

Study reveals three quarters of people are dissatisfied with political parties

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Research by the University of Sheffield has revealed more than three quarters of people are dissatisfied with political parties and has identified the seven main qualities people want to see in parties today.

Gathering data through a survey administered by YouGov and three public workshops, research led by Dr. Kate Dommett and Dr. Luke Temple asked people about their attitudes towards parties, including how people believe parties are behaving now and how they would like to see parties work.

The top words used to describe political parties by workshop participants included 'unrepresentative', 'undemocratic', 'self-interested' and 'divided'. Seventy-seven per cent of those surveyed said they were fairly or very dissatisfied with parties.

Forty-six per cent of people said parties need major reform, 26 per cent said that reforming parties is pointless and they can't be made to work, while 25 per cent said parties need minor reform and three per cent said they work well and do not need reform at all.

The report – What People Want to See in Parties Today – can be used by political parties to make changes to bring their [party](#) more in line with public desires, promote the ways they already do these things, or challenge people's ideas and offer an alternative set of benchmarks against which they feel they should be being judged.

The study found that people want:

- Transparency – they want to understand what parties do, how decisions are made and what influence they can have.
- Communication – they want honest and accountable parties that communicate with the people. They want to know when something has gone wrong and want parties to explain and take responsibility when something doesn't work out as planned.
- Reliability – they want to see parties that outline an agenda and stick to it, enacting their manifesto promises and sticking to pledges. They do not want parties that are self-interested, or that

are dogmatic and uncompromising.

- Principles – they want parties that are guided by their principles when making policies or decisions, using these ideas to filter the different voices and influences that can affect the decision made.
- Inclusivity – they want parties to include a range of different voices and ideas. Rather than just listening to members or supporters, people want parties to listen to experts, opponents and the wider public.
- Accessibility – they want a range of ways to engage with parties, but they don't want parties to entirely open up. Certain activities should continue to be the preserve of members and leaders, but for less intensive activities citizens want a wider range of people to be able to get involved.
- Integrity – they want parties to be honest, ethical and dignified. Rather than focusing on the competition of party politics and the partisan behaviour this can promote, people want parties that have moral codes and principles that underpin how they work.

Dr. Kate Dommett, from the University of Sheffield's Department of Politics, said: "As widely disliked organisations seen to be essential to contemporary democracy, parties are often under pressure to reform.

"But whilst some parties have been quick to roll out new initiatives or try new ideas, there has been less attention devoted to what it is that people actually want from parties, and where they would like to see reform.

"This report has shown that there isn't a single or simple solution, but that parties can usefully think about seven principles that the public wish parties display when they consider how to respond.

"By thinking about these principles we argue that parties can review their current processes to decide whether there is a case for reform, a need for improved communication, or a shift in the focus of existing debate."

The report considered what people think about how parties provide opportunities to participate, with 59 per cent of people saying there should be more opportunities for people to get involved in political parties.

However, in both the survey and workshops, researchers found considerable evidence that people did not see engagement to be worth the time and effort as they felt they had little impact on what parties did.

Survey data showed that while 80 per cent thought that when people like themselves get involved in [political parties](#) they should be able to make a difference, only 20 per cent thought they actually can have an impact.

The study also explored what people thought about parties' governing performance – asking them how they felt parties delivered their promises, delivered good policy outcomes, managed the day-to-day running of government and managed crises.

Dissatisfaction was high across all areas, but parties were seen to perform worst when it comes to delivering promises, with 87 per cent saying parties don't do this well. In contrast, they were seen to perform best when managing crises – with 47 per cent saying parties did this well.

Dr. Luke Temple, from the University of Sheffield's Department of Geography, said: "There was a perception that parties mislead the electorate and, once in office, could not be trusted to deliver their promises.

"They were also seen to suffer minimal consequences because, by the time of the next election most people have forgotten and therefore didn't vote them out.

"From this perspective, people desired parties that were trustworthy,

reliable and stick to their promises; feeling that these were essential characteristics given people's inability to hold parties to account between elections."

He added: "When parties did change position, people also wanted them to explain why they had changed, offering accounts of why a promise could not be delivered and what would be done instead.

"Greater transparency and accountability therefore featured prominently in participants' ideas."

A series of blog posts by politicians and think tanks responding to the report, produced in collaboration with Involve, will be published this week.

More information: For the report and additional materials, see www.involve.org.uk/

Provided by University of Sheffield

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