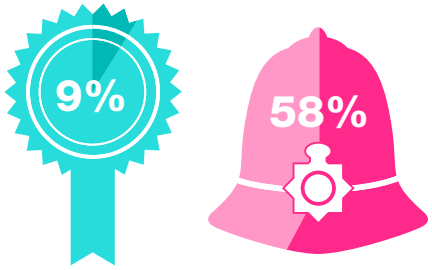
Constitutional reform

Constitutional reform: a recipe for restoring faith in our democracy?

The first coalition since the Second World War is itself an innovation at Westminster. But it also came to power committed to an ambitious programme of constitutional reform – including fixed-term parliaments, directly elected mayors and local police commissioners, and the wider use of referendums. Could any of these changes reverse the long-term decline in public trust in government?

Attitudes to politicians

Despite some increase in levels of trust since the MPs' expenses scandal, people express considerable scepticism about politicians and government. Meanwhile, the proportion who would prefer Britain to be governed by a coalition rather than a single party has fallen to the lowest level ever recorded.



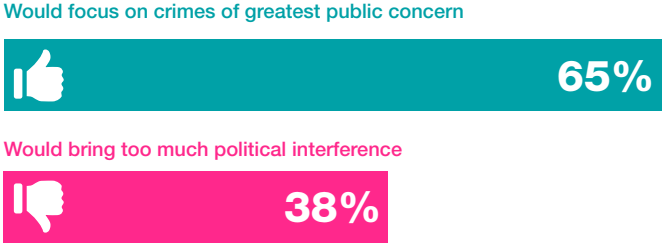
Fewer than one in ten (9%) **trust British politicians** "a great deal" or "quite a lot", compared with 58% who say they trust the police.

The proportion **favouring a coalition** has fallen from 40% in 2010 to 28% in 2011, while support for single-party government has risen from 48% to 63%.

Popular reforms

Most people, including those with least trust in politicians and governments, favour the wider use of referendums on a range of issues and ballots on 'recalling' MPs guilty of wrongdoing. They are more ambivalent about new forms of representative democracy, including elected mayors and local police commissioners.

88% support the Coalition's proposal that voters should have the right to force MPs who have "broken the rules" to resign and fight a by-election. However, as many as 58% would like to go further and be able to **recall an MP** who is "not doing a very good job".



65% think **elected police commissioners** would ensure the police focus on crimes that are of greatest public concern. However, 38% think that police commissioners would bring about too much political interference, while only 29% disagree.

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Introduction

The last Labour government came to power in 1997 acutely concerned about an apparently widespread lack of regard for and trust in politics and politicians. Tony Blair had argued in opposition that "so low is popular esteem for politicians and the system we operate that there is now little authority for us to use unless and until we first succeed in regaining it" (Blair, 1996). The Party's 1997 manifesto promised to "rebuild this bond of trust between government and the people" (Labour Party, 1997). Central to fulfilling Labour's ambition was a wide-ranging programme of constitutional reform. Voters in some parts of the country – notably Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London – were given control over new, devolved tiers of government. The representation of hereditary peers in the Lords was curtailed. In addition, however, there was also a striking emphasis on transparency and regulation (Curtice, 2011). Government was made more open and transparent by introducing new freedom of information rules, while political funding was exposed to greater public scrutiny and regulated more tightly. Transparency was seen as an antidote both to the perception and the occurrence of political misbehaviour.

Yet after 12 years in power, Labour – along with other political parties – was caught in a wide-ranging scandal over MPs' expenses. Many a politician was accused of having sought to maximise their ability to benefit from the financial support that MPs could claim for running two homes. A few were eventually found guilty of false accounting. Labour's hopes of restoring trust and confidence were dealt a body blow through revelations that, ironically, came to light through the passage of its own freedom of information legislation.

Unsurprisingly, the scandal generated renewed interest in ways of rekindling citizens' trust in their elected representatives. In 2010 history repeated itself and a new administration, a coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, came to power committed to restoring the public's trust in government through constitutional reforms. The Conservatives' election manifesto talked of citizens being "detached from the political process, devoid of trust in the political classes, and disillusioned with our system of government" and promised to "restore trust in our political system" (Conservative Party, 2010: 65, ix). Their partners in government, the Liberal Democrats, described the political system as "rotten" (Liberal Democrat Party, 2010: 87), while the Party's leader, Nick Clegg, called for a wholesale "revamp" of the political system (Clegg, 2009), declaring that his aim was to persuade people "to put your faith in politics once again" (Clegg, 2010).

However, the new government's proposed reform programme had a somewhat different character from that of its predecessor. Although, like Labour, the Coalition contemplated changing the system of representative, party-based politics, its proposals, which included a referendum on the Commons voting system and a wholly or partly elected House of Lords, focused more on politics at Westminster than on the governance of the devolved territories. At the local level radical changes to the nature of the electoral process were envisaged with the promotion and extension of 'presidential' style local political offices, in the form of directly elected mayors and police commissioners, whose elections were expected to be about personality as much as party politics. Most strikingly, however, the government proposed to depart from the norms of representative democracy by giving voters a direct say in certain decisions. A variety of referendums were to be held at both national and local level, while voters were to be given the ability to 'recall' their MP. Instead of simply opening up politics to public scrutiny as Labour had done, it was now to be subjected as well to the discipline of greater public involvement.

