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## How Might Reform of the Political System Appeal to Discontented Citizens?

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In Britain, levels of political trust have declined, stimulating policy makers to explore ways of appealing to discontented citizens. One such initiative involves reform of the political system. Yet this raises the question of which types of political reform are likely to appeal to discontented citizens. Existing studies have examined how individuals respond to political reforms, yet these studies only consider a limited range of institutional changes. Scholars and policy makers thus know little about the popular appeal of a wider set of institutional reforms. Taking advantage of proposals for political reform in Britain, this article considers public reactions to a wide range of institutional changes. Using data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey, we find that direct democratic reforms are not the only changes that appeal to discontented citizens. Instead, policy-makers may also appeal to the distrustful via reforms that allow voters more control over their political representatives.

**Keywords:** Institutional reform; Political trust; Political discontent; Direct democracy.

One of the most striking features of contemporary British politics is the apparent decline in the public's regard for politicians and political institutions. Numerous surveys have pointed to the lower levels of political trust among citizens today compared with three or four decades ago (Phillips and Simpson, 2015; Jennings et al, 2016; Stoker, 2017: 35-41). Low levels of political trust are deemed to have significant effects, including the stimulation of popular support for 'outsider' or 'protest' parties such as the UK Independence Party (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 187-200; Jennings et al, 2016). Not surprisingly given these effects, mainstream politicians and commentators are searching for ways to appeal to disaffected citizens in the hope of boosting levels of trust. One such trust-building initiative involves reform of the political system. Since 1997, Britain's political architecture has undergone fundamental reform, often with the goal of improving the way citizens view, and engage with, the political system (King, 2009: ch4). In one of the most recent manifestations of this development, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government that came to office in 2010 suggested that Britain's political system was "broken" and required "fundamental political reform" to put it on a more healthy footing (HM Government, 2010: 26).

The question implicitly raised by the Coalition pledge is whether political reform is likely to engage discontented citizens, and if so whether certain types of reform are likely to be more successful than others? That levels of political trust among British citizens have continued to decline even after the panoply of constitutional changes introduced by successive governments since 1997 (Curtice and Seyd, 2012) suggests either that institutional reform by itself may be an ineffective way of engaging citizens (Bowler and Donovan, 2013), or that only certain types of institutional reform – going beyond those already introduced in Britain – are likely to engage them. This article is designed to explore the second of these theses. Rather than exploring whether existing institutional changes have re-connected citizens with their political rulers, we seek to identify whether different types of institutional change have the potential to appeal to distrustful citizens, and if so which among these types hold an especially strong appeal.

It is noteworthy that the 'Programme for Government' signed by the Coalition parties in 2010 proposed a variety of political reforms, some of which fell within the standard 'representative' model, but many of which anticipated a very different form of politics. Falling within the representative category were proposals to change the voting system for national elections via a referendum, and to replace the appointed House of Lords with a predominantly elected second chamber. New and powerful political offices were also proposed at the local level, in the form of mayors and police commissioners, who would be directly elected and thus accountable to local people. Yet some of the Coalition's proposed reforms anticipated a form of politics going well beyond the traditional representative relationship between citizens and politicians. Into this category fell proposals allowing citizens to initiate referendums at the local level and giving voters greater control over party representatives, through provisions for the recall of MPs and for open primaries to select parties' election candidates. The proposed political reforms thus extended well beyond minor tweaks to the existing representative model. Instead, they encompassed extending the electoral principle to new offices (in the form of mayors and police commissioners), giving voters greater say in policy decisions (via referendums), and allowing voters greater rights to select party candidates (through open primaries) and to sanction existing MPs (through legislator recall).

We should note straightaway that most of these proposals were not introduced; of the reforms just identified, the only ones to be implemented were the proposals for directly elected mayors and police commissioners and, to a limited degree, for the recall of MPs. Given this, we are unable to explore the effects of actually implementing different types of political reform. Nonetheless, we can explore what appeal these reforms have for citizens, and in particular for citizens who distrust the existing political system.

To date, the empirical literature provides only limited evidence about how citizens evaluate different types of political reform. This is not surprising, since only rarely do politicians propose radical changes to the operation of national political systems. Yet as a result of the far-reaching changes proposed in Britain in 2010, along with their public discussion and evaluation, we are better placed to evaluate how citizens view a range of reforms to the political system. This provides us with an important insight into whether, if citizens are to be re-engaged with the political system, policy makers might need to consider very different ways of conducting politics, for example by giving citizens more extensive decision-making rights over policy issues and political personnel. Alternatively, however, we might find people responding positively to reforms that grant them greater electoral control over public officials. If this is the case, effective political reform might not need to extend as far as the 'direct democratic' model, but might instead focus on extending the electoral principle to local and national level political offices.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we review what existing studies tell us about the relationship between institutional design and citizens' political support, and identify how our analysis contributes to scholarly understanding in this area. The second section describes our analytical approach, and introduces the data on which the analysis rests. The third section considers the structure of people's attitudes towards different institutional reforms; in doing so, it explores whether people appraise different types of reform in similar or distinct ways, and thus whether particular groupings of institutional reform exist in the public mind. The fourth section explores the relationship between support for different types of reform and levels of trust in the existing political system. We find that, although discontented citizens are generally not attracted to political reforms that maintain representative arrangements, they do favour some changes within the basic representative model. Moreover, distrustful citizens seem just as attracted to institutional changes that give them a stronger role in the selection and rejection of political representatives as they do to reforms that give them a direct say over policy decisions.

Although our analysis focuses on Britain, many other advanced democracies also face declining levels of public trust in the political system and have introduced, or are considering, similar types of reform to those proposed in Britain. The implications of our results may thus have a reach beyond Britain, in particular in countries where political reform is being considered as a way of re-engaging discontented citizens.

