

Performance and perceptions

Measuring the effectiveness of government actions is difficult. To what extent can government claim responsibility for any improvements? To what extent can one define what an improvement looks like? How does one define effectiveness?

Some studies have developed methodologies for comparing countries according to government effectiveness or efficiency. We explore some of these, in which the UK tends to rank fairly highly but behind Scandinavia, Switzerland, countries in the Far East, Middle East and North America, and some other countries in northern Europe. The UK is top of one respected health-system ranking, however – although global education rankings are not so positive.

A proxy for measuring government effectiveness could be to look at how the public perceives it. Polling by the Institute for Government suggests that the public values those politicians who are able to show how they would implement their promises and policies, but many do not think British politicians have the ability to do so. They also think politicians place party-political activities above long-term decision-making.

A number of surveys – both domestically and looking across Europe – suggest that nearly two-thirds of the British public are dissatisfied with how government does its job. However, such measures are also driven by other factors, with ‘government effectiveness’ being seen through a political prism.

About the data

The **global comparisons of government effectiveness** we use are the Bertelsmann Stiftung Sustainable Governance Indicators, the World Bank Institute’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index, and the IMD business school’s World Competitiveness Yearbook.¹

We examine two **global studies of specific policy areas**: the Commonwealth Fund’s Health System Scorecards, and the OECD’s Pisa rankings of education systems (specifically scores for maths, reading and science).²

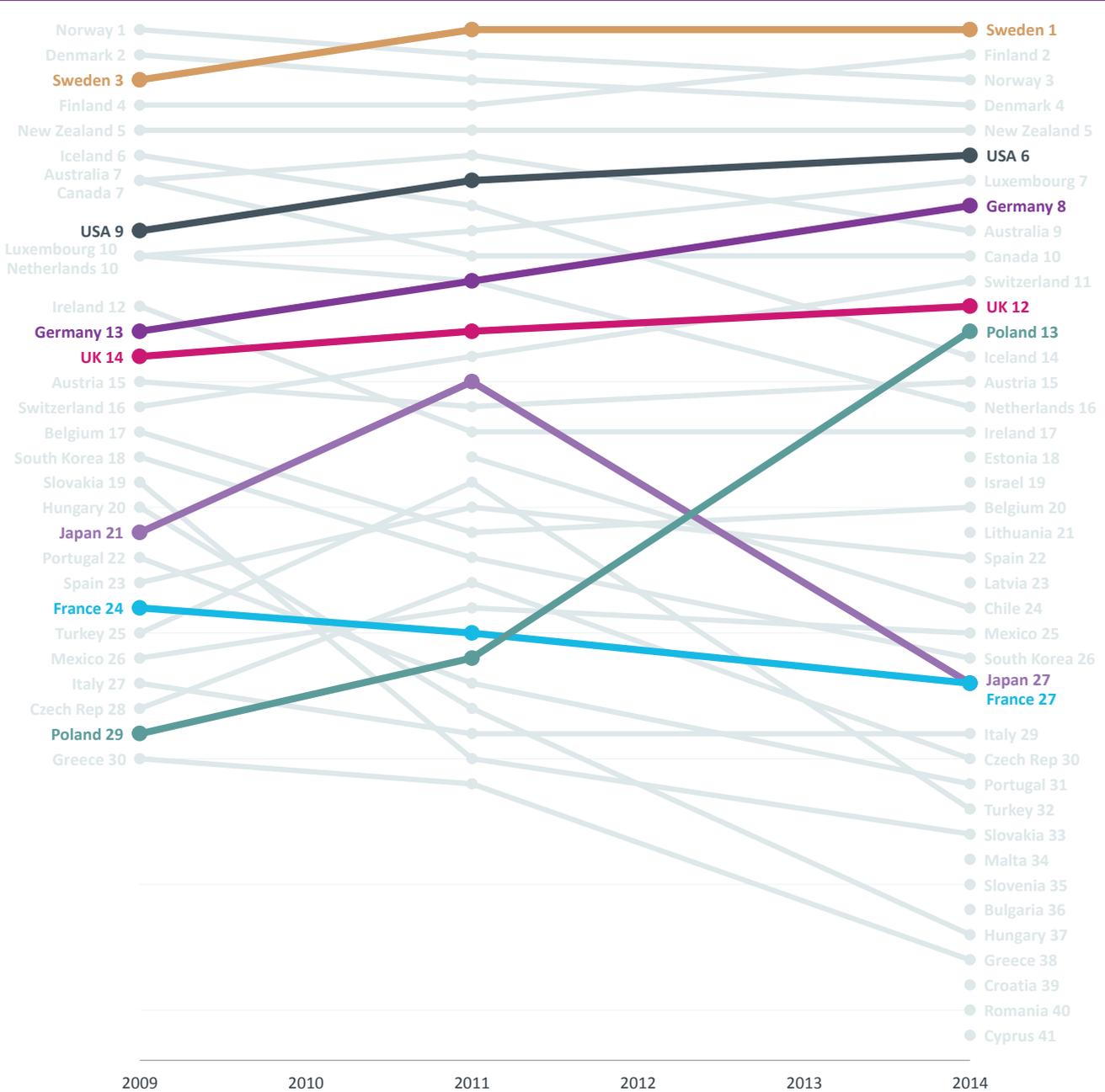
Our data on **public expectations of politics and politicians** is taken from a Populus poll commissioned by the Institute for Government as part of our *Programme for Effective Government*. Populus interviewed 2,040 GB adults online between 8 and 10 August 2014. Results have been weighted to be representative of all GB adults. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Additionally, we use one question from NatCen’s British Social Attitudes survey.³