But in so far as it is implemented, is the Coalition's proposed approach to reform any more likely to succeed in restoring public trust? For that to have any prospect of happening, we suggest that two important conditions would need to be satisfied. Firstly, the reforms should be popular with the public at large. Secondly, the changes would need to have particular appeal for those whose trust in the existing system was particularly low.

Existing research offers reason to be hopeful on the second count at least. Those with low levels of trust have been found to be particularly keen on the idea of direct democracy (Bromley et al., 2001; Dalton et al., 2001; Bowler et al., 2007). It has been argued, too, that levels of trust and confidence tend to be higher in states in the US where electors can insist that policy propositions are put to a popular vote (Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Smith and Tolbert, 2004; though see also Dyck, 2009; Dyck and Lascher, 2009). So perhaps the coalition government's reform programme really is better suited than that of its predecessor to the task of addressing public scepticism (see also Bogdanor, 2009).

This chapter uses data collected by the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey to consider whether this is, indeed, the case. We begin by looking at levels of trust in the political system and assess whether the Coalition is correct in its assessment that they are all very low. Thereafter we consider how popular the government's proposed reforms are among the public in general, bearing in mind that the formation of a coalition government was itself an innovation for the post-war period. Finally, we examine the appeal the reforms have for those who have the lowest levels of trust in the current political system in particular.

How sceptical are people in Britain?

Politicians are often accused of misrepresenting reality in order to sell their policy wares. Yet their perceptions of a lack of trust in the political system can hardly be viewed as a distortion of the way British citizens think about their government. Since 1986, the British Social Attitudes survey has regularly asked:

> *How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?*

Levels of trust have improved a little since the MPs' expenses scandal

As shown in Table 3.1, the responses reveal a sharp decline over time in levels of trust. The proportion saying they trust governments "just about always" or "most of the time" fell from 40 per cent in 1986 to just 16 per cent in 2009, following the MPs' expenses scandal. Over the same period, the proportion saying they "almost never" trust government rose from 12 per cent to 40 per cent. The decline has not been straightforwardly linear. In particular, trust is consistently higher just after an election, perhaps because casting a ballot gives voters the feeling they do have some influence over their politicians. Even so, the degree of trust recorded in 2010 was much lower than after the 1987 election. Meanwhile, levels of trust have actually improved a little since the nadir in 2009 and are much the same now as in 2006. It appears that despite the furore it evoked at the time, the MPs' expenses scandal has not contributed to any significant, further long-term erosion of trust. Even so, it is evident that Labour did not achieve its aspiration to reverse the decline in trust that had become marked during John Major's 1992–97 administration. If anything levels of trust fell away even more during its time in office.

Table 3.1 Levels of political trust, 1986–2011

	86	87 (1)	87+ (2)	91	94	96	97 (1)	97+ (2)	98
Trust British governments of any party	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/most of the time	40	37	47	33	24	22	26	33	28
Only some of the time	48	46	43	50	53	53	48	52	52
Almost never	12	11	9	14	21	23	23	12	17
Weighted base	*1548*	*1375*	*3413*	*1422*	*1140*	*1171*	*1355*	*2906*	*2067*
Unweighted base	*1548*	*1410*	*3414*	*1445*	*1137*	*1180*	*1355*	*4214**	*2071*

	00	01	02	03	05	06	07	09	10	11
Trust British governments of any party	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Just about always/most of the time	16	28	26	18	26	19	29	16	20	22
Only some of the time	58	50	47	49	47	46	45	42	45	45
Almost never	24	20	24	31	26	34	23	40	33	31
Weighted base	*2293*	*1108*	*2285*	*3305*	*3161*	*1077*	*993*	*1141*	*1083*	*2198*
Unweighted base	*2293*	*1099*	*2287*	*3299*	*3167*	*1077*	*992*	*1143*	*1081*	*2215*

+*Source: British Election Study*

Readings that are shaded were taken shortly after an election had been held; (1) = just before general election, (2) = just after general election

**The unweighted base is much higher than the weighted base because in this year the British Election Study oversampled people from an ethnic minority and people living in Scotland*

However, previous studies have shown that people's expressed levels of trust are sensitive to the way survey questions on the subject are worded and the particular aspects of trust that respondents are asked to evaluate (e.g. Citrin and Muste, 1999). We can check whether the picture of low levels of trust we derive from our regular question on the subject is, in fact, a valid one, by examining responses to a new set of questions asked for the first time in 2011. These questions asked respondents how much trust they had in the Westminster parliament, British politicians, British governments and – as a non-political point of reference – the police.

As seen in Table 3.2, the results confirm the picture painted by the original measure. Only around one in six people trust either British governments or the Westminster parliament "a great deal" or "quite a lot", while less than one in ten trust British politicians. By contrast, almost six in ten (59 per cent) indicate "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in the police.[1] Equally, whereas 57 per cent do not trust politicians "very much" or "at all", just 11 per cent say the same of the police.

Table 3.2 Trust in political institutions and the police

	British governments in general	Parliament at Westminster	British politicians in general	The police
	%	%	%	%
A great deal	1	1	1	10
Quite a lot	16	14	8	48
Some	39	36	33	29
Not very much	33	35	42	9
Not at all	10	12	15	2
Weighted base	*2198*	*2198*	*2198*	*2198*
Unweighted base	*2215*	*2215*	*2215*	*2215*

We have, thus, found solid evidence of public scepticism towards politicians and governments. Levels of trust have fallen over the past 25 years and, despite some recovery since the MPs' expenses scandal, remain at a relatively low ebb. So how likely is it that the Coalition's constitutional reforms will succeed in reversing this trend?

