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Opening up political parties – an uphill battle between a rock and a hard place

Opinion polls rarely paint a positive picture of politics. Politicians and Westminster are frequently bemoaned as being self-serving, elitist and unresponsive. This has led to proposals for political reform – such as those outlined in the Power Report in 2004 (and follow up in 2010) – which focus in particular on widening and deepening participation. However, our recent research questions the rationale of designing reform based on this kind of polling data.

This need for caution is particularly evident in the case of political parties. Parties as institutions are viewed very negatively. Indeed, our own survey found that whilst 47 per cent of people are dissatisfied with democracy, nearly 70 per cent are unhappy with parties. People believe parties listen to self-interested groups rather than the wider public, bicker constantly, and chase votes at the expense of longer-term thinking. As with the wider system, findings like these have led analysts to conclude that parties need reforming and there have indeed been many initiatives responding to these trends; parties have created supporters' networks, experimented with open primaries, and emphasised their democratic credentials in efforts to (re)engage the public and improve their image. The logic of these responses is that people's attitudes and participation can be improved by changes to how parties work, specifically focusing on the way citizens engage. But the assumption made here is far from secure – whilst polling data can be used to generate theories explaining behaviour, many of the frequently asked questions give little insight into what people see to be wrong and, importantly, what kind of change they desire and see to be possible.

This latter question is particularly important, as whilst it is often assumed that parties can be reformed, for many people this is not a given. Asking our survey respondents about party reform, we found that 25% called for minor change and 46% for major reform to parties, but that a quarter agreed that 'reforming parties is pointless, they can't be made to work'. For a considerable proportion of people, reform is therefore unlikely to bring about changed views and so parties face a very uphill battle.

For those who do think reform is viable there is little guidance from most survey questions about what the public want from parties, and whether changes would improve public views. To gather more data, our survey used novel question formulations (such as trade-offs), and we also conducted deliberative workshops to better understand people's views of parties. We found, as might be expected, that public opinion is something of a quagmire of contradictory expectations.

Here we'll discuss our findings on participation since it provides such a go-to suggestion in many reform agendas. When it comes to participation, the results are likely frustrating for parties – the

public in general *don't* want to get involved in political parties but many do believe there *should* be opportunities to get involved. For all the options we provided – such as being a member, supporting the party online, donating, campaigning, etc. – our survey suggested 60-74% had not done it and would not even consider it.

A counter-argument might be that people would get involved if they thought it would make any difference. Our data does show that 70% agree with the idea that when people like them get involved in parties they *should* have an impact on what the party does, whilst many were sceptical that in reality people do have any influence. So perceptions of efficacy are important, but we aren't able to demonstrate if improved perceptions of efficacy would in fact boost engagement.

And there is another issue to consider here – our data suggests that, more broadly, the general public are actually quite sceptical of party members. Of our survey respondents, 31% already think parties already listen to their members enough, and 36% think parties listen *too much* to their members. Our survey and workshop data suggest that perhaps the biggest frustration for the general public is parties being seen to ignore the wider public at the expense of self-interested groups, and this includes party members. Paradoxically then, whilst investing energy in opening up a party might be seen to be a positive step, many people probably won't take it. Indeed, it might well be that a party with an increasing activist base becomes seen as self-serving in the eyes of the general public.