### **Political support and institutional design**

Within the existing literature on the relationship between citizens' political support and the design of political institutions, two approaches are adopted. The first considers the

relationship at the aggregate level, exploring whether levels of political support are systematically higher or lower in differently configured political systems. These studies have focused in particular on the effects of (i) differently designed electoral systems and (ii) the provision of direct democracy. When it comes to electoral systems, studies suggest that political support tends to be higher among citizens in countries operating a proportional electoral model than among citizens in countries operating a majoritarian model (Lijphart, 1999; Berrgren et al, 2004; Farrell and McAllister, 2006; Karp and Banducci, 2008; Listhaug et al, 2009; Christensen, 2015), although there are some exceptions to this finding (eg. Norris, 1999; Aarts and Thomassen, 2008).<sup>1</sup> When it comes to direct democratic institutions, studies suggest that levels of political support are higher where there is more extensive provision for, and use of, direct democracy (Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Persson et al, 2013; Bauer and Fatke, 2014).

While such cross-unit studies are helpful in identifying the potential effects of different institutional forms,<sup>2</sup> they tell us little about the relationship between institutional design and political support at the individual level.<sup>3</sup> Such individual-level evaluations have been pursued primarily through single country analyses. A few of these studies have examined how far public support for reforming representative arrangements covaries with levels of political trust. Analyses of public attitudes to changing the electoral rules have sometimes shown no clear link with feelings of political support (Wenzel et al, 2000; Curtice and Seyd, 2011), although once reform is introduced it appears to be favoured by those with high levels of political support (Karp and Bowler, 2001). Rather more studies have focused on the link between political support and direct democratic institutions. These analyses largely corroborate the results of the cross-national studies, showing that people with low levels of political trust and democratic satisfaction are particularly supportive of direct democracy in the form of referendums (Donovan and Karp, 2006; Bowler et al, 2007; Parry and Donovan, 2008; Curtice and Seyd, 2012; Webb, 2013; Allen and Birch, 2015; Schuck and de Vreese, 2015).

However, while these individual-level studies deepen our understanding of how citizens evaluate political reforms, they only cover a limited set of institutional changes. Granted, recent studies have examined citizens' attitudes towards a wider range of decision-making arrangements, including forms of 'stealth' democracy, in which institutional arrangements allocate a central policy role to unelected experts.<sup>4</sup> These studies find that citizens discontented with the existing political system tend to respond negatively to institutions that entrench the position of elected representatives, and more favourably to reforms that transfer decision-making authority to unelected experts, or instead to citizens themselves (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Webb, 2013; Coffé and Michels, 2014; Font et al, 2015). Even these studies, however, limit the range of institutions considered to representative, direct democratic and stealth varieties, and do not consider other ways in which political systems might be reformed.

Hence, the evidence about how citizens respond to different ways of reforming the political system is not as extensive as it could be, insofar as existing studies focus on a limited range of reform options. This is understandable, since it is difficult to ask citizens for their views on political reforms that exist only at a hypothetical or abstract level. Since citizens are generally found to lack information about how the political system operates (Delli Carpini

and Keeter, 1996: 69-73), any attempts to measure attitudes to hypothetical institutional changes would risk uncovering mere 'non-attitudes' (Converse, 1964; Schumann and Presser, 1980). Yet this leaves open the question of how citizens are likely to respond to the kind of institutional reforms proposed in Britain. This is an issue not only for domestic policy makers, but also for those in other countries where similar reforms have been introduced. Governments in many advanced democracies have, in recent years, introduced a variety of reforms to core political structures, often in the hope of appealing to discontented citizens (Cain, Dalton and Scarrow, 2003; Bedock, Mair and Wilson, 2012; Renwick, 2012; Farrell, 2014). For example, various countries in western Europe and beyond have extended the use of directly elected local mayors (Scarrow, 2003; Magret and Bertrana, 2007; Steyvers et al, 2008; Bedock, Mair and Wilson, 2012) and increased the involvement of citizens in the selection of party candidates and leaders (Hazan and Rahat, 2010: ch3; Sandri and Seddone, 2015) and in the recall of legislators (Beramendi et al, 2008: ch5; Qvortrup, 2011; Kelly et al, 2014). Given the political changes proposed in Britain, and the changes already introduced in other countries, we need a clearer understanding of how citizens evaluate these different reforms.

Based on the empirical studies already reviewed, and the wider conceptual and descriptive literature on institutional design, we derive various hypotheses about the likely association between citizens' faith in the existing political system and their support for institutional reform. We assume in general that citizens who are discontented with the existing political system are more likely to favour its reform than people who are contented. Far more interesting, though, is which types of reform are favoured. We anticipate that reforms that merely alter the terms of the representative model – such as changing the electoral system – will hold only a limited appeal for discontented citizens.

*Hypothesis 1:* There is no substantial positive relationship between citizens' political distrust and their support for electoral reform.

Notwithstanding this hypothesis, granting citizens greater control over public officials – through direct election of members of the House of Lords and of local mayors and police commissioners – is likely to be more popular among the discontented. In particular, the direct election of single-person executive positions like elected mayors is believed to encourage a focus on candidates' personal qualities and appeals, rather than on party images and labels (Scarrow, 2003; Curtice et al, 2008). Since political parties appear to conjure up negative impressions among citizens (Dalton and Weldon, 2005), institutional reforms that promote personalised, as opposed to party-based, representation might be expected to attract distrustful citizens in particular.

*Hypothesis 2:* There is a positive relationship between citizens' political distrust and their support for the direct election of existing or new office-holders.

When it comes to citizen voice in policy decisions, a clear finding from the empirical literature is that discontented citizens favour instruments of direct democracy such as referendums. We anticipate a similar result among our sample. However, we also anticipate that discontented citizens who distrust politicians elected under existing institutional rules will respond particularly favourably to reforms that give them greater control over party

representatives, either in the form of open party primaries or the recall of poorly performing legislators.<sup>5</sup>

*Hypothesis 3:* There is a positive relationship between citizens' political distrust and their support for the use of referendums, and also for reforms that give citizens greater control over party candidates and legislators.