Our analysis of **popular satisfaction – and dissatisfaction – with government** is based on two sources: the Hansard Society’s *Audit of Political Engagement*, going back to 2004; and the 2012 European Social Survey.⁴

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Effectiveness: Nordic countries highly ranked in international comparisons

Figure 14.1: Bertelsmann Stiftung Governance rank, 2009-14



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Bertelsmann Stiftung Sustainable Governance Indicators, 2009-14.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung Sustainable Governance Indicators use a variety of sources to rank 41 countries on Policy Performance, Quality of Democracy and Governance. We have focused on the Governance category, where the UK was ranked 12th in 2014. The UK's rank has risen steadily since the first set of results in 2009. Scandinavian countries all perform well throughout. Of other major economies, the USA and Germany have risen steadily, France has fallen slightly and Japan risen and then fallen dramatically. Poland has improved its ranking considerably, from 29th in 2009 to 13th in 2014.

Figure 14.2: Bertelsmann Stiftung – UK scores by Governance sub-category, 2014



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Bertelsmann Stiftung Sustainable Governance Indicators, 2014.

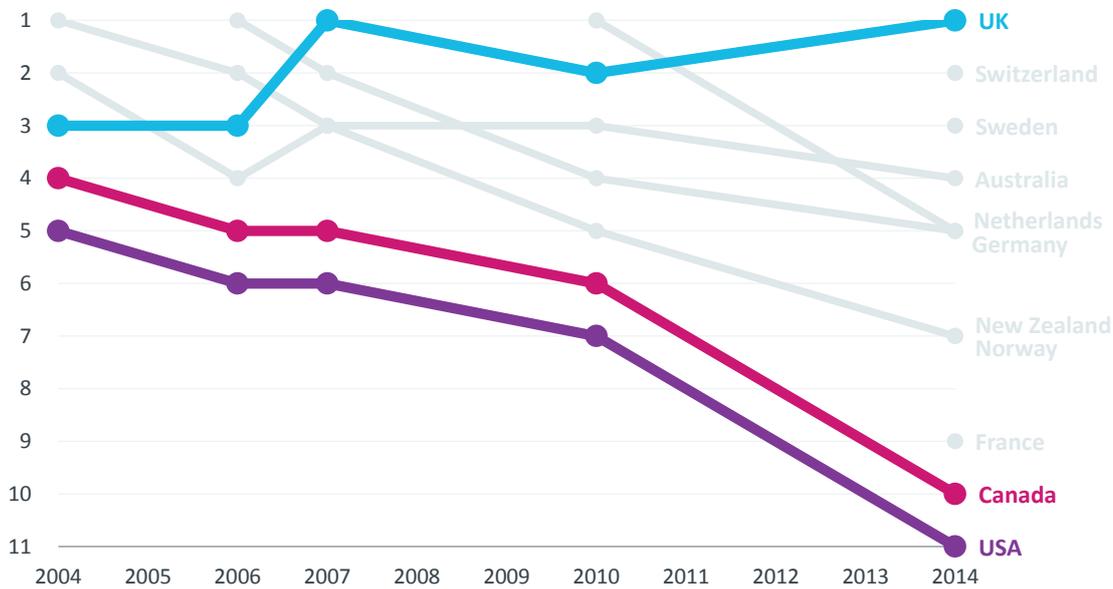
The Governance category is itself broken down into two subcategories: Executive Capacity ('Does the government have strong steering capabilities?') and Executive Accountability ('Are non-governmental actors involved in policy-making?'). Each of these is then broken down in turn to give scores for 12 subjects, which are largely reliant on survey questions but also make use of quantitative data (voter turnout for Citizens' Participatory Competence, for example).