Views on the government's reforms

As previously noted, the constitutional reforms originally agreed by the Coalition can be divided into three types. Firstly, there are reforms that represent changes to the party-based representative model of democracy at Westminster. These include reform of the Commons electoral system, changes to the composition of the House of Lords and a move to fixed parliamentary terms. Secondly, there are reforms that represent a bigger challenge to a party-based model of representative democracy, since they potentially weaken the role of political parties. These include efforts to increase the number of directly elected mayors, the introduction of directly elected police and crime commissioners throughout England and Wales, and changes to the way political parties choose their election candidates. Thirdly, there is a cluster of reform proposals that represent potentially the biggest challenge of all to representative democracy, by providing for direct citizen involvement in decision-making. These include the wider use of referendums and granting voters the power to 'recall' errant MPs.

Parliamentary democracy

As we have already noted, the formation of a coalition after the 2010 election itself represented something of a constitutional innovation. This would, thus, seem a good place to start our examination of attitudes towards the government's proposed reforms of the system of parliamentary democracy at Westminster. During the course of the last 30 years British Social Attitudes has regularly asked respondents whether they prefer single party or coalition government:

> ***Which do you think would generally be better for Britain nowadays …***
>
> ***… to have a government at Westminster formed by one political party on its own,***
>
> ***or, to have a government at Westminster formed by two political parties together – in coalition?***

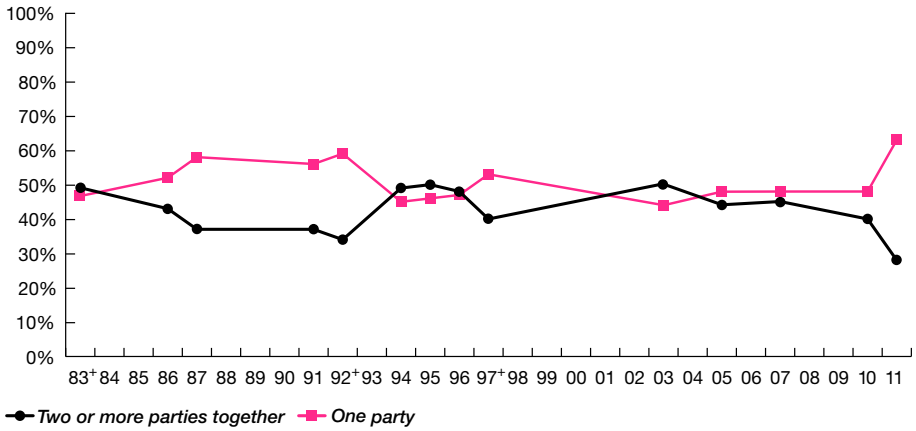
28%

prefer coalition to single party government, lower than ever before

Figure 3.1 shows that on most occasions since 1983 single party government has proved to be the more popular. Initially the formation of the Coalition did little to disturb this picture; in 2010 just under half (48 per cent) said they preferred single party government, while two-fifths (40 per cent) favoured a coalition. Early experience of the reality of a governing coalition appeared neither to have won hearts and minds for the idea nor generated a strong adverse reaction.

This, though, is no longer the case. The proportion preferring a coalition has fallen away to just 28 per cent and is now lower than ever before. It might be thought this change is simply the consequence of an adverse partisan reaction among opposition Labour Party supporters. Indeed, those who identify with Labour are now particularly opposed to coalitions, by a margin of 71 per cent to 23 per cent. Moreover, support for single party government among this group is now 10 percentage points higher than a year ago. However, this increase is almost matched by an eight point rise (from 53 per cent to 61 per cent) among Conservative identifiers and even a six point increase (from 32 per cent to 38 per cent) among Liberal Democrat identifiers. Disenchantment with the idea of coalition has evidently spread well beyond the ranks of opposition supporters.

Figure 3.1 Attitudes to single party versus coalition government, 1983–2011[2]



The full data on which Figure 3.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
+Source: British Election Study

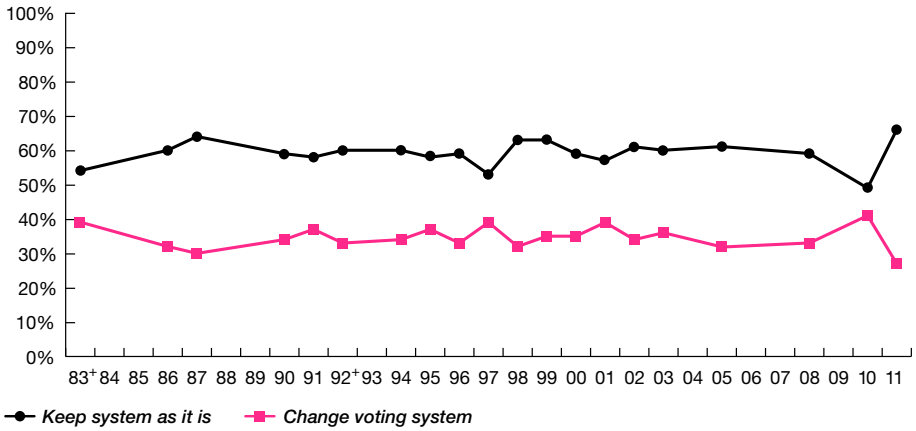
A key issue in the negotiations that led to the formation of the Coalition was how elections to the House of Commons should be conducted in future. The Liberal Democrats preferred proportional representation, while the Conservatives wished to keep 'first-past-the-post'. In the event, the two parties bridged the gap between them by promising a referendum on a relatively minimal reform, the Alternative Vote. Although the Alternative Vote is far from being a proportional system, one argument put forward by opponents is that its introduction would make 'hung' parliaments – and thus coalition administrations – a more likely (and undesirable) outcome of elections. Given the resounding 'no' vote (68 per cent) when the referendum was held in May 2011, perhaps this argument resonated particularly strongly with the public, thereby accounting for the decline in support for coalitions?