While the focus of our analysis is on the impact of political (dis)trust on support for institutional reform, we recognise that trust is not the only factor likely to shape how citizens evaluate changes to the political system. Other factors that may shape such support include citizens' broader values, their cognitive capacities and their status as electoral 'winners' or 'losers'. We explain below what effect these factors are likely to have, and how we incorporate them into our modelling.

## Data

We analyse evaluations of different types of political reform by drawing on a module of questions specifically designed to tap people's attitudes towards the range of reforms proposed by the Coalition government, and fielded on the 2011 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. The BSA survey interviewed face to face a randomly generated sample of British adults, with fieldwork taking place between June and October 2011. Overall, 3,311 respondents were interviewed by the survey, representing a response rate of 54 per cent. Among this group, 2,215 respondents were asked a version of the face-to-face questionnaire that included the module of questions on institutional reform; some additional questions were also fielded on a separate, self-completion, part of the questionnaire (answered by 2,845 people).

To gauge people's feelings about reforms falling within the 'representative' model, we draw on survey measures tapping attitudes towards changing the electoral system, whether respondents voted in favour of changing the electoral system in the referendum on the Alternative Vote (AV) in 2011<sup>6</sup>, support for an elected House of Lords over an appointed second chamber, and support for the House of Lords to comprise unelected experts rather than party politicians (all question wordings can be found in Appendix 1). To measure support for directly elected local offices, we draw on questions that assess attitudes towards mayors and police commissioners. To measure attitudes towards reforms that open up political parties to citizens, we draw on survey questions asking which group should be responsible for selecting parties' election candidates – party members, party supporters or all local voters –and whether local voters should also be able to 'recall' their MP if he or she breaks the rules or simply performs poorly. Finally, to gauge attitudes towards reforms within the 'direct democratic' model, we draw on a number of questions tapping support for the use of referendums at both the national and the local levels, on such issues as the electoral system, the powers of the European Union, local taxation and the death penalty.<sup>7</sup>

As previously noted, attempts to gauge public reactions to different types of political reform are usually stymied by the hypothetical nature of most of these reforms; citizens will struggle to assess institutional changes that have not been introduced or at least extensively discussed and evaluated through public debate. Although by the time of the 2011 survey

some of the reforms proposed by the Coalition Government were still at the planning stage, all had either been the subject of public debate or, in some cases (such as elected mayors), had already been introduced on a smaller scale by a previous government. This gave us confidence that our participants would have at least some knowledge of the reforms they were being asked about. Support for this assumption came from a pre-survey pilot exercise that tested participants' understanding of the survey questions; this exercise revealed few problems, with interviewers reporting little evidence of respondent incomprehension of the survey questions.<sup>8</sup>

We have reported elsewhere on the overall popularity of the institutional reforms proposed by the Coalition [citation removed to preserve anonymity]; the marginal distributions are also reported in Appendix 1 of this paper. To summarise these results, there is divided public support for 'representative' reforms, with widespread opposition to reform of the electoral system, yet more public support for moving to an elected House of Lords. Support for directly elected mayors and police commissioners varies, while reforms that give citizens greater control over elected representatives and greater say in policy decisions are generally popular, with only the option of fully open primaries for selecting party candidates attracting modest levels of public approval.

### **How do citizens evaluate political reforms?**

Before examining the relationship between political trust and institutional reform, we consider the way in which citizens evaluate the proposed reforms. This issue is important since it sheds light on whether citizens evaluate different types of reforms in similar ways – suggesting that the reforms are seen to share common purposes or outcomes – or in distinctive ways – suggesting that the nature and effects of the reforms are seen in more individual or discrete terms.

Previous analyses of British citizens have found some overlap in the way people evaluate similar types of institutional reform, such as changes to the electoral system (Curtice and Jowell, 1998; Fletcher, 2007). Citizens in other West European democracies have also been found to evaluate similar types of political institution in consistent ways (Font et al, 2015). We therefore have some expectation that attitudes to individual reforms will show some similarities, and not be entirely discrete. However, although we have identified some broad distinctions between different types of political reform – notably between 'representative' and 'direct democratic' changes – we do not anticipate these conceptual distinctions mapping exactly onto citizens' own evaluations. Thus, instead of imposing a hypothesised dimensionality on our data, we instead pursue a more inductive approach by identifying the dimensions that emerge from the way citizens evaluate the different reforms.

We do so using Mokken scaling, a technique that allows for the identification of latent dimensions that underlie answers to individual survey items (van Schuur, 2003; 2011). These latent dimensions, observed in the clustering of survey items, represent a picture of people's attitudes under which each cluster of items comprises reforms that are regarded in a similar fashion by respondents. Mokken scaling therefore has a similar purpose to factor analysis, yet is a more suitable technique when, as here, the form of the data to be analysed is ordinal rather than interval (van der Eijk and Rose, 2015). The reliability of these scales is evaluated



using rho, a measure similar to Cronbach's alpha (for a discussion, see van Schuur, 2003: 152). In common with other measures of reliability, rho is strongly related to the number of items analysed, and as such scales with few items will have lower reliability, *ceteris paribus*. However, this feature does not undermine the interpretation of the scales as being internally consistent measures of a single concept (Sijtsma, 2009: 114-6).

We present the results from the Mokken scale analysis in Table 1.<sup>9</sup> The coefficients represent the underlying connection between the responses to the individual survey measures and the rest of the scale as a whole, and are therefore analogous to factor loadings. It is generally accepted that values above 0.3 represent substantively important relationships between the questions at the latent level (van Schuur, 2003: 149). The clearest evidence of consistency in the way people evaluate institutional reforms arises in relation to the use of referendums. Here, although the survey asked about the use of referendums at both the national and local levels, and in relation to a variety of policy issues, our analysis suggests that citizens' preferences follow a broadly similar pattern irrespective of the character of the referendum. Yet our analysis also shows that views on the use of referendums do not reflect the same underlying attitude that exists towards other ways of involving the public in decision-making, notably via the selection of party candidates or the recall of legislators. Nor do these two types of reform themselves attract consistent public evaluations; hence attitudes towards the use of open party primaries do not fit within scale 5, which defines evaluations towards the use of MP recall. Our analysis thus suggests there is no singular variant of 'people power' in the public mind, but rather different varieties.