Overall, the UK scores more highly on capacity (7.2, 9th place) than on accountability (6.6, 15th place). It scores best on two capacity measures – Evidence-based Instruments ('Does the government apply Regulatory Impact Assessments? Is the quality and sustainability of the RIA process ensured?') and Interministerial Co-ordination ('Is government decision-making co-ordinated across institutional lines?') – and worst on an accountability measure: Media ('Do the media provide substantive information, enabling the broader public to evaluate government decisions?', based partly on newspaper circulation). The next two worst measures – the capacity measure of Societal Consultation ('Does the government consult with economic and social actors in the course of policy preparation?') and the accountability measure of Citizens' Participatory Competence ('Do citizens possess the information and knowledge needed to evaluate government policies?') – also concern non-government actors in decision-making or scrutiny.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung is only one of a number of international comparisons along similar lines – others include the World Bank Institute's Worldwide Governance Indicators, which have a Government Effectiveness category (the UK was 21st out of 210 in 2012); the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index, which has a Government Efficiency category (the UK was 14th out of 144 in 2014-15); and the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook, which has a Government Efficiency category (the UK was 17th out of 60 in 2014). Countries in Scandinavia and the Far East, as well as Switzerland and some countries in the Middle East, tend to rank consistently highly in these studies.

Health and education: UK top in Commonwealth Fund, further back in Pisa

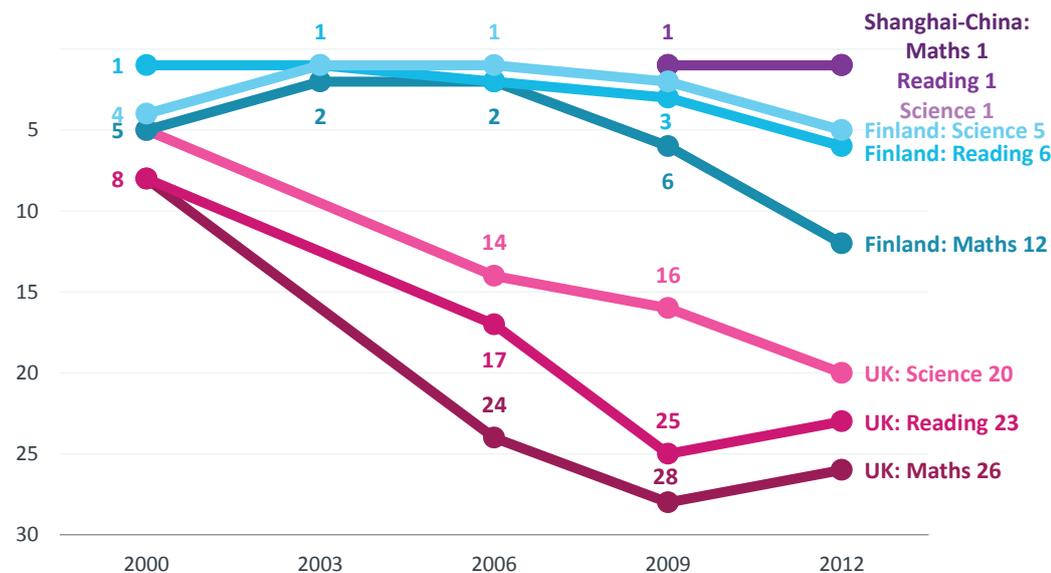
Figure 14.3: Commonwealth Fund ranking of health systems, 2014



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Commonwealth Fund Health System Scorecards, 2014.

