimates that upwards of 21 million people are living in areas where the local government is the equivalent of a 'one-party state', with a single party holding more than 75 per cent of council seats – a share that is very often wholly out of proportion to their overall vote share (Electoral Reform Society 2013). This is unhealthy for local democracy: it is disproportionate, and fails to reflect the diversity of political support and affiliation within areas. Introducing the STV system for local government would correct these flaws and ensure greater political competition in areas that are currently 'no-goes' for parties that have lower support levels due to the first-past-the-post system.

The single transferable vote system

The Electoral Reform Society defines the STV system as follows:

'…a form of proportional representation which uses preferential voting in multi-member constituencies. Candidates don't need a majority of votes to be elected, just a known 'quota', or share of the votes, determined by the size of the electorate and the number of positions to be filled.

'Each voter gets one vote, which can transfer from their first-preference to their second-preference, so if your preferred candidate has no chance of being elected or has enough votes already, your vote is transferred to another candidate in accordance with your instructions. STV thus ensures that very few votes are wasted, unlike other systems, especially First Past the Post, where only a small number of votes actually contribute to the result.'

Source: http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/single-transferable-vote

Since STV was introduced in Scottish local elections in 2007, local political representation has become far more proportionate and reflective of the pluralism of political opinion in Scotland. For example, in the most recent local elections in 2012, the SNP won 34.75 per cent of available council seats on 32.33 per cent of first-preference votes; Labour won 32.22 per cent on 31.39 per cent of first-preference votes; the Conservatives 9.4 on 13.27 per cent respectively; the Liberal Democrats 5.81 on 6.62 per cent; and the Green Party 1.14 on 2.31 per cent (Liddell et al 2012). By contrast, in the 2003 local elections – the last one conducted in Scotland under the first-past-the-post system – Labour won 41.65 per cent of council seats on only 32.6 per cent of the vote, while the second-placed SNP won only 14.8 per cent of seats despite winning almost a quarter of the popular vote. Clearly, then, the STV system produces far more proportionate election results.

More broadly, while all electoral systems have strengths and weaknesses, the STV system has a number of virtues in terms of strengthening the influence of voters, encouraging pluralism and making representation fairer. For example, it gives more choice to voters than any other system does; this in turn gives voters more power, and ensures that there are fewer 'wasted' votes as it results in most voters having a representative that their vote helped elect. Similarly, there are no safe seats under the system, and no incentive for tactical voting. Also, given the multi-member nature of constituencies, STV systems also often produce more diverse candidate lists, as parties have to select multiple representatives for each constituency, giving more opportunity in each for a more varied selection of potential candidates.

Moreover, unlike proportional representation and similar voting systems, under STV all representatives are elected in the same way, which ensures that there are no 'second-class' candidates or representatives.

Finally, the introduction of an STV system in England and Wales should have cross-party appeal. At present, both large and small parties are locked out of large areas of the country by virtue of the disproportionality of first-past-the-post elections to local government. Introducing the STV system could enable parties to revive their presence in areas from which they have long been absent in terms of political representation – the Conservatives in the great northern cities, for instance, or Labour in the South East. Equally, they would provide smaller parties with an avenue for growth through which they could gain greater electoral purchase. Introducing STV would therefore be an important step towards making our democracy more reflective of the pluralistic political culture that exists in the UK today. In doing so, it would also help to reduce political inequality at a local level.

2. Reform the electoral registration process to make our democracy more inclusive

Reinvigorating our democracy and reducing political inequality will require more than a traditional electoral reform agenda. It will also require action to reduce unnecessary barriers to political participation and expand and protect democratic public spaces where participation can take place. Fundamental to this is ensuring that everyone who is eligible to vote is able to.

