

Study: Voters value honesty in their politicians above all else in the UK

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As pressure mounts on the UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, members of his party are considering their options. Should they topple him or keep him? Those who want him out fear that the public will not forgive the string of alleged [social events](#) held in Downing Street while the rest of the country lived under strict COVID lockdowns. Their anger may cost the Conservatives dearly at the next election. Those who are hesitating do so because Johnson had been such an electoral success story before this scandal.

We at the UCL Constitution Unit are conducting a major study of public attitudes to democracy in the UK that sheds new light on what matters most to voters. Our [latest findings](#) from a large-scale survey of the UK population conducted last summer suggest Conservative MPs are right to be concerned about the fallout of "partygate." Integrity is extremely important to voters. It is in fact valued above all other traits in a [politician](#).

When we asked about a range of characteristics that politicians should have, "being honest" came top. This was followed by "owning up when they make mistakes." "Getting things done" and "being inspiring" were far behind.

Johnson has a trademark tactic—seen repeatedly at Prime Minister's Questions—of batting away critics by saying he is focused on delivering the people's priorities. When asked about any potentially questionable behavior or incidents, he insists that members of the public care more about "getting Brexit done" than it does about anything else.

However, our findings suggest otherwise. When we asked respondents to

"imagine that a future [prime minister](#) has to choose between acting honestly and delivering the policy that most people want," 71% chose honesty and only 16% delivery. When we asked whether respondents agreed more that "healthy democracy requires that politicians always act within the rules" or that "healthy democracy means getting things done, even if that sometimes requires politicians to break the rules," 75% chose the former and just 6% the latter.

It is worth repeating that these findings come from the summer—before the [Owen Paterson affair](#) and "partygate." They are not knee-jerk reactions to short-term headlines. The vast majority of voters expect politicians to act honestly and follow the rules.

Limiting power at the very top

Another less obvious but equally important pattern emerged from our findings. Voters do not want power to be unduly concentrated in the hands of the prime minister and their [government](#). Many favor at least somewhat greater powers for parliament—45% think MPs should decide what the House of Commons debates, against 30% who think the prime minister or government should do so.

Even more clearly, and perhaps surprisingly, most want judges to constrain ministers too. We asked respondents to "imagine there is a dispute over whether the government has the legal authority to decide a particular matter on its own or whether it needs parliament's approval," and to consider how the dispute should be settled. Most (51%) said it should be settled by judges and only 27% chose government ministers or politicians in parliament. We also asked about whether judges should play a role in resolving whether a new law violates rights. Depending on the rights that we asked about, between 65% and 77% of respondents said that the courts should have their current powers under the Human Rights Act or even be given stronger powers to strike down laws directly.

A large majority also said that civil servants should be "neutral and permanent government employees" rather than "appointed by the government of the day." And most respondents thought that someone who had previously said [the BBC](#) should be neutral in its reporting could be a suitable candidate for BBC chair, but that someone who had said the BBC should be less critical of government could not.

The reason for these answers appears clear: most people don't trust politicians, and they trust the politicians closest to power least. They therefore welcome limits on what those in power can do.

Our study is investigating public attitudes to democracy not only through surveys, but also through a citizens' assembly, which shows whether people think the same or differently once they have thought and learnt about the issues in depth. We will publish full results of the [Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK](#) in the spring. But initial findings fit the survey responses closely. Assembly members said "we feel dissatisfied with how democracy is working in the UK today because there is a lack of honesty and integrity in politics." By large majorities, they favored greater powers for parliament and the courts vis-à-vis the executive.

However the current ructions in the Conservative Party pan out in the coming weeks, those in power should be clear: people in the UK expect their leaders to act with integrity—and they expect a system of checks and balances on executive [power](#) to be maintained. A leader who violates these principles harms him or herself and damages confidence in [democracy](#).

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