The Commonwealth Fund scores countries on quality of care, access, efficiency, equity and healthy lives, and ranks the UK first out of 11 industrialised nations for its health system. Indeed, Britain tops all but three of the report’s 11 categories (the UK comes second to Sweden on equity, third on timeliness of care, and 10th on ‘healthy lives’). The UK has been ranked in the top three ever since the start of the series in 2004; Canada has always been second from last and the USA last.

Figure 14.4: OECD Pisa rankings (UK, Finland, Shanghai), 2000-12

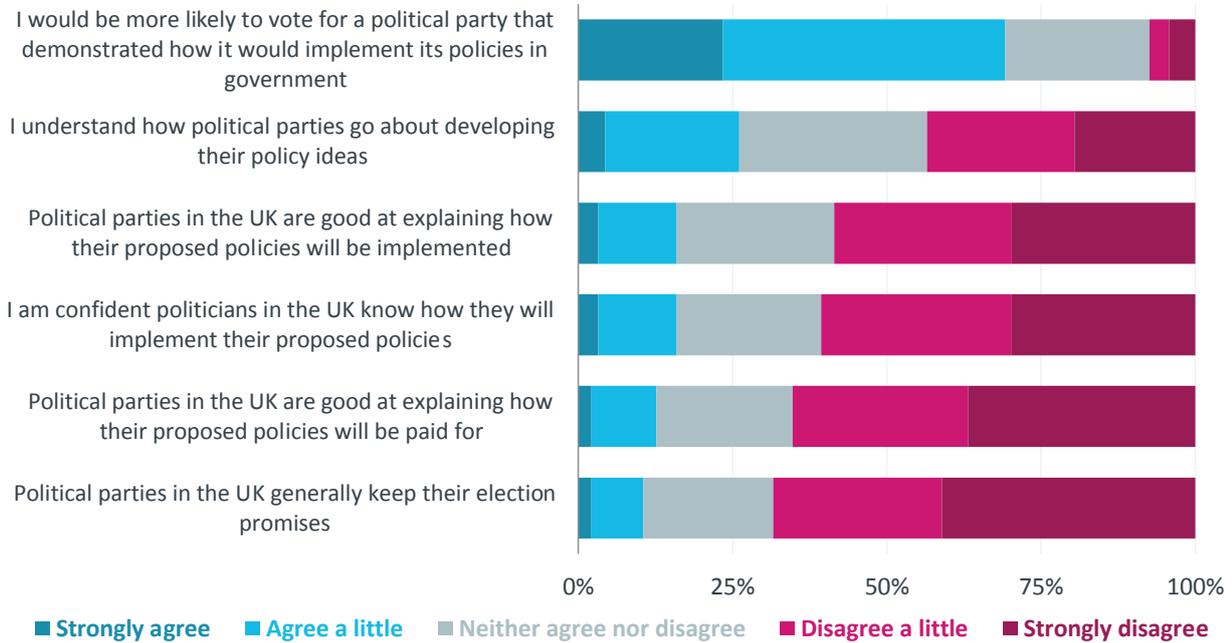


Source: Institute for Government analysis of OECD Pisa rankings, 2000-12. There were 41 countries in the 2000 study, 40 in 2003, 57 in 2006 and 65 in 2009 and 2012.

However, the UK rates less well on the OECD’s international rankings of maths, science and reading education, its ranking having fallen since 2000 (although with a recovery in reading and maths in the most recent figures). The top of the rankings are now dominated by east Asian cities and nations – Shanghai topping all categories in 2009 and 2012 – while Finland, consistently the strongest major European nation, has also fallen behind in recent studies.

Expectations: the British public values the ability to implement policies

Figure 14.5: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'



Source: Institute for Government/Populus polling, August 2014.

The British are not so positive in their perceptions of government effectiveness. Polling commissioned by the Institute for Government shows the British public cares about politicians who are effective in terms of being able to implement their policies: nearly two-thirds agree or strongly agree that they would be more likely to vote for a political party that could show how it would do so. However, only one in six believe UK parties are good at explaining how they will actually implement their policies; one in seven are confident that politicians will know how to implement their policies; and one in nine believe politicians are good at costing their policies. Only one in nine also believe that election promises are actually kept.

In short, the polling suggests the British public values government that is effective in doing what it has promised, but a large majority does not believe UK politicians are currently capable of doing so.