This is particularly important in the current context, given that in 2014/15 the UK transitioned to a system of individual electoral registration, whereby each person is now required to register to vote individually, replacing the previous household-based system. Although individuals remain legally obliged (on pain of a fine) to provide their electoral registration officer (ERO) with the information requested of them – and although an estimated 35 million voters were, under the automatic transfer mechanism, transferred to the new system automatically provided that their identity was verified using the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP's) database – inadequate voter registration rates remain, to many, a barrier to voting (White 2015).

In 2010, for example, of the 45 million people eligible to vote, as many as 7.5 million were not registered. Socioeconomic and cultural barriers were often central to this. There were clear inequalities by age and ethnicity in terms of who was registered to vote in the 2010 election: 90 per cent of people aged 55–64 were registered, compared to 55 per cent of those aged 18–24; nearly 20 per cent of BME individuals were not registered to vote, compared to only 7 per cent of the 'white British' population (Birch et al 2013).

Complete figures for 2015, which would illustrate the impact of individual electoral registration, are not yet available for comparison. However, at the beginning of the year it was found that '307 of 373 local authorities that provided data had recorded a reduction in their electoral roll', with an overall reduction of 950,845 from the previous system (BBC 2015b). Meanwhile, research published by the House of Commons Library suggests that those most likely to have dropped off the roll are students, young adults and private renters (White 2015). If we are serious about making our democracy one in which all voices are heard, we must pursue reforms that reduce these disparities.

This will require greater clarity over who is responsible for ensuring registration; a better understanding of the scale and nature of the problem; and greater targeting of resources in order to resolve issues of electoral under-representation.

First, to ensure greater clarity over the registration process, we make two recommendations for the government.

- **Extend the transition period for individual registration to December 2016:** In July 2015 the government brought forward the deadline by which an individual must register under the new individual electoral registration system from December 2016 to December 2015. After this date, individuals who are not registered under the new system will drop off the electoral roll. At present, there remain a significant number of people, many of them from groups that are already politically under-represented, who have not transitioned and therefore risk losing their right to vote in future. As a first step, the government should reverse its decision and extend the transition period for individual registration to the original deadline of December 2016.
- **Make additional funding available to local authorities to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register, ringfence it for that purpose, and target it at authorities proportionally based on their level of under-registration:** £6.8 million was allocated to local authority EROs in January 2015 to help them oversee the transition to the individual registration system and ensure a complete and accurate electoral register was maintained – for example, by providing resources for extra canvassing sessions. Provided that the registration deadline is extended, to further ensure that individuals do not drop off the register an equivalent level of funding should again be made available to local EROs in 2016 (see White 2015). This funding should be allocated according to the scale of under-registration in each local authority in December 2015, by which time the effects of the transition from the household to the individual registration system will have become clear. This funding should be ringfenced.

These remedial steps will help ensure that the transition to the individual registration process is completed with greater accuracy and fairness than is likely at present. However, more generally, the way in which the electoral register is maintained could be improved by establishing greater clarity over responsibilities, improving procedures, instituting stronger accountability mechanisms, and doing more to target resources.

- The transition to individual registration has been a significant disruption. As the system beds in, **the Electoral Commission should be given a lead role in developing a robust, clear outline of the responsibilities of EROs, local government, devolved government and national government in terms of ensuring that the register is as complete and accurate as possible.**
- The automatic transfer mechanism – whereby individuals are registered automatically based on their records in the DWP's system – is estimated to have had a 78 per cent record match, having transferred an estimated 35 million voters to the new system. This is an impressive transfer rate, but clearly more work could be done to improve it and thereby increase likelihood of a complete and accurate register (White 2015). **To improve this rate in future, the government should work with the Electoral Commission to assess this data-matching programme and examine how data-matching techniques could be extended in order to improve registration accuracy rates.**

  For example, local councils or the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) could be obliged to register residents who interact with their services, who are not currently registered to vote and who do not have a national insurance number. Similar mechanisms are in place in Germany, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Austria and Belgium, among others (Rosenberg and Chen 2009). The effective use, during the transition to an individual electoral registration system, of public data to verify the identity of potential electors without requiring them to provide additional information highlights the potential for direct registration to be extended more generally.

