

Trust in government is growing – but it needs to deliver

New Institute for Government polling shows:

- **More people believe politicians try to make government work well than they did in 2014, but they think that representing their constituency is low on their list of priorities.**
- **People have not "had enough of experts"; they still want them involved in decision making.**
- **Remainers and Leavers are both sceptical about whether government will deliver on key Brexit and domestic policies.**
- **People don't want big announcements – they want to know how things will get done.**

The months since the UK voted to leave the European Union have been some of the most tumultuous times in British politics that many of us can remember. These events have raised challenging questions about the nature of government and the kinds of leaders we want. Commentators have suggested that people have lost faith in politicians and experts. And much has been written about how the rancour between those who voted to remain in the EU and those who voted for Brexit could leave the country permanently divided.

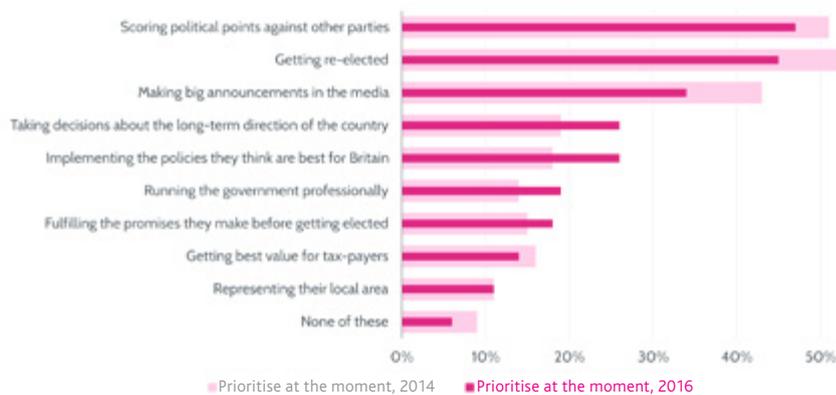
But new polling published today by the Institute for Government challenges much of this analysis. It shows that people are more likely to believe politicians will prioritise running government well now than they were in 2014. It also shows that trust in experts has increased (although people are not convinced that politicians prioritise their role as local representatives). Perhaps even more surprisingly, Leave and Remain voters are not as divided as might be expected. They share scepticism about the Government's ability to deliver on some of the promises made about Brexit and want government to focus on delivering policies rather than making big announcements.

The public are more likely now than in 2014 to believe politicians prioritise making government work well

Surprisingly, given the negative views of politics and politicians generated by the EU referendum, our polling suggests that the public is more likely to think that government is focused on the right things than it was in 2014. They are more likely to believe that politicians will prioritise running government effectively: 8% more people believe politicians are prioritising the implementation of policies that are best for Britain; 7% more that they are prioritising taking long-term decisions; and 5% more that they are prioritising running government professionally (see Figure 1). At the same time, people perceive politicians as less likely to focus on scoring political points (down by four percentage points since 2014) or getting re-elected (down by eight percentage points).

Figure 1

'Which three things do you think UK politicians prioritise at the moment?' - Populus



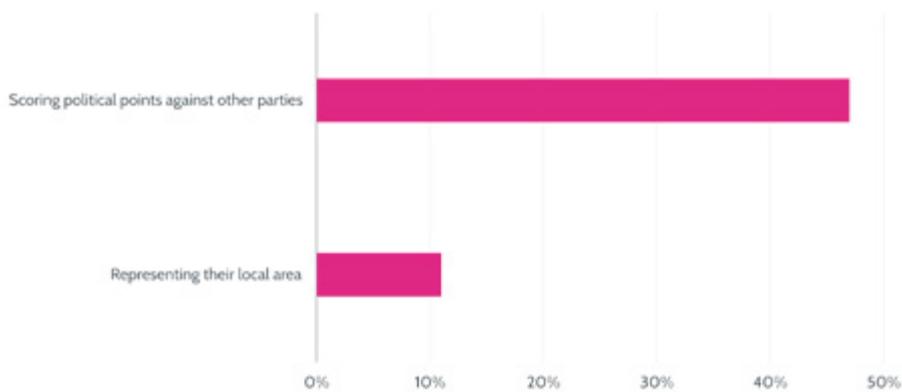
Source: Polling conducted by Populus for Institute for Government, 2014 and 2016. First poll: Populus interviewed 2,040 adults in Great Britain, online, 8-10 August 2014. Second poll: Populus interviewed 2,035 Britons online, 31 August and 1 September 2016. Weighted to be nationally representative. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council, and abides by its rules.