Figure 14.6: 'Which three things do you think UK politicians prioritise at the moment?' and 'Which three things do you think UK politicians should prioritise?'



Source: Institute for Government/Populus polling, August 2014.

Our polling also suggests that the British public values politicians getting good value for taxpayers, taking long-term decisions and running government professionally. However, at present, they believe that parties prioritise political, office- and vote-seeking goals – getting re-elected, scoring political points and making big announcements – over governmental, policy-oriented ones. This tallies with other similar surveys, such as NatCen’s British Social Attitudes, which shows an increase in the number of respondents not trusting governments to place the needs of the nation above their own political interests.

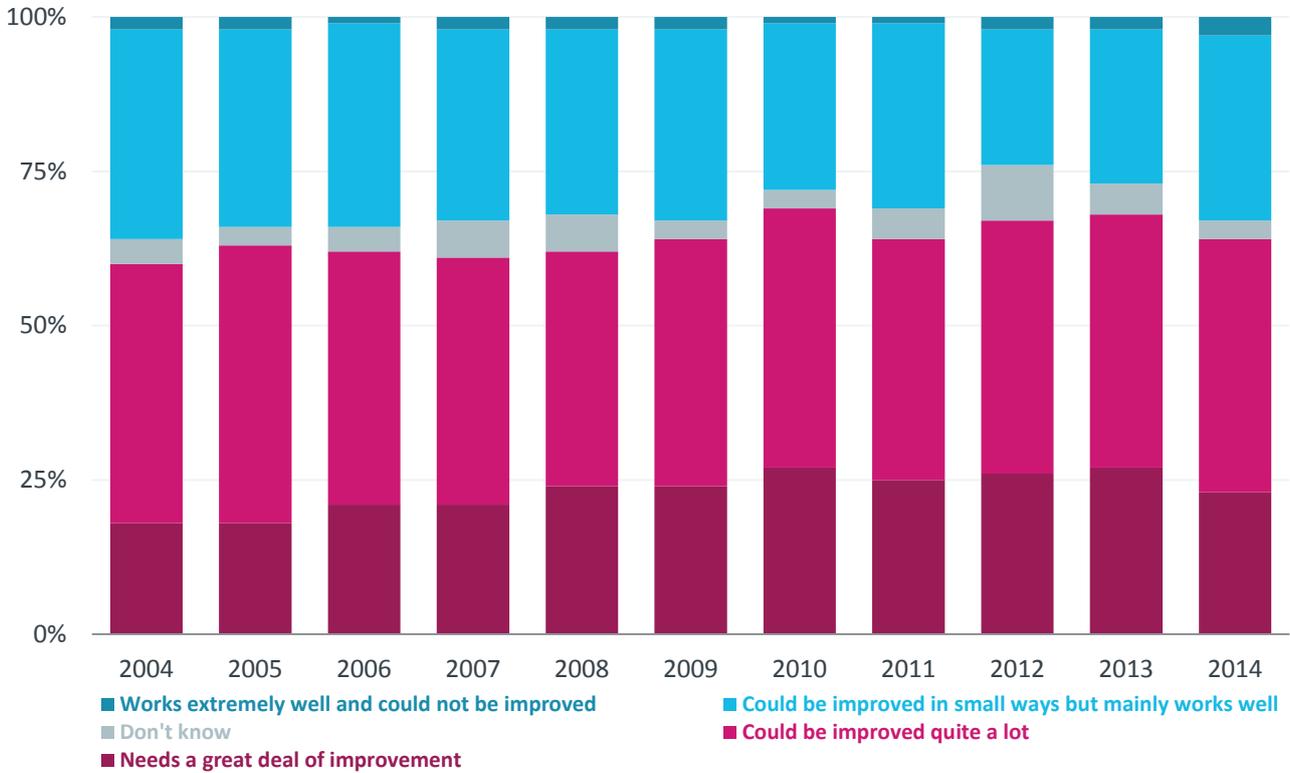
Figure 14.7: Do you trust the Government 'to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party'?



Source: Institute for Government analysis of NatCen, British Social Attitudes, 1986-2013.

Satisfaction: political allegiances may influence scores; UK mid-ranking in European terms

Figure 14.8: 'Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing Britain?'