  Similarly, **the government could explore the possibility of establishing a single national voter registration database, administered by the Electoral**

Commission, so that once an individual has individually registered they do not have to register again upon moving or if their personal circumstances change in other ways. Instead, registered individuals would, as they are under the Australian system, be cross-tracked through relevant databases so that they remain eligible to vote even if they change address. This version of an individual registration system has resulted in high accuracy rates across Australia – for example, New South Wales achieves an estimated 95 per cent accuracy level in its register (NSWEC 2011 and Wheeler 2015). Establishing such a database in the UK could also represent a first step towards replacing the administration of electoral registration by individual councils with a nationally run database and registration service, though such a step would require careful evaluation.

- **To improve transparency, local authorities' performance in terms of voter registration rates should be published annually in an easily accessible format.** The way in which each local authority is 'ranked' in such a publication should be weighted to reflect its particular demographic makeup – for example, those that typically have a more transient population should have this taken into account. Once a fair ranking system is established, either the Electoral Commission or the Cabinet Office should be given powers to intervene where local authorities are consistently underperforming, or EROs are failing to meet agreed performance standards.

3. Build institutions that strengthen democratic relationships: establishing a Democracy Commission

To address political inequality we must restore substantive democratic power over how our social and economic institutions – and public life more broadly – are organised, thereby better enabling individuals to come together as citizens to make collective decisions that shape their lives, communities and workplaces. There is no single piece of legislation or institutional mechanism that can do this on its own. Nor is the solution to be found in the imposition of a centralised, monocultural form of democracy upon a variegated country. Rather, it can only be achieved by encouraging invention and pluralism in political life and supporting new ways of participating, deliberating and being represented, with a focus on building and sustaining powerful democratic relationships and spaces in society.

Such regular experimentation should, as Roberto Unger has suggested, seek to 'hasten the *pace* of politics – the facility for structural change – as well as raising its *temperature* – the level of popular engagement in public life' (Unger 2013; emphasis added). Political inequality can only be eradicated through the cumulative expansion of new forms of democratic power, supported by higher levels of engagement and inclusivity. This, in turn, can only be brought about by regular experimentation in how we organise democratic participation and deliberation – some of which will not always work as intended – rather than through a one-off initiative or piece of legislation.

In recent years a growing appetite for new forms of democratic organisation has become evident, with 69 per cent of individuals reporting that they feel 'the system of government needs significant improvement', and over half stating that they would like to participate in local citizens' assemblies and other participatory political forums that shape decision-making; exactly half say they want to take part in national participatory assemblies (Chwalisz 2015). However, this desire is no longer merely stated. It found practical expression in the mass civic mobilisation witnessed both during and after the Scottish independence referendum; in a more transitory way in movements such as Occupy London; and in Ukip's 2015 election manifesto, which proposed new forms of direct democracy to complement existing representative institutions. Each of these phenomena express, in different ways, a widespread desire for the democratisation of political power – and often, by extension, of hierarchical social or economic power.

It would, however, be naïve to believe that such relationships and spaces can be sustained, and the aspirations behind them met, without support from effective public policy. Powerful currents run against them that must be overcome: on the one hand, the overly centralised and transactional nature of the British state discourages the emergence of democratic relationships; on the other, new technologies and forms of sociality that have the potential to develop and promote deeper forms of democratic participation and civic engagement are often co-opted as vehicles for narrow, often individualising forms of economic activity.

Public policy must therefore support the emergence of new and effective ways of democratically relating to each other, while recognising fragmentation and difference in social life. This will involve the creation of spaces, campaigns and institutions in which democratic relationships can emerge or be strengthened, and will require space, time, resources and the power to put democratically agreed outcomes into action. IPPR therefore recommends **the establishment of a Democracy Commission to facilitate democratic participation and deliberation and strengthen democratic relationships.**

The UK's Electoral Commission is an independent body that is answerable to parliament, and which is responsible for ensuring transparency in party and election finances, and that elections, referendums and electoral registration are well run. These are vital responsibilities, which the Electoral Commission pursues based on a tightly prescribed mandate. However, while these duties are necessary for ensuring a well-run vibrant democracy, they are not sufficient.