People don't think politicians prioritise their local areas

Since the referendum, there have been questions about whether the gap between the so-called political elite and other people's lives is fuelling dissatisfaction with our model of government. One of the obvious places our MPs in Westminster can connect with the people they represent – and narrow this gap – is in their constituencies. But our polling suggests people don't feel politicians prioritise this part of their role (see Figure 2). In fact, only 11% of people actually think politicians prioritise representing their local area – compared to the 47% of people who think they prioritise scoring points against each other.

Figure 2

'Which three things do you think UK politicians prioritise at the moment?' - Populus (selected responses)

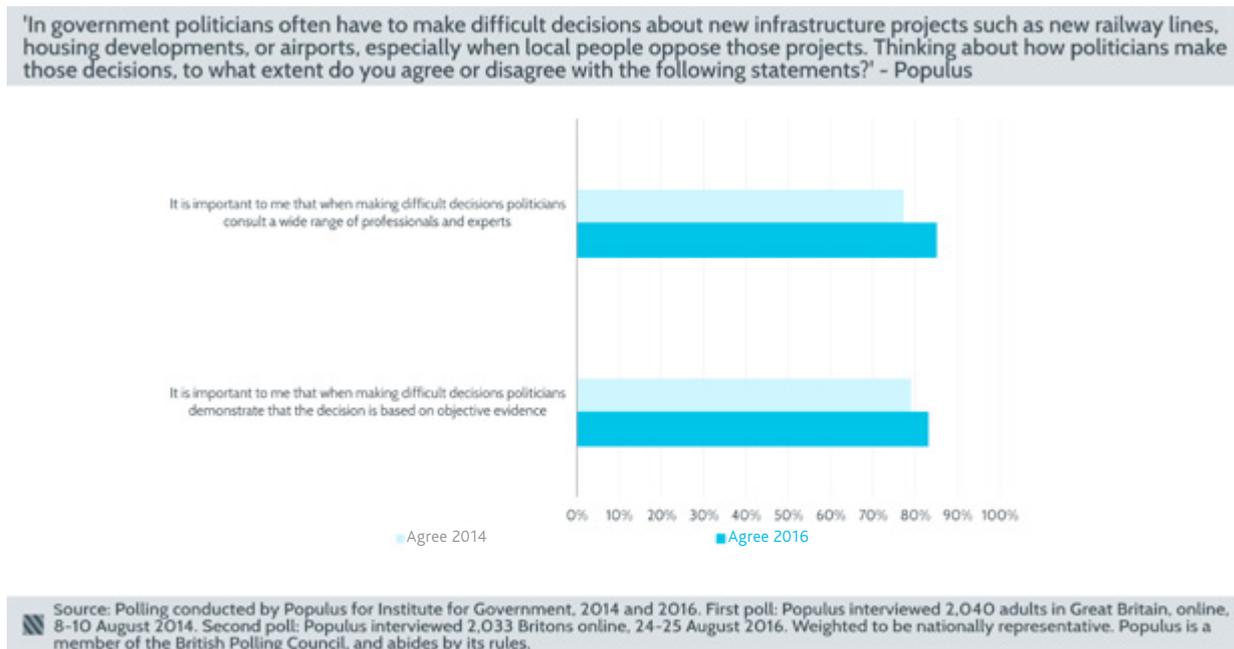


Source: Polling conducted by Populus for Institute for Government. Populus interviewed 2,035 Britons online, 31 August and 1 September 2016. Weighted to be nationally representative. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council, and abides by its rules.