The referendum certainly coincided with a sharp decline in support for electoral reform. For more than a quarter of a century British Social Attitudes has regularly asked the following question:

> ***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 ...***
>
> ***... that we should change the voting system for the House of Commons,***
>
> ***or, keep it as it is?***

Unlike some differently worded questions (Curtice et al., 2007), this question has typically found no more than between a third and two-fifths in favour of change (see Figure 3.2). However, in the immediate wake of the indeterminate outcome produced by the 2010 election, support passed the 40 per cent mark on this measure for the first time. But then between 2010 and 2011 it slumped to an all time low of just 27 per cent.

Figure 3.2 Attitudes to electoral reform, 1983–2011[2]



The full data on which Figure 3.2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
+Source: British Election Study

Support for coalitions has dropped since 2010

It is, however, less clear that the historically low level of support for electoral reform is directly linked to the fall in support for coalition government. For example, in 2010 only 49 per cent of those in favour of electoral reform also said they preferred coalition government, a figure not markedly higher than the 38 per cent level of support for coalitions among those who preferred to keep the existing voting system. On these figures any decline in support for electoral reform would have only a minimal impact on support for coalition government. What in practice has happened is that support for coalitions has dropped since 2010 among both those in favour of electoral reform (down to 41 per cent) and those who are opposed (to 23 per cent). Evidently, many people have changed their mind about the merits of coalition government irrespective of their views on the merits of electoral reform. All in all, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the current administration at Westminster has come to be regarded as a poor advertisement for coalition government irrespective of its particular partisan composition or the debate about the merits of electoral reform.

While the outcome of the referendum has ensured that the electoral system used in elections to the House of Commons will not be changed for the foreseeable future, the coalition government has made a significant change to the timing of general elections. In future, they will take place at fixed, five-yearly intervals, rather than at the Prime Minister's discretion. This move is strongly backed by the British public. We asked:

> *Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view ...*
>
> *... General elections should be held on a fixed date every four or five years,*
>
> *or, the Prime Minister should be able to hold a general election whenever he or she decides?*

More than four times as many people prefer fixed legislative terms (79 per cent) to flexible ones (16 per cent). However, this is to overstate the popularity of the government's particular reform. For when asked how often elections should be held, only 28 per cent back the five-year parliamentary terms adopted by the Coalition. No less than 43 per cent feel that elections should occur every four years, while 28 per cent say that three-year terms are long enough. There is evidently considerable scepticism about allowing politicians the luxury of long periods in office without having to face the electorate.

The Coalition's reform programme originally extended to the House of Lords, settling on proposals, since withdrawn, for replacing its almost wholly appointed membership with a largely but not wholly elected second chamber (Cabinet Office, 2011; UK Parliament, 2012). We sought to ascertain where the public stood on this debate by asking respondents what balance of elected and appointed members should sit in the Upper House:

> ***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 comes closest to your view?***
>
> ***All** members of the House of Lords should be **appointed***
>
> ***Most** members of the House of Lords should be **appointed***
>
> *Roughly **equal** numbers should be **appointed and elected***
>
> ***Most** members of the House of Lords should be **elected***
>
> ***All** members of the House of Lords should be **elected***

The principle of an elected chamber is widely supported, although not necessarily to the exclusion of some appointed members. More than one in four (27 per cent) believe that all members of the Lords should be elected, while another 16 per cent would like to see most members elected. By contrast, just 16 per cent favour the appointment of most or all members of the Lords, although a further 29 per cent would prefer equal numbers of elected and appointed members. Thus, while there is relatively little support for a wholly appointed house, as exists at present, there is no public consensus about what the alternative should be.

55%

agree the House of Lords should consist of independent experts, not party politicians

One argument put forward for retaining at least some appointed members in the Lords is that it would help ensure the House retained the professional expertise required to scrutinise legislation effectively. There appears to be widespread public sympathy for this argument. As many as 55 per cent support the proposition that "the House of Lords should consist of independent experts, not party politicians", while only seven per cent disagree. However, the public does not necessarily regard this as an argument in favour of an appointed House. Rather, those who favour a chamber composed of independent experts are actually more likely (34 per cent) to support a wholly elected Lords than are those who disagree (24 per cent). Perhaps there is some scepticism that appointment would enhance the inclusion of experts rather than party politicians in the Upper House.