The figures in Table 1 also show that attitudes to electoral reform are fairly consistent; but that views on this topic are largely unconnected to attitudes towards establishing an elected House of Lords. Unlike certain constitutional reform lobby groups, then, the public appears to lack a consistent perspective on the virtues of what are sometimes presented as a set of pluralistic or consensual political reforms. Public attitudes are also broadly consistent when it comes to elected local mayors, and to elected police commissioners. However, as indicated by the separate scales underlying the relevant measures, there is little consistency in people's evaluations across the two types of reform.

#### TABLE 1 HERE

Overall, the pattern of evaluations suggests that most citizens do not adopt consistent attitudes towards the very different types of political reform proposed in Britain. True, people are largely consistent in their responses to questions about specific reforms, but those who support one particular reform do not necessarily support other, similar, proposals. At least when it comes to the changes considered here, our sample of citizens showed little inclination to evaluate political reform in generic ways. Instead, evaluations are specific to the particular institutional reform that respondents are asked about.

In seeking to identify the structure underlying mass attitudes, the assumption is that any observed patterns reflect the character of people's evaluations, and not the way that attitudes are measured. However, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that our results are driven at least in part by measurement effects. We recognise that some of our survey indicators tap attitudes towards the principle of an institution ("Who do you think should

have a say in deciding who stands as a party's candidate?"), while other measures tap evaluations of the institution's operation ("Do you agree or disagree that having an elected mayor makes it easier to get things done?") (see Appendix 1). However, as we have seen, we find little relationship between attitudes towards reforms that were asked about in similar ways (eg. between mayors and police commissioners), while we still find consistency in attitudes towards particular reforms even when our measures are worded in opposite (ie. positive and negative) directions. This suggests that the structure to public attitudes we have identified is not mainly an artefact of measurement, but reflects genuine distinctions in people's minds.

### **The appeal of different types of institutional reform**

Having established how citizens evaluate different types of institutional reform, we now turn to examine the factors that shape those evaluations. Our principal objective is to establish, among individuals, the relationship between support for various institutional reforms and levels of political trust, and thus to identify which types of political reform hold a particular appeal for people discontented with the existing political system. However, in exploring popular support for political reform, we recognise that discontent is unlikely to be the only motivating factor. Various other individual-level features are likely to shape evaluations of political reform, of which we focus on three whose role has been highlighted in previous studies: cognitive awareness, ideology and governing status. Each of these features may independently affect people's views on political reform; they may also mediate the relationship of primary interest here, between political trust and institutional reform.

Cognitive engagement theories suggest that higher levels of cognitive capacity are associated with demands for direct participation in decision-making, reflecting a greater ability to engage with the political process as well as a heightened desire for such engagement (Inglehart, 1997: 307-15; Dalton, 2014: chs. 3-4). While some empirical studies have upheld the link between cognitive capacity and participatory demands (Dalton et al, 2001; Donovan and Karp, 2006; Bowler et al, 2007), others have found that support for direct democracy is greater among people with low levels of cognitive awareness and political knowledge (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Anderson and Goodyear-Grant, 2010; Collingwood, 2012; Allen and Birch, 2015). Even so, while the direction of its effect may vary, cognitive awareness does seem to shape attitudes to political reform, particularly to institutions providing for direct citizen participation.

Attitudes to political reform are also likely to be shaped by people's ideological values. In particular, we might anticipate citizens holding authoritarian values to react more favourably than their libertarian counterparts to institutional arrangements that enhance the authority of rulers by centralising political power. In the British context at least, this means that citizens holding authoritarian values should prefer the majoritarian *status quo* over reform of these arrangements. By contrast, people holding libertarian values might be expected to favour reform of these rules, particularly where these increase the representation of minorities (via electoral reform, for example) and extend the opportunities for individuals to participate in decision making. Alongside authoritarian and libertarian values, support for institutional reform might also be shaped by ideology. Opening up political systems to citizen voice is often supposed one way of challenging the established

political and economic order, and is thus often associated with the political left (Von Schoultz, 2015). Empirical studies have corroborated this claim, showing higher rates of support for direct democracy among people holding left-wing values than among people holding right-wing values (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009). On the other hand, people holding right-wing values might, relative to their left-wing counterparts, favour restricting the scope of the state, and thus be inclined to support reforms that grant voters greater control over their elected representatives, via legislator recall.

Support for reforming the political system is also likely to vary according to the policies of the parties that people identify with, and according to whether those parties sit inside or outside government. The latter claim is based on the notion that people whose party has 'won' an election are less likely to favour reform of the rules that enabled this victory than people whose party has 'lost', who are likely to favour alternative processes through which to make their voices heard (Bowler and Donovan, 2007). At the time of our survey, the incumbent governing parties were the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, in coalition. While the policy of the Conservative party is generally to maintain traditional forms of political authority, the Liberal Democrats generally seek to reform political authority. Hence, only for the Conservative party do governing status and party ideology coincide. We therefore refrain from categorising citizens as either electoral 'winners' or 'losers', and instead identify the individual party supported by our survey respondents, based on a question tapping party identification.<sup>10</sup> Our expectation is that support for institutional reform will be lower among Conservative party supporters than among supporters of the other parties.