Citizens want experts involved in decision making

The idea – much discussed in the wake of the referendum – that citizens have given up on evidence and experts is strongly contradicted by our polling. As shown in Figure 3, 85% of people want politicians to consult professionals and experts when making difficult decisions, and 83% want government to make decisions based on objective evidence. We asked the same questions in 2014 and the percentage of people who want expert involvement and evidence-based decision making has increased since then.

Figure 3



These figures suggest we should not call time on evidence-based policy-making yet. The Government should be aware that there is an increasing demand from the public to demonstrate that their policies are based on evidence and are informed by experts. Whether on the expansion of grammar schools, high-speed rail or social mobility, people want to see that the rhetoric of policy making is grounded in evidence.

People are also more convinced than ever that citizens need to be involved in difficult decisions – 86% say politicians should consult local people who will be affected by a decision. As we set out in our paper *The Spending Challenge*¹, current pressures on spending are likely to involve significant public service reconfiguration, including for example highly unpopular closures of hospital services. Engaging citizens in these kinds of trade-offs will be one of the major challenges for this government.

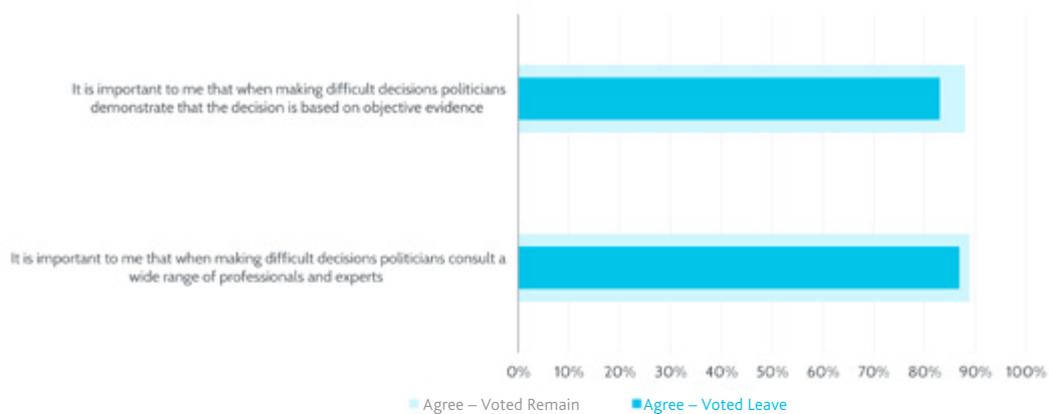
¹ McCrae, J 2016, *The Spending Challenge: how to cut spending while maintaining quality*. Institute for Government. www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/spending-challenge

The demand for expertise in policy making is equally important to Remainers and Leavers

Leave voters are just as likely as Remain voters to want experts involved in decisions and for policies to be based on evidence. As shown in Figure 4, over 83% of Leave voters want evidence-based policies and over 86% of Leave voters want professionals and experts involved in difficult decisions.

Figure 4

'In government politicians often have to make difficult decisions about new infrastructure projects such as new railway lines, housing developments, or airports, especially when local people oppose those projects. Thinking about how politicians make those decisions, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?' - Populus

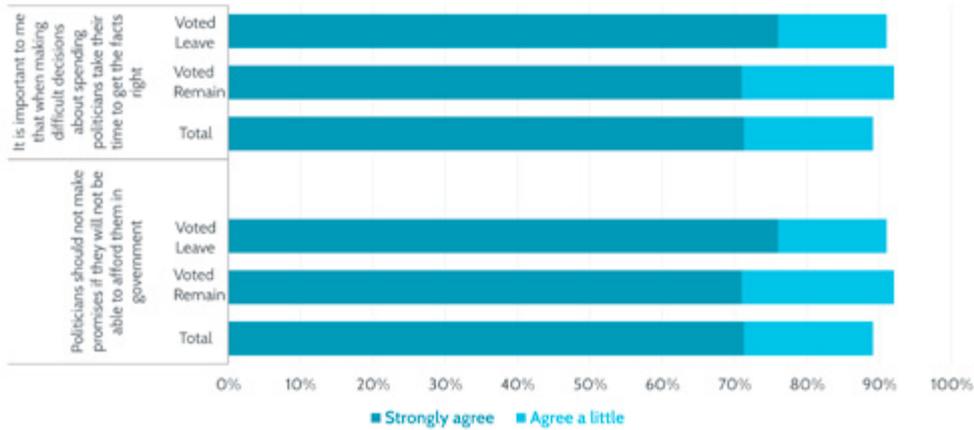


Source: Polling conducted by Populus for Institute for Government. Populus interviewed 2,033 Britons online, 24-25 August 2016. Weighted to be nationally representative. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council, and abides by its rules.