In summary, none of the reforms advanced by the Coalition for changing the practice of representative government at Westminster appears to strike a resounding chord with the public. The principle of fixed-term parliaments is widely supported, but people would prefer that elections were held every four, rather than five, years. The principle of electing members to the House of Lords is widely endorsed, but there is no consensus about how far the principle should apply. Meanwhile, following the defeat of proposals for Alternative Vote elections to the House of Commons, public support for electoral reform has never been lower. Even the idea of political parties governing in coalition has never had so few friends. All in all it seems unlikely that the Coalition's Westminster reforms can contribute much to restoring public trust and confidence in the political system.

'Presidential' reforms at local level

Another striking feature of the Coalition's various constitutional initiatives has been an enthusiasm to invest executive authority at local level in a single directly elected individual. The first steps towards the introduction of such 'presidential-style' offices were taken by the previous Labour government, which introduced a directly elected mayor for a new London-wide authority, while inviting local authorities and their electorates in other areas of England and Wales to initiate a referendum on creating such a post in their area. However, of 37 local referendums on adopting elected mayors held while Labour was in office, just 12 produced a majority in favour. Moreover, voters in one of these localities – Stoke-on-Trent – subsequently chose to abolish their mayor (Hope and Wanduragala, 2010). Nevertheless, the model was revived by the coalition government, which decided that referendums should be held on introducing the system in 12 of the largest English cities. More controversially, the government legislated to create the new office of elected police and crime commissioner. Each of the 41 police authorities in England and Wales outside London (where the position is held by the directly elected mayor) is to be headed by a police commissioner, who will set the strategic direction for local policing while being accountable to local citizens through the ballot box.

The concept of directly elected mayors receives a mixed response from the public

For their supporters, one of the virtues of directly elected mayors and police commissioners is that they open the way for politically independent figures to win elected office. Indeed, in 30 mayoral elections held up to and including May 2012, 11 were won by a figure not aligned at the time to a political party.[3] However, the concept of directly elected mayors receives a mixed response from the public across Britain as a whole. The idea that mayors can act as advocates for their locality secures widespread assent. Six in ten (58 per cent) agree that directly elected mayors mean "there is someone who can speak up for the whole area", while only 15 per cent disagree. However, faced with a commonly-heard criticism that having a mayor "gives too much power to one person", more people agree (35 per cent) than disagree (27 per cent). Many people, too, remain unconvinced that an elected mayor "makes it easier to get things done". While those who agree (37 per cent) outnumber those who disagree (21 per cent), another 38 per cent say they neither agree nor disagree.[4] All in all, perhaps it should not have come as too much of a surprise that when, in May 2012, referendums on introducing a directly elected mayor were held at the Coalition's behest in 10 of the largest English cities, only one – Bristol – voted in favour.[5]

The public exhibits a similar lack of clear or consistent support for the idea of directly elected police and crime commissioners. Our questions, fielded for the first time in the latest survey, ran as follows:

> *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 ...*
>
> *... ensure the police concentrated on tackling those crimes that most concern ordinary people?*
>
> *... result in too much political interference in the way the police do their job?*

38%

agree elected police commissioners will bring about too much political interference

There is widespread assent that elected police commissioners will ensure the police focus on crimes that are of greatest public concern. Indeed, 65 per cent agree that they will deliver this benefit, while just 17 per cent disagree. Yet one of the key doubts expressed about the new arrangements – not least by the police themselves – that they will result in undue political interference, receives an echo too. More people (38 per cent) agree that directly elected commissioners will bring about too much political interference than disagree (29 per cent), while another 28 per cent neither agree nor disagree.

There is, then, no consistent support for the Coalition's proposals to extend direct candidate-centred elections for local leaders. True, people seem to believe that elected mayors and police commissioners can provide stronger local advocacy and responsiveness. But alongside this run concerns that these elected posts might give undue political power to individuals and compromise the independence of the police service.

If undue political interference is a concern for some people, how much appetite is there for opening up political parties themselves to greater popular involvement by giving the public a greater say in whom they nominate in the first place? Before the 2010 general election, the Conservative Party held 'open' primary elections in a number of constituencies. Ordinary citizens as well as party members and officials could vote in a ballot to determine who should be the party's local parliamentary candidate. The coalition agreement between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats (Cabinet Office, 2010) pledged to extend such primaries to 200 constituencies in advance of the next general election, although the commitment has yet to be implemented. To assess support for this idea we asked:

> ***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,***
>
> ***all those locally who usually vote for the party,***
>
> ***or, everyone in the constituency, whether they usually vote for the party or not?***

The idea of giving citizens some say in the selection of party candidates is popular in principle but, as we saw with elections to the House of Lords, there is no consensus on how far it should extend. While 30 per cent think all voters should be able to take part in such primaries, another 28 per cent want participation limited to those who usually vote for the party. Meanwhile, 23 per cent are happy to leave the decision to party members, while a further 19 per cent could not decide between these options.

Direct democracy

Thus, as in the case of reform of party-based representative government at Westminster, measures that focus greater attention on the merits of individual candidates rather than just their parties largely receive no more than lukewarm, and certainly far from uncritical, support. But is this also true of reforms that give the public a more direct say in decision making? How, in particular, do people view the increased use of referendums and the coalition government's plans for the recall of Members of Parliament?