The nature of our dependent variables – evaluations of various institutional reforms – follows the structure of people's attitudes established in the previous section (Table 1). Since we found consistent attitudes towards the use of referendums, we aggregate the responses to the seven individual items into a single scale tapping support for giving citizens a more direct role in policy-making. We also form scales to tap evaluations of elected mayors (three items), elected police commissioners, electoral reform and the recall of MPs (each two items). Since, in addition, we wish to analyse attitudes towards an elected House of Lords and open party primaries, and evaluations of these reforms did not fit into one of the broader attitudinal dimensions in Table 1, we also use the single-item measures we have for these two reforms.<sup>11</sup>

Our models include the following independent variables. Of central concern for us is an indicator tapping levels of political trust. This is measured via a set of survey questions on how much trust respondents have in the British parliament, politicians and governments. Testing with a Mokken scale analysis (see above) showed that the responses to these three questions are strongly related to each other and form a single scale which is also highly reliable ( $H=0.82$ ,  $\rho=0.90$ ), confirming prior research which points to a single dimension underpinning levels of trust in different political institutions (Hooghe, 2011; Rose, 2014: ch2). We aggregate the responses to the three trust measures into a single scale, ordered so that higher values equate to higher distrust. We gauge cognitive awareness through a measure of people's educational attainment, distinguishing between people educated to below university degree level and people educated to degree level and above. To gauge authoritarian values, we draw on a set of four indicators designed to tap attitudes towards

individual liberty versus respect for authority (Evans and Heath, 1995).<sup>12</sup> These indicators are added together to form a single, reliable, scale ( $H=0.48$ ,  $\rho=0.74$ ). We gauge left-right ideology through a set of five indicators designed to tap attitudes towards economic equality (Evans and Heath, 1995).<sup>13</sup> These indicators are again added together to form a single, reliable, scale ( $H=0.51$ ,  $\rho=0.82$ ).

Our models also control for demographic attributes found in previous empirical studies (eg. Webb, 2013) to be associated with attitudes to democratic processes, namely age, gender and social class (for the sake of clarity, the results from these variables are omitted from the table below). Our models employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. While this method has proven to be effective even where the dependent variable is not measured on an interval-level scale (Hellevik, 2009), we also ran the same models using an ordinal logistic function. As expected, these results were substantively similar to those obtained from OLS; nonetheless, because the results of OLS regressions are more directly meaningful and easier to interpret (Hellevik, 2009), we report the OLS models here. We recoded our dependent variables to a consistent 0-1 scale (with higher values indicating support for reform); the coefficients for the independent variables are thus comparable across different types of institutional reform.

The results of our models are shown in Table 2 (descriptive statistics for all the variables in the model are presented in Appendix 2). In line with hypothesis 3, we find the use of referendums to attract significantly greater favour among those with a low regard for the political system than among those with a high regard (as indicated by the positive and statistically significant coefficient for the 'distrust' term). But this is not the only set of institutional arrangements to attract the support of discontented citizens. People who distrust politicians are also more favourable to reforms that allow them to select party representatives (via open primaries) and to sanction errant legislators (via legislator recall). Thus, the politically discontented are drawn not only to reforms that replace representative arrangements with a form of direct democracy; they also welcome reforms that give them a greater say in how the representative system operates, again in line with our third hypothesis.

On the other hand, less radical changes appear for the most part to have little appeal for the distrustful in particular. This is certainly true of changing the electoral system, which supports our first hypothesis. Yet when it comes to reforms that introduce personalised elected offices, our results stand contrary to hypothesis 2. Here, our results show that distrust is either unrelated to support for political reform (in the case of elected police commissioners) or even negatively related to support for reform (in the case of directly elected mayors). However, some reforms to the representative model do hold a particular appeal for the distrustful, notably when it comes to extending the electoral principle to the House of Lords, where the distrustful are more supportive than their trusting counterparts. What these results suggest is that people who are already distrustful of politicians embrace reforms that allow them to take more policy decisions for themselves, along with reforms that increase their control over existing office-holders, whether via elections or via internal party mechanisms. What they are less specifically engaged by, or indeed actively reject, are reforms that establish new tiers of office-holder, even when many of these new positions are,

as in the case of mayors and police commissioners, based on individuals rather than party-dominated groups.

#### TABLE 2 HERE

The results also show that distrust is not the only factor associated with support for institutional change. People holding authoritarian values oppose institutional reforms that disperse political power (through a more proportional electoral system), and favour reforms that either concentrate power (in the hands of an elected police commissioner) or redistribute power from political elites to citizens (via referendums, legislator recall and open primaries). The latter finding contradicts our supposition that authoritarians would be less likely than libertarians to favour reforms that grant citizens greater influence in the political process. It may well be, however, that authoritarians regard reforms that concentrate political authority in a single individual and reforms that grant more extensive decision-making rights to citizens themselves in a similar fashion, because both reforms avoid the deliberative role of party representatives. People holding right-wing values also oppose reforms that disperse political power (through electoral reform or moving to an elected House of Lords) although, as anticipated, they are also wary of granting citizens a direct say in policy decisions via referendums. However, right-wing values do not appear to be associated with support for institutional changes that potentially constrain state activism, for example through legislator recall; in fact, the coefficient here is negative, although not statistically significant.

When it comes to cognitive awareness, there is little apparent impact on support for the use of referendums; our results here fail to confirm either of the competing relationships identified in previous studies between education and support for direct democracy. Where cognitive awareness does seem to matter is, first, in increasing support for reform of the electoral system (Curtice and Jowell, 1998) and, second, in reducing support for opening up the selection of party candidates to ordinary citizens. Cognitively aware citizens are not significantly less supportive of direct democracy, but they do appear more favourable towards maintaining the existing role of members and supporters within political parties. Net of these various factors, partisanship mostly has little impact on support for institutional change. The one exception is changing the electoral system, where Conservative supporters hold distinctly more negative views towards reform than supporters of other parties.

### **Conclusion**

Policy makers in Britain and many other advanced democracies are currently confronted with rising levels of citizen discontent and distrust.<sup>14</sup> For these actors, reform of the political system presents a potential response to this malaise. Our results therefore provide a starting point for considering the utility of a diverse set of institutional reforms, likely to be of use for policy makers in Britain and further afield.

Based on those results, we suggest that policy makers concerned to appeal to discontented citizens may need to embrace some fairly radical options. Institutional reforms that simply alter the nature of the representative relationship between citizens and their rulers do not appear, for the most part, to appeal specifically to the politically disaffected. Indeed, such

reforms might even be counterproductive if they involve creating new sets of political offices. Anti-politician sentiment is widespread among British citizens, and reforms based on creating yet more elected officials – even in the name of boosting democratic accountability – seem to have at best a limited positive appeal and at worst a substantially negative appeal.