Leavers and Remainers are also united in their vision of the type of politicians they want, preferring politicians who are willing to focus on the long term and stick to promises they can afford, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

'Before the 2015 General Election, all parties committed to getting the UK's public finances under control. When making decisions in government about how to do so - such as where to cut public spending or make changes to tax rates - politicians often have to make difficult choices regarding the best course of action. Thinking about how politicians make those decisions, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?' - Populus



Source: Polling conducted by Populus for Institute for Government. Populus interviewed 2,033 Britons online, 24-25 August 2016. Weighted to be nationally representative. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council, and abides by its rules.

Both Leave and Remain voters are sceptical about whether the Government will deliver key Brexit and domestic policies

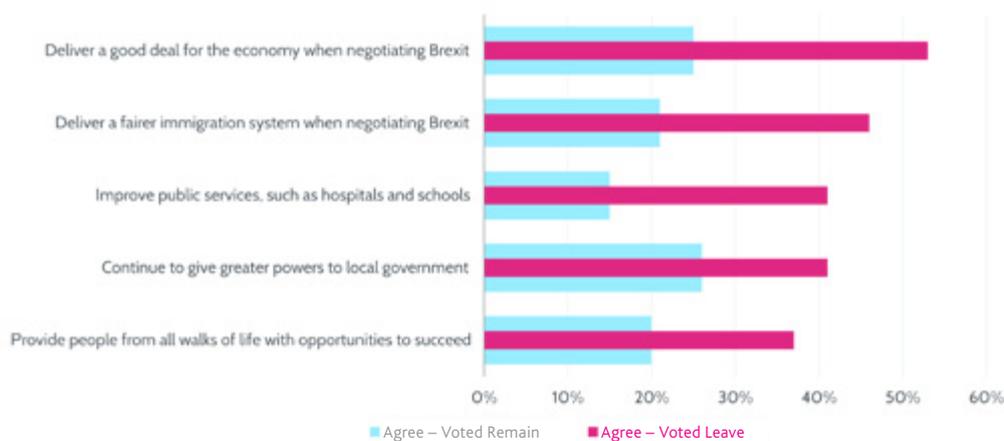
People who voted Leave and people who voted Remain are unconvinced that the Government will be able to deliver a fairer immigration system when negotiating Brexit – although people who voted to remain are, unsurprisingly, significantly more sceptical than those who voted to leave (see Figure 6). We also heard that only 25% of remain voters think the Government will deliver a good deal for the economy when negotiating Brexit, compared to a more confident 53% of leave voters.

In general, neither Leave nor Remain voters are convinced that the Government will be able to deliver on some very significant domestic challenges, with Remain voters particularly sceptical.

As shown in Figure 6 below, only 15% of Remain voters think that the Government is going to improve public services – compared to 41% of Leave voters. Only 26% of Remain voters think the previous government’s regional devolution drive will continue. Even on social mobility – a policy area Theresa May has singled out for attention, pledging to fight the ‘burning injustice’ of social inequality in her first speech at Downing Street² – only one in five Remain voters, and just over one in three Leave voters, believe the Government will provide people from all walks of life with opportunities to succeed.

Figure 6

‘Following the result of the EU referendum, how confident, if at all, are you that the UK Government will do each of the following things?’ – Populus



Source: Polling conducted by Populus for Institute for Government. Populus interviewed 2,033 Britons online, 24-25 August 2016. Weighted to be nationally representative. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council, and abides by its rules.

These figures highlight the substantial challenge this government faces in convincing people it will deliver key policies, and should be a cause