A Democracy Commission would therefore be given a different mandate: to encourage experimentation in how we organise democratic participation and deliberation in the UK, with the goal of increasing broad-based involvement by age, class and region in political activity. Its overarching mission would be to better democratise political decision-making through greater public involvement, and by strengthening democratic organisation and power in society.

The Commission should have a threefold remit:

1. conducting research into how to improve participation
2. partnering with organisations or institutions to provide democratic services
3. facilitating efforts to improve public participation and influence in political decision-making.

With regards to its first duty, it should conduct research into what institutions, cultures and policies are effective at increasing political participation, and advise all levels of government on decisions relating to the health of British democracy. It is particularly important that the Commission makes itself available to advise all major devolved authorities, including the Scottish and Welsh governments, the Greater London Assembly (GLA) and the mayor of London, plus those regions involved in the city deals process. In this way, its research should help facilitate policy competition between devolved authorities in terms of how best to promote sustained democratic participation in their areas.

The Commission's second duty should be to make its services available to partners who want to commission research or capacity-building initiatives which aim to increase participation and deliberation rates in public decision-making processes. These partners could be government itself, major public institutions, trade unions, or potentially private companies looking to democratise their internal working practices.

Finally, the Commission should have an engagement and experimentation function, with the resources and capacity to support local initiatives by any group or body, that aim to increase public participation and substantive influence in the political

process – not only in formal political structures, but also in informal political spaces. For example, the Commission could work to help facilitate local deliberative bodies or citizen assemblies, support local authorities conduct effective participatory budgeting exercises, and experiment with new means for the public to engage in political decision-making processes in more direct and sustained ways.

What forms this experimentation takes will vary by location, and it would not be appropriate or effective to mandate in advance exactly what these should be. Nonetheless, further examples of the type of democratic experimentation it could promote or facilitate include the following.

- **The use of citizens' juries:** Pierre Rosanvallon (2008) has argued that forms of 'counter-democracy', in which mechanisms of oversight and authority sit alongside representative channels, can strengthen democracy as a whole. As a practical example of this, the Democracy Commission could help facilitate a citizens' jury whereby individuals are chosen randomly by ballot to deliberate and advise on the future constitutional settlement of the UK. Similar experiments have been successfully in Ireland, Canada and Iceland in recent years.
- **Help design and facilitate local deliberative bodies with substantive powers:** Such bodies are comprised of local individuals, often drawn by ballot, and they typically deliberate on specific issues of political significance or policy choice, and make recommendations to elected bodies. For example, a body of local individuals could assist the Greater Manchester Combined Authority to design the planned integration of health and social care in the area. The exact extent of the deliberative powers of such bodies should, however, be subject to local preference.
- **Participatory budgeting:** This is a form of public participation in deciding how public resources should be allocated. Paris, for example, has recently begun the world's largest participatory budgeting exercise, with €500 million to be spent in the city between 2014 and 2020 on projects conceived and chosen by the public (see New Cities Foundation 2015). More than 5,000 ideas have already been submitted, both online and offline.[14] A Democracy Commission could facilitate similar experiments in the UK. For example, it could assist the mayor of London and the GLA, or the mayor of Bristol and Bristol city council, to conduct a public participation exercise similar to Paris's successful example.
- **Support political parties to better perform their public functions:** Political parties will always remain central to a functioning and vibrant democracy. As well as seeking to win elections, they fulfil a vital public function of representation. Where a local party can demonstrate that it is fulfilling a public function – by, for example, organising local members of the community to participate more fully in public meetings or decision-making – then the Commission should support organisational innovation on the part of the parties. Its focus should be on improving the parties' capacity to help 'organise' the public, though a subsidiary aim would be to improve the democratic organisation of the parties themselves. It would have to be ensured, however, that support for political parties is impartial and fairly apportioned, with no party receiving a disproportionate amount of time or resources.