Of greater attraction to the disaffected are proposals that place more powers directly in citizens' hands. This might involve delegating policy authority to citizens, via the use of referendums. But equally appealing to sceptical citizens are reforms to representative processes that give voters greater authority over elected officials. Hence, the introduction of more direct democracy need not be the only type of political reform capable of attracting discontented citizens; reforms that introduce greater citizen voice into the representative process may hold similar potential. Either way, however, what does appear to be required is for political elites to be willing to give voters a greater direct say, whether over policy decisions or over the selection and control of elected representatives.

We do not wish to over-extend our claims about the potential effects of institutional reform on citizen engagement. For a start, any reforms designed to engage citizens must be both popular across the population as a whole and of particular appeal to people who distrust the existing political system. As we have shown, many of the reforms proposed in Britain fail to meet these twin conditions. In addition, levels of political support may depend less on the particular institutional regime in place than on the outcomes to which these institutions give rise (Thomassen, 2014), or indeed to a wider set of factors that are largely unrelated to the design of a country's institutional architecture (Bowler and Donovan, 2013: ch8). Yet if political reform is to contribute to the goal of citizen engagement, and particularly if it is to engage the distrustful, we suggest that these reforms need to go beyond changing the electoral rules or creating additional tiers of elected officials. Instead, a more radical set of reforms may be needed, giving voters a greater say, not only in how policy decisions are taken, but also in how political representatives are elected and ejected.

Since 2010, however, British governments appear to have lost their appetite for radical reform of the political system. The Conservative party dropped its own proposal for open party primaries (Alexandre-Collier, 2016), watered down the terms on which MPs could be recalled<sup>15</sup> and indicated in its 2015 election manifesto that an elected House of Lords was no longer a priority. Moreover, following the Brexit referendum in 2016, it is difficult to foresee governments of any party readily resorting to referendums to resolve important policy issues. Yet by ignoring such radical reforms to the political system, British governments might be depriving themselves of one potential way of re-engaging discontented citizens.

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**Table 1: Mokken analysis, showing relationship of items within clusters**

	Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Not part of wider scale
Mayors make it easier to get things done	0.58					
Mayors give too much power to one person*	0.41					
Mayors mean there is someone to speak up for the area	0.52					
Referendum needed before councils set large tax rises		0.33				
Referendums on issues of local concern		0.32				
Referendum to decide on death penalty		0.39				
Referendum to decide on electoral system		0.31				
Referendum to decide on giving more power to EU		0.37				
Referendum on moving to elected local mayors		0.43				
Referendum on level of local taxes		0.48				
Police commissioners would ensure a focus on crime			0.52			
Police commissioners would politicise the police*			0.52			
Favour changing the electoral system				0.61		
Supported AV voting system at the referendum				0.61		
Favour allowing voters to force resignation of rule-breaking MPs					0.46	
Favour allowing voters to force resignation of poorly performing MPs					0.46	
Favour the Lords being elected not appointed						-
Lords to consist of independent experts, not party politicians						-
Who should select party election candidates						-
rho	0.70	0.73	0.65	0.73	0.55	
n	2077	1268	2089	1082	2159	

Figures represent  $H_i$  coefficients.

\* Coding for this item is reversed.

Note that each of these scales also meets the assumption of monotone homogeneity when using the cut-off of crit values greater than 80.

**Table 2: Models of support for different types of institutional reform**

	Electoral reform	Elected House of Lords	Elected mayors	Elected police commissioners	MP recall	Open primaries	Referendums
Distrust	0.02 (.02)	0.04 (.01)**	-0.04 (.01)**	0.01 (.01)	0.05 (.01)**	0.05 (.02)**	0.05 (.01)**
Cognitive awareness (0=<degree, 1=≥degree)	0.09 (.03)**	-0.03 (.02)	0.01 (.01)	-0.02 (.02)	0.01 (.01)	-0.07 (.03)*	-0.02 (.02)
Authoritarian values	-0.11 (.02)**	-0.00 (.01)	0.01 (.01)	0.04 (.01)**	0.03 (.01)**	0.08 (.02)**	0.10 (.01)**
Rightwing ideology	-0.10 (.02)**	-0.04 (.01)**	0.01 (.01)	-0.01 (.01)	-0.01 (.01)	-0.03 (.02)	-0.04 (.01)**
Party identification (Conservative)							
Labour	0.09 (.04)*	0.03 (.02)	0.01 (.01)	-0.01 (.02)	-0.00 (.01)	0.02 (.03)	-0.01 (.02)
Liberal Democrat	0.27 (.05)**	0.07 (.03)*	0.02 (.02)	-0.03 (.03)	0.00 (.02)	-0.06 (.04)	-0.00 (.03)
Green/Other party	0.20 (.05)**	0.04 (.03)	0.00 (.02)	-0.01 (.02)	-0.00 (.02)	-0.05 (.05)	0.04 (.03)
None	0.05 (.07)	0.01(.03)	0.02(.02)	-0.01 (.02)	-0.03 (.02)*	0.06 (.04)	-0.03 (.03)
F ratio	16.31	3.48	4.30	5.24	6.14	9.74	13.38
(prob > F)	(p<0.001)	(p<0.001)	(p<0.001)	(p<0.001)	(p<0.001)	(p<0.001)	(p<0.001)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.27	0.05	0.06	0.08	0.09	0.13	0.17
N (weighted)	799	1370	1434	1440	1474	1213	1354

Controls for respondents' social class, age and gender are included in models, but the results are not shown here.

Attitudes to each institutional reform are coded on a 0-1 scale, with higher values equating to greater support for reform. Don't know responses are set to missing.

\*\*p≤0.01 \*p≤0.05; two-tailed tests.