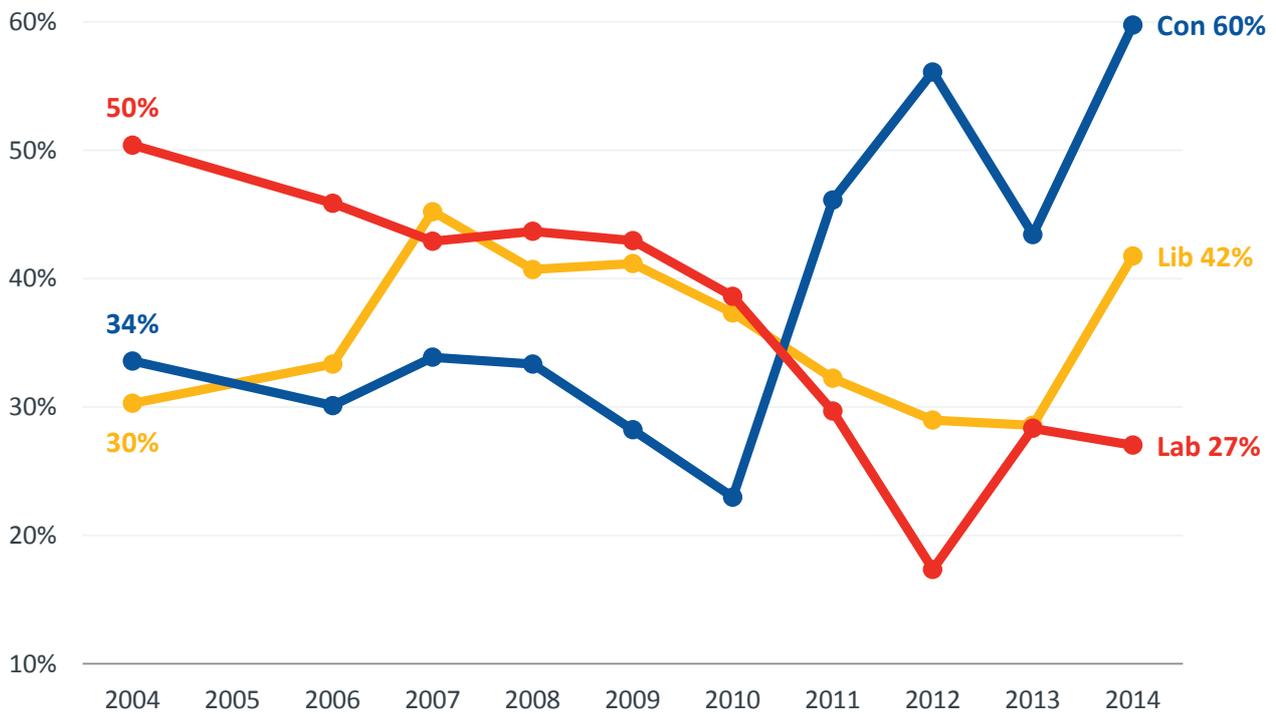


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement*.

A number of surveys ask respondents what they think about how the government does its job, which is the closest most come to a proxy for asking about government effectiveness. For example, the Hansard Society has asked the British public what they think about the system of governing Britain since 2004. In 2014, just over 60% of respondents think our government system could be improved a lot or a great deal. This figure compares with more than two-thirds in 2010 (post-expenses scandal), 2012 and 2013.

There are important caveats to using this question as a proxy for government effectiveness: it's not directly asking about government effectiveness, for a start. But there are further definitional issues. How do those surveyed interpret terms such as 'system of governing', 'works well' and 'need improvement'? Respondents could be thinking about all of these things differently. 'Working well', for example, could simply mean that a respondent's own political party happens to be in government.

Figure 14.9: The present system of governing Britain 'mainly works well' or 'works extremely well' by political party support