The point here is not for the Democracy Commission (or those who set the terms of its remit) to prescribe solutions for democratic revival, measured by increased levels of broad-based public participation. Some of the above examples may be

14 http://www.opengoveu.eu/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=86%3Amore-than-5000-ideas-submitted-for-paris-participatory-budget&Itemid=508

trialled successfully and expanded, others less so, some not at all; and others yet to be thought of will surely arise.[15]

Instead, what is critical is that there is an institution that has the capacity, resources and reach to promote and strengthen collective forms of democratic participation and deliberation, building on the energy that exists within civil society without dictating what form participation should take. The Democracy Commission should fulfil that role.

In doing so, the Commission should set out clear and consistent criteria regarding the projects and democratic initiatives will support. Nesta's D-CENT[16] project has recently set out a series of guidelines on what constitutes effective forms of deliberative or participatory forms of democracy, which could form a reasonable assessment baseline. These include ensuring there is clarity on what wider engagement is for, whether 'legitimation, or public trust; better quality decisions and outcomes; or a public which better understands the key issues and choices'. They also require the involvement of elected representatives in some effective capacity, to ensure that the actions of the initiative have effective purchase and influence over governmental decision-making (Mulgan 2015).

The Commission must also assess which issues should be subject to the maximum level of direct or deliberative participation: in some areas the general public has forms of collective expertise or dispersed knowledge, and so can help lead in policy-formulation in areas such as the design of public health services, the criminal justice system, and policies related to working conditions; in other areas, however – infrastructure design and project delivery, for instance – decisions are very specialised, and the most effective way of involving the public would be to offer a choice between potential outcomes. The Commission should ensure that it conducts a neutral assessment of initiatives, based on an equivalent series of assessment criteria, in making any decision over which to support or facilitate.

Finally, the Democracy Commission should be an independent body, with its operating mandate set by, and its actions accountable to, parliament, as is true of the Electoral Commission. The Commission's board should be comprised of representatives drawn from the many stakeholders in our democracy, including the public at large, parliament, political parties, the government, and civil institutions and organisations.

There are a range of institutions that exist in other countries that fulfil a function similar to that of our proposed Democracy Commission (as distinct from those of the Electoral Commission), and which it could be modelled upon. In France, for example, the *Commission nationale du débat public* is 'an independent, administrative authority with a mission to inform citizens and ensure their point of view is taken into account in decision-making'.[17] Elections Canada performs a similar function to the UK's Electoral Commission, but also provides in-depth research into political participation.[18] In Finland, the *Otakantaa* is a national institute designed to assist individuals and groups 'discover influence network services and participate in decision-making' relating to democratic procedures, including facilitating direct and participative democratic initiatives.[19]

15 For further examples of initiatives that the Democracy Commission could facilitate, see Wainwright H (2003) *Reclaim the State Experiments in Popular Democracy*, and Fung A and Wright OE (2003) *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Democracy*, both published by Verso Books. Both books showcase a range of democratic initiatives that have successfully increased participation, deliberation and democratic engagement.

16 http://www.nesta.org.uk/project/d-cent

17 http://www.debatpublic.fr/

18 http://www.elections.ca/home.aspx

19 https://www.otakantaa.fi/fi-FI

In terms of funding, the Electoral Commission experienced a real-terms cut in its funding of 30 per cent over the course of the previous parliament, with its total running costs standing at just over £22 million in 2014/15 (Electoral Commission 2014b). The exact size of the Democracy Commission's budget should be settled upon over time. However, an equivalent budget of £22 million for 2016/17 could be financed, for example, by reducing the current tax exemption for historic cars, which was worth £80 million in 2014/15.[20] There should, however, remain scope to revise the Commission's budget depending on how it beds in, and what the fulfilment of its mandate proves to require.