Since coming to power, the Coalition has both held and made provision for a variety of referendums. We have already referred to the referendum in May 2011 that rejected the Alternative Vote for elections to the House of Commons, and the referendums held in May 2012 in some English cities on whether or not to introduce directly elected mayors. In addition, voters in Wales were invited in March 2011 to decide whether or not their National Assembly should assume full legislative powers in its devolved areas of responsibility. The Coalition has, meanwhile, legislated for a referendum to be held before any further significant transfer of powers to the European Union can take place. It has also required any local council in England wishing to increase the council tax by more than a government-recommended maximum to secure the assent of its voters in a referendum. At one stage, the Coalition also proposed to enable voters in any local authority to initiate an advisory referendum vote on an issue of local concern. However, this proposal was dropped following opposition in the House of Lords, not least because of the expense of holding such ballots (Lords HC Deb 10 October 2011, cols.1406–1413).

All of the Coalition's referendum proposals are popular

All these referendum proposals are popular. For example, 67 per cent agree that "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", while just 13 per cent disagree.[6] People appear equally keen on being able to initiate a local referendum on issues where there is "a lot of local concern"; two-thirds (67 per cent) are in favour while only 16 per cent object. Again, 67 per cent say voters rather than MPs should decide in a referendum "whether or not Britain should agree to giving more powers to the European Union". Meanwhile, as many as 69 per cent reckon voters should directly determine the electoral system used in House of Commons elections, while no less than 76 per cent support holding a referendum to decide "whether or not a town or city should have a directly elected mayor".

One Coalition reform whose origins lie directly in the MPs' expenses scandal is the proposal that voters should be able to 'recall' their MP in the event of 'serious wrongdoing'. If an MP received a custodial sentence[7] or was adjudged guilty of wrongdoing in a vote of the whole House of Commons, a by-election would be called in their constituency provided that more than 10 per cent of the local electorate signed a petition demanding one. No less than 88 per cent feel voters should be able to compel an MP who has "broken the rules" to resign and fight a by-election.[8] However, public support for this approach goes well beyond what the government envisages; six out of ten people (58 per cent) feel that MPs should also be subject to recall in cases where no rules have been broken but where voters think the MP is "not doing a very good job".[9]

In contrast to the rather muted response to the coalition government's proposals for reforming representative democracy, those reforms that offer an element of direct democracy are generally favourably received. The public gives solid backing to reforms that give them the right to vote to decide certain local and national issues, as well as to require errant MPs to face the judgement of the ballot box. What, however, is less clear is whether the government's direct democracy reforms go far enough to satisfy the public mood. Most people support more powerful recall measures for MPs than the Coalition is proposing, as well as local policy referendums of a kind that the government has now dropped. We might note, too, that 61 per cent believe that any decision to reintroduce the death penalty should be decided by a referendum as well. Nevertheless, of all the constitutional reforms so far enacted or announced by the government, it seems that its direct democracy measures are the ones best placed to help restore the public's trust in politics. We still need, however, to apply the second of two key tests we identified at the start of this chapter, that is to assess whether the government's reforms appeal particularly to those who are currently most sceptical about government and politics.

Do the government's reforms appeal to the less trusting?

In Table 3.3 we compare the level of support for the various elements of the Coalition's reform programme among those with low and high levels of trust. The measure of trust we employ is a scale based on the combined answers to three questions introduced earlier on how much people trust the Westminster parliament, politicians and governments.[10] Those deemed to have 'low trust' comprise the one fifth or so with the lowest levels of trust on this scale, while those with 'high trust' are the one fifth with the highest levels. The difference between the two groups in their levels of support for each reform is shown in the third column of the table; positive scores indicate that the reform in question is more popular among those with low levels of trust.

Many of the Coalition's reforms are particularly appealing to those with low levels of trust in government and politics

Many of the Coalition's reforms are particularly appealing to those with low levels of trust in government and politics. Such voters are, for example, relatively keen on an elected second chamber (albeit a fully elected one) and on allowing the public to choose a party's candidate in a primary election (so long as all voters can participate). However, in neither case does the measure command majority support among those with low levels of trust. Meanwhile, the idea of fixed-term parliaments with elections every five years appears no more popular among those with low levels of trust than those with high levels, while the pattern is actually reversed when it comes to directly elected mayors. People with low levels of trust apparently do not regard having more visible and powerful local politicians as the solution to Britain's political ills.

The one type of reform that is consistently both absolutely and relatively popular among the sceptical is that which gives citizens a direct say in decisions. This is especially true of citizen-initiated local referendums and referendums on transferring powers to the European Union. Also of particular appeal to those with low levels of trust is the proposal to allow voters to recall their MP, though this difference is more pronounced when it comes to recalling MPs who have not necessarily broken any rules but are simply seen as doing a poor job.

Table 3.3 Attitudes to constitutional reform by level of political trust

	Low trust	High trust	Difference Low trust - High trust
% saying should be decided by referendum			
Fixed-term parliaments	79	78	+2
Elections every five years‡	29	31	-2
Fully elected House of Lords	37	19	+18
% saying			
Elected mayors …			
… speak up for area	49	71	-22
… easier to get things done	28	47	-19
… power to one person*	25	38	-13
Police commissioners …			
… concentrate on crimes	71	60	+11
… political interference*	32	25	+7
Party candidates decided by everyone‡	36	21	+15
% saying should be decided by referendum			
Council tax increase‡	70	60	+10
Elected mayors‡	77	69	+8
Issues of local concern‡	76	59	+17
Electoral system‡	71	66	+5
Powers to EU‡	74	57	+17
% saying recall MPs …			
… who break the rules	93	81	+12
… who are not doing good job	71	47	+24