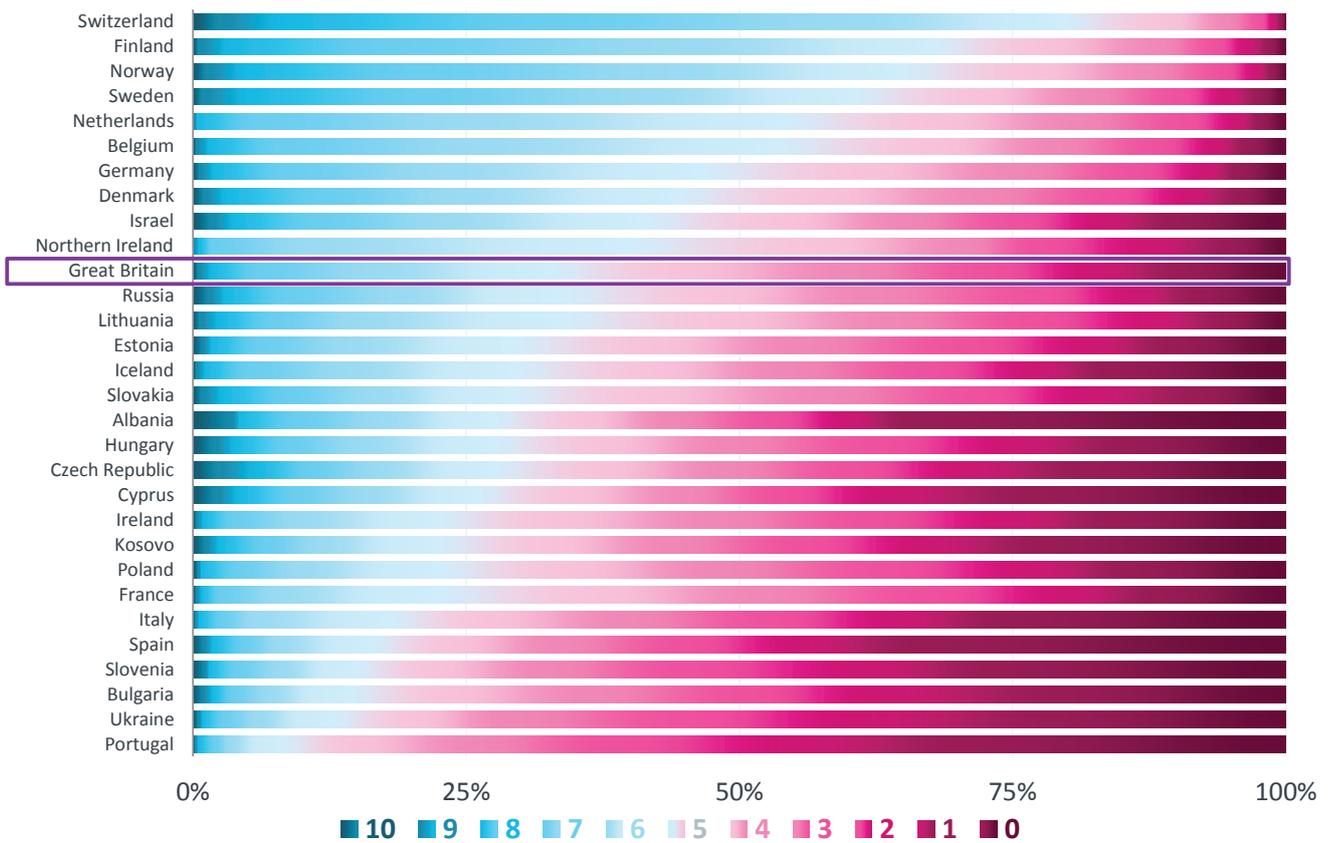


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement*. All Audits conducted by Ipsos MORI except 2012 and 2013, conducted by TNS BMRB.

People appear more likely to think our governing system works well if their party is in power. Labour supporters were more positive than Conservative ones until 2010, when the position was reversed, although Liberal Democrat supporters were positive throughout (indeed, more positive than Labour supporters in 2007). All parties fell between 2009 and 2010, when the parliamentary expenses scandal was exposed.

Political affiliations and events not wholly connected with government effectiveness may, therefore, affect the answers given by respondents.

Figure 14.10: 'About the government. How satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?'



Source: Institute for Government analysis of European Social Survey, 2012.

That said, one European-wide survey – the European Social Survey – also puts British dissatisfaction with the way government does its job around the 60% mark. When asked to rank their satisfaction from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied), 55% scored it 0-4, an additional 16% giving an answer of 5. Only four countries – Switzerland, Finland, Norway and Sweden – had more than 50% score their satisfaction as 6-10.

Britain’s dissatisfaction score has remained similar since 2002, hitting a low in 2008. Of the other major European economies, German citizens’ level of dissatisfaction has decreased since 2002, whereas France’s has increased steadily.