It is clear is that modern technologies – particularly the internet and digital networked technologies – combined with an increasingly pluralistic and heterogeneous political and social culture, together have the capacity to level unnecessary political hierarchies and build a more inclusive, participatory and responsive democracy. However, there is no guarantee that they will do so. Public policy should therefore, through a newly established Democracy Commission, explicitly support the growth and renewal of forms of democratic power and relationships in society and, in so doing, help reverse entrenched political inequality.

20 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/389539/20141231_expenditure_reliefs_v0.3.pdf

8. CONCLUSION

The story of our democracy's evolution is one of yesterday's impossible becoming today's ordinary. When the Chartist movement summoned a sea of people to Kennington Green on 10 April, 1848 to assert the political rights of ordinary people, the propertied classes and their representatives in parliament rejected their demands as utopian. Yet over the decades that followed, the struggle of countless unknown people – EP Thompson's condescended-to cropper, hand-loom weaver, and artisan – cracked open the door to suffrage.

Many years later, when the Suffragettes fought for the principle of universal suffrage, they were denounced as dangerous radicals. Today, while gender inequality has not yet been overcome, few question the principle of 'one person, one vote'.

More recently, struggles for political equality have been fought, and continue to be fought, to ensure that regardless of their characteristics – ethnicity, disability or sexuality, for example – all are given full and equal consideration as equal democratic citizens.

In other words, the way we organise our democracy can change, and in that changing, what once seemed impossible – through struggle, and over time – becomes normal. Our democracy is not immutable but malleable, and capable of being reformed for the better. If we are serious about reversing political inequality then we must channel that spirit, so evident in historical struggles for a better democracy, today. We must act on the belief that our democracy is not set in aspic – that its institutions, technologies and culture can be remade, that political inequality can be addressed and the democratic process strengthened.

This, we have argued, requires us to radically update the infrastructure of our democracy, particularly how we vote and what influence that vote has, while supporting the growth of democratic forms of power and relationships in society. The path to such democratic renewal will be hard. However, unless we overcome political inequality by transforming the technologies and institutions of our democracy to ensure that all voices are heard and have influence, then the long revolution will have stalled irreversibly.

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APPENDIX

PARTISANSHIP, DEPRIVATION, SPENDING CUTS AND ELECTORAL TURNOUT: FULL REGRESSION RESULTS

Table A.1

The impact of partisanship and deprivation on the Local Government Finance Settlement 2011–13

Independent variable	Model 1	Model 2
Coalition party (Con/LD) control of local authority in 2010	1.03** (.34)	-.51 (.38)
Index of Multiple Deprivation (2010)		-.16*** (.02)
Constant	-11.00 (.27)	-6.98 (.60)
N	*318*	*318*
Adjusted R^2	*.02*	*.16*

Sources: DCLG 2011a, 2011b and 2011c, BBC News 2010
Note: * = p<0.05; ** = p<0.01; ***= p<0.001
These models are the results of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression results; dependent variable: estimated (projected) change in revenue spending power 2011–13. Cell entries are coefficients (standard errors).

Table A.2

The impact of local government spending cuts on turnout at local elections

Independent variable	Model 1
Reduction in revenue spending power 2011/12–2012/13	-.18* (.09)
London and metropolitan	.47 (.57)
Unitaries	.73 (.91)
Constant	-2.78 (1.08)
N	*155*
Adjusted R^2	*.01*

Sources: DCLG 2011a, 2011b and 2011c, Rallings and Thrasher 2006 and 2014, London Datastore data: http://data.london.gov.uk/
Note: * = p<0.05
These models are the results of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression results; dependent variable: change in local election turnout, 2006–14. Cell entries are coefficients (standard errors).