* *Figures show the percentage who disagree with this item*

Except for the items marked‡, the unweighted base for those with low trust is 401 and for those with high trust, 384; the weighted bases are 357 and 415 respectively

In the case of the items marked‡, the unweighted base for those with low trust is 339 and for those with high trust, 336; the weighted bases are 300 and 354

In the case of nearly all reforms distrust is positively related to support for reform

It seems that people who are already sceptical of politicians and governments are particularly receptive to constitutional changes that reallocate decision-making power away from elected representatives towards ordinary citizens. Moreover, these links are not artefacts, concealing more important relationships between the attributes of individuals and their support for constitutional change. Further statistical analysis summarised in the appendix to this chapter shows that even when we take into account a variety of other possible reasons as to why people might support or oppose constitutional reform, the patterns illustrated in the difference column of Table 3.3 are largely still evident. In only two cases – the concern that elected police commissioners will introduce political interference into policing and the introduction of fixed five-year parliamentary terms – are people's reactions largely unrelated to their existing levels of trust. Meanwhile, as we would expect from Table 3.3, there is a negative relationship between distrust and people's views on the merits or otherwise of directly elected mayors (people who are sceptical of politicians are less, not more, likely to favour elected mayors). But in the case of all other reforms, distrust is positively related to support for reform, indicating that support for constitutional change is more likely to be found among the ranks of the sceptical than among those who are more trusting of politicians. However, this relationship is particularly strong in respect of all of the various measures of direct democracy, namely, giving voters the power to recall MPs and holding referendums on both local and national issues.

Conclusions

No informed commentator would sensibly argue that an assortment of constitutional reforms is, in itself, sufficient to persuade a hitherto sceptical population that their political leaders and institutions are now worthy of their trust. But the chances that reform will assist that endeavour are likely to be greater if the particular measures both command a high degree of popular support in general and appeal, in particular, to those who are especially sceptical of politicians.

We have found that many of the coalition government's original package of reforms, not all of which are in any event being pursued, lack either one or both of these qualities. For example, in the case of elections for members of the House of Lords, local mayors and police commissioners, we discover that public support for the changes is accompanied by residual concerns about concentration of power or undue political influence. Moreover, in the case of directly elected mayors, the idea appeals most to those who are already least sceptical about politics and politicians. Yet it is also evident that some of the government's reforms pass both our tests, most notably reforms such as referendums and the recall of MPs that give voters a greater direct say in the political process.

But here our results pose an additional dilemma for policy makers. For they suggest there are further reforms that the Coalition has not pursued – such as giving voters the ability to initiate referendums and recall MPs thought to be incompetent – which attract substantial public support, particularly among the sceptical. However, politicians who have acquired power through the representative mechanisms of political parties and elections unsurprisingly are often reluctant to transfer that power back to citizens. Yet it is precisely such direct democratic reforms that particularly appeal to sceptics. If the current government, or a future administration, wishes to use institutional reform as a recipe to restore public faith in British politicians, then the mix of ingredients may need to become even more radical.

Notes

1. This picture of low trust in politicians relative to other professional actors, such as the police, is confirmed by data from other polling organisations, such as MORI's 'Trust in Professions' surveys (Ipsos-MORI, 2011).

2. Readings are indicated by data marker; the line indicates an overall pattern but where there is no data marker the line cannot be taken as a reading for that year.

3. These figures have been collated from various House of Commons Library papers supplemented by data from the New Local Government Network.

4. Nor have attitudes to elected mayors improved since their introduction in 2000. The same questions about speaking up for the area, getting things done and giving too much power to a single person were also asked on British Social Attitudes in 1998 and 2000. The proportions agreeing that mayors speak up for the area and help gets things done were no higher in 2011 than in 1998, while the proportion agreeing that mayors give too much power to a single person fell by only 10 percentage points, from 45 per cent in 1998 to 35 per cent in 2011.

5. Two other of England's largest cities, Leicester and Liverpool, had previously decided to introduce a directly elected mayor without holding a referendum. In four other referendums on directly elected mayors held since the 2010 general election, the proposal was approved in two cases (Salford and Tower Hamlets) and rejected in a third (Great Yarmouth). Doncaster voted in May 2012 to keep its elected mayor.

6. The Coalition's proposal is that a referendum should be held when a council wishes to increase the level of council tax by more than a limit specified by the government. To simplify matters, we couched this as referring to an above inflation increase. Note though that voters are not necessarily keen that decisions about the council tax should routinely be referred to them. Only 43 per cent say that decisions about the council tax should be made by voters in a referendum, while 52 per cent would prefer the decisions to be made by their elected council. It would appear that, while voters are happy to have a referendum as a potential bulwark against a particularly large increase in council tax, they are not sure they trust their fellow citizens to make decisions about the tax on a regular basis.

7. Strictly speaking this provision would apply to custodial sentences of 12 months or less, as longer sentences already result in automatic disqualification from membership of the Commons.

8. The full question wording was:

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

   Respondents were invited to answer using a five point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

9. The full question wording was:

   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?

   Again respondents were invited to answer using a five point scale.

10. The scale was created by adding the scores (ranging from 1 to 4) across the three items and dividing the resulting total by three. Multi-item measures of complex concepts like trust are usually held to be more reliable and valid than single item measures (Zeller and Carmines, 1980: 48-52; Heath and Martin, 1997). Cronbach's alpha for this particular scale is 0.90.