## Appendix 1: Question wordings and response distributions

### *Weights*

Data are weighted

### *Codings*

'Agree-disagree' response options are coded thus: Disagree strongly =1, Disagree = 2, Neither = 3, Agree = 4, Agree strongly =5.

All other response codings are listed below.

### *'Representative' reforms*

(Q1) Some people say we should change the voting system for general elections to the UK House of Commons to allow smaller political parties to get a fairer share of MPs. Others say that we should keep the voting system for the House of Commons as it is to produce effective government. Which view comes closer to your own?

Change the voting system for the House of Commons as it is: 66%; change it: 27% (Don't know: 7%)

(Q2) In the May 5<sup>th</sup> referendum you were asked, 'At present, the UK uses the 'first past the post' system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' system be used instead?' Did you vote:

No, against the Alternative Vote: 68%; Yes, in favour of the Alternative Vote: 29% (Don't know: 3%)

Codings for Q1-Q2: against reform = 0, favour reform = 1

(Q3) Some people say that having appointed members brings valuable expertise to the House of Lords. Other people argue that members of the House of Lords should be elected for it to be democratic. Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view?

All members of the House of Lords should be appointed: 9% (coded 1)

Most members of the House of Lords should be appointed: 7%

Roughly equal numbers should be appointed and elected: 30%

Most members of the House of Lords should be elected: 16%

All members of the House of Lords should be elected: 28% (coded 5)

Don't know: 11%

(Q4) The House of Lords should consist of independent experts, not party politicians

Disagree strongly: 1%; Disagree: 6%; Neither agree nor disagree: 28%; Agree: 39%; Agree strongly: 17% (Don't know: 9%)

### *Directly elected local officials*

Some towns and cities have a Mayor who is elected by all the people in the area and who has the power to take some decisions on behalf of the local council. From what you have seen or heard, how much do you agree or disagree that:

(Q5) ... having an elected Mayor makes it easier to get things done?

Disagree strongly: 2%; Disagree: 18%; Neither agree nor disagree: 38%; Agree: 34%; Agree strongly: 2% (Don't know: 4%)

(Q6) ... having an elected Mayor gives too much power to one person?

Disagree strongly: 1%; Disagree: 26%; Neither agree nor disagree: 35%; Agree: 31%; Agree strongly: 4% (Don't know: 4%)

(Q7) ... having an elected Mayor means there is always someone who can speak up for the whole area?

Disagree strongly: 1%; Disagree: 14%; Neither agree nor disagree: 23%; Agree: 55%; Agree strongly: 3% (Don't know: 3%)

It has been suggested that every police force should be headed by a commissioner who is elected by all the people in the area and who would be responsible for setting priorities for how the area is policed. Please say how much you agree or disagree that having locally elected police commissioners would ...

(Q8) ... ensure the police concentrated on tackling those crimes that most concern ordinary people?

Disagree strongly: 3%; Disagree: 13%; Neither agree nor disagree: 15%; Agree: 54%; Agree strongly: 11% (Don't know: 3%)

(Q9) ... result in too much political interference in the way the police do their job?

Disagree strongly: 1%; Disagree: 29%; Neither agree nor disagree: 28%; Agree: 33%; Agree strongly: 5% (Don't know: 4%)

### *Party representative reforms*

It has been suggested that sometimes voters should be able to force their local MP to resign and fight a by-election.

(Q10) First of all, say that the MP has broken the rules. How much do you agree or disagree that in those circumstances voters should be able to force their MP to resign?

Disagree strongly: 0%; Disagree: 3%; Neither agree nor disagree: 7%; Agree: 53%; Agree strongly: 35% (Don't know: 2%)

(Q11) And what if the MP had not broken any rules, but voters thought he or she was not doing a very good job? Should voters be able to force their MP to resign?

Disagree strongly: 1%; Disagree: 22%; Neither agree nor disagree: 17%; Agree: 47%; Agree strongly: 11% (Don't know: 2%)

(Q12) Before each general election, each of the political parties has to choose someone as their candidate to be the local MP. Who do you think should have a say in deciding who stands as a party's candidate? Should it be:

Only those who are paid-up members of the party locally: 23% (coded 0)

All those locally who usually vote for the party: 28% (coded 0.5)

Everyone in the constituency, whether they usually vote for the party or not: 29% (coded 1)  
(Can't choose: 20%)

*'Direct democracy' reforms*

Here are some decisions that could be made either by the MPs we elect to Parliament or by everyone having a say in a special vote or referendum. Who do you think should make the decision about:

(Q13) ... whether or not Britain should reintroduce the death penalty for some crimes?  
Elected MPs in Parliament: 22%; Everyone in a referendum: 61% (Can't choose/not answered: 18%)

(Q14) ... the system used to elect MPs to the House of Commons  
Elected MPs in Parliament: 16%; Everyone in a referendum: 69% (Can't choose/not answered: 15%)

(Q15) ... giving more powers to the European Union  
Elected MPs in Parliament: 19%; Everyone in a referendum: 67% (Can't choose/not answered: 14%)

(Q16)... whether or not a town or city should have a directly elected mayor  
Elected MPs in Parliament: 10%; Everyone in a referendum: 76%; (Can't choose/not answered: 14%)

(Q17) Decisions about the level of the council tax in your area could be made either by your elected local council or by everyone locally having a say in a special vote or referendum. Should the decision about council tax be made:  
By your elected local council: 52%; By everyone in a referendum: 43% (Don't know: 5%)

Codings for Q13-Q17: elected MPs/council = 0, everyone = 1

(Q18) A council that wants to increase the council tax by more than inflation should have to get a majority vote in favour through a local referendum  
Disagree strongly: 3%; Disagree: 11%; Neither agree nor disagree: 13%; Agree: 42%; Agree strongly: 24% (Can't choose/not answered: 6%)

(Q19) People should be able to insist that their local council holds a special vote or referendum on any issue about which there is a lot of local concern  
Disagree strongly: 2%; Disagree: 9%; Neither agree nor disagree: 16%; Agree: 48%; Agree strongly: 19% (Can't choose/not answered: 6%)