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Appendix

The data on which Figure 3.1 is based are shown below.

Table A.1 Attitudes to single party versus coalition government, 1983–2011

	83+	86	87	91	92+	94	95
Form of government generally better for Britain	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
One party	47	52	58	56	59	45	46
Two or more parties together	49	43	37	37	34	49	50
Weighted base	*3855*	*1548*	*1375*	*1422*	*2855*	*1140*	*1253*
Unweighted base	*3855*	*1548*	*1410*	*1445*	*3534**	*1137*	*1227*

	96	97+	03	05	07	10	11
Form of government generally better for Britain	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
One party	47	53	44	48	48	48	63
Two or more parties together	48	40	50	44	45	40	28
Weighted base	*1171*	*2906*	*1157*	*1058*	*993*	*1083*	*2198*
Unweighted base	*1180*	*4214**	*1160*	*1075*	*992*	*1081*	*2215*

+*Source: British Election Study*

**The unweighted base is much higher than the weighted base in 1992 because the British Election Study oversampled people from an ethnic minority and people living in Scotland. In 1997 the unweighted base is higher because an oversample was taken of people living in Scotland*

The data on which Figure 3.2 is based are shown below.

Table A.2 Attitudes to electoral reform, 1983–2011

	83+	86	87	90	91	92+	94	95	96	97
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	39	32	30	34	37	33	34	37	33	39
Keep system as it is	54	60	64	59	58	60	60	58	59	53
Weighted base	*3955*	*1548*	*1375*	*1353*	*1422*	*2855*	*1140*	*1253*	*1171*	*1355*
Unweighted base	*3955*	*1548*	*1410*	*1397*	*1445*	*3534**	*1137*	*1227*	*1196*	*1355*

	98	99	00	01	02	03	05	08	10	11
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	32	35	35	39	34	36	32	33	41	27
Keep system as it is	63	63	59	57	61	60	61	59	49	66
Weighted base	*1026*	*1066*	*2293*	*1108*	*2285*	*1157*	*1058*	*1153*	*1083*	*2198*
Unweighted base	*1035*	*1060*	*2293*	*1099*	*2287*	*1160*	*1075*	*1128*	*1081*	*2215*

+*Source: British Election Study*

**The unweighted base is much higher than the weighted base because in this year the British Election Study oversampled people from an ethnic minority and people living in Scotland*

Multivariate analysis

The following table summarises the results of multivariate regression modelling of attitudes towards each of the Coalition's proposed reforms. Its purpose was to identify whether or not the statistical relationship between political trust and attitudes towards particular measures of constitutional reform remains significant after taking account of other potentially relevant variables. The additional factors included in our models were a respondent's age (recognising that younger voters might be more willing to contemplate change), their level of education (those with a degree have previously been shown to take a distinctive view on constitutional reform; Curtice and Jowell, 1998), their degree of political interest (acknowledging that support for reform could be primarily a concern of those with an interest in politics) and their party identity. The table summarises the statistically significant differences in outlook identified among these additional factors and reports the coefficient for respondent's score on our political trust/distrust scale. A positive coefficient indicates that those who are more distrusting are more likely to agree with the relevant proposition.

Table A.3 Summary of results of logistic regressions of attitudes towards constitutional reform

	Age	Education	Party identification	Political interest	Political distrust
Fixed-term parliaments	18–44 support	CSE against	Con/Lab/Lib Dem identifiers support		0.15*
Elections every five years	18–54 against				ns
Fully elected House of Lords	18–24 against	Degree/ higher education/ A level/O level against	Con identifiers against	Interested people support	0.32**
Elected mayors …					
… easier to get things done	18–34 agree	A level/O level/CSE disagree			-0.28**
… speak up for area	18–34 agree				-0.42**
… power to one person†		A level disagree			0.22**
Police commissioners …					
… concentrate on crime	18–44 agree	Degree/ Higher education disagree			0.13*
… political interference†	35–44 disagree	Degree/ CSE agree			ns
Party candidates decided by everyone	18–34 agree	Degree/ A level disagree			0.28**

Table A.3 Summary of results of logistic regressions of attitudes towards constitutional reform (continued)

	Age	Education	Party identification	Political interest	Political distrust
Referendum on …					
… council tax increase	18–24 disagree	Degree disagree			0.21**
… elected mayors	45–54 disagree	CSE agree			0.40**
… issues of local concern	18–24, 35–54 disagree	Degree disagree	Other party identifiers agree		0.36**
… electoral system	55–64 agree				0.24**
… powers to EU		CSE agree			0.40**
Recall MPs …					
… who break the rules			Con identifiers agree	Interested people agree	0.56**
… who are not doing good job	35–44 agree	O level disagree			0.35**

†*This item was worded in a negative direction, and thus a group that was more likely to agree with this proposition is less supportive of reform.*

* = *significant at 95% level;* ** = *significant at 99% level; ns = not significant*

In the regressions, age, education and party identification were entered as categorical variables with those aged 65 plus, those with no qualifications and non-identifiers as the reference category. Thus in the case of these three variables the groups identified are ones that were either significantly more supportive or more opposed than those in the relevant reference group. Political interest was entered as an interval level variable and thus the table indicates the overall direction of the relationship between trust and support for the reform where it is statistically significant.

Full results of the regression models are available at:
http://bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk/read-the-report/constitutional-reform/additional-tables.aspx

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