To ensure consistent variable codings for Q18-Q19 and Q13-Q17, the response categories for Q18-Q19 were recoded into: disagree strongly/disagree/neither = 0, agree/agree strongly = 1



**Appendix 2: Coding and descriptive statistics for variables in Table 2.**

	Min	Max	Mean	SD	N
<b>Dependent variables</b>					
<i>Support for electoral reform</i>					
Scale of responses to questions 1 and 2 (see Appendix 1). Scale runs 0 (against change to the electoral system and voted against AV), 0.5 (either support change to electoral system or voted for AV) and 1 (support change to electoral system and voted for AV).	0	1	0.27	0.40	1082
<i>Support for elected House of Lords</i>					
Question 3 (0=favour appointed membership to 1=favour elected membership)	0	1	0.63	0.32	1925
<i>Support for elected mayors</i>					
Scale of responses to questions 5, 6 (coding reversed) and 7. Scale runs 0 (disagree mayors having beneficial effects) to 1 (agree mayors having beneficial effects)	0	1	0.54	0.17	2077
<i>Support for elected police commissioners</i>					
Scale of responses to questions 8 and 9 (coding reversed). Scale runs 0 (disagree commissioners having beneficial effects) to 1 (agree commissioners having beneficial effects)	0	1	0.55	0.20	2089
<i>Support for politician recall</i>					
Scale of responses to questions 10 and 11. Scale runs from 0 (reject recall) to 1 (support recall).	0	1	0.71	0.17	2159
<i>Support for open primaries</i>					
Question 12 (0=choice made by party members, 0.5=local voters, 1=all constituents)	0	1	0.54	0.40	1523
<i>Support for direct democracy</i>					
Scale of responses to seven questions: Q13 to Q19. Scale runs 0 (prefer representatives to take decisions) to 1 (prefer citizens to take decisions).	0	1	0.75	0.27	1687
<b>Explanatory variables</b>					
<i>Feelings about existing political system</i>					
Measured through scale of responses to questions on trust in parliament, politicians and governments in Britain. Scale runs from 1 (high trust) to 5 (low trust).	1	5	3.53	0.83	2164
<i>Cognitive awareness</i>					
Measured through question on educational qualifications (0= <university level, 1= ≥university level)	0	1	0.32	0.47	3002
<i>Authoritarian values</i>					
Measured through scale of responses to four statements (1=libertarian, 5=authoritarian)	1	5	3.94	0.72	2793
<i>Ideological values</i>					
Measured through scale of responses to five statements (1=left values, 5=right values)	1	5	2.58	0.74	2758

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, other analyses have found levels of political support to be highest where electoral systems are either very proportional or very disproportional (Marien, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Although whether variations in institutional design are themselves responsible for variations in political support among citizens is debatable; there is always the suspicion that unobserved variation between units influences observed variation in political support.

<sup>3</sup> Some comparative analyses use a multi-level approach, to explore the effects on trust of both system-level and individual-level factors; for example, Van der Meer (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Other studies have examined citizens' evaluations of different democratic principles and practices (Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016). In this article, our focus is on citizens' reactions to specific institutions rather than to more general democratic principles and practices.

<sup>5</sup> The popular appeal of these sets of reform has not been extensively studied. Among the very limited evidence base, one study that does provide clues as to likely public responses concerns legislative term limits, support for which was found to be concentrated among citizens discontented with the existing political system (Karp, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The AV referendum took place across the United Kingdom in May 2011, with 32 per cent voting for AV and 68 per cent opting to retain the existing single member plurality system.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the Coalition Agreement in 2010 contained no promise to hold a referendum on the death penalty, although we would nonetheless expect voters to be familiar with the issues raised by such a referendum.

<sup>8</sup> This conclusion is further supported by the modest proportions who answered 'don't know' to the survey questions (listed in Appendix 1). On questions with an explicit 'don't know' response option, the maximum proportion of respondents selecting this option was 11 per cent.

<sup>9</sup> Because Mokken scaling requires the use of listwise deletion of cases with missing values, which sharply reduces the number of cases available for analysis, we conducted the analysis in two steps. First, we ran a general clustering analysis on all nineteen of the indicators of support for the institutional reforms (see Appendix 1) to determine which dimensions defined attitudes to each of these reforms, using the standard cut-off of 0.3 for assessing substantively important connections ( $n=616$ ; analysis not shown here). Second, and having determined the identity of these dimensions, we assessed the fit of each survey item with its relevant dimension (shown in Table 1). The results obtained are substantively similar to those obtained by factor analysis of all pairwise complete observations, although as expected given that we analyse ordinal data the factor analysis results have a tendency to over-dimensionalise (see van der Eijk and Rose, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> There was no question on the BSA for recalled vote choice.

<sup>11</sup> Distributions on each of these measures are set out in Appendix 2. Confirming the results obtained from the Mokken scale analysis, the inter-relationships between the measures are modest. Only attitudes towards the use of referendums and voter recall of MPs (correlation of 0.28,  $p<0.01$ ) and towards referendums and the use of open party primaries (0.29,  $p<0.01$ ) achieve even a modest association in people's minds. Otherwise, inter-relationships between attitudes to the various types of political reform are low.

<sup>12</sup> The indicators were: "Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values", "People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences", "For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence", and "Schools should teach children to obey authority". Responses were recorded on a 1-5 agree-disagree scale. Two additional items often found (Evans and Heath, 1995) to load onto the liberty-authority scale ("The law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong" and "Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards") were found not to load strongly onto the scale, and were thus dropped.

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<sup>13</sup> The indicators were: “Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off”, “Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers”, “Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth”, “There is one law for the rich and one for the poor” and “Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance”. Responses were recorded on a 1-5 agree-disagree scale.

<sup>14</sup> Although increasing distrust is by no means a feature in all advanced democracies; see Norris (2011): chapter 4.

<sup>15</sup> The *Recall of MPs Act 2015* lodged the power to trigger a recall petition with parliament (in the office of the House of Commons Speaker) rather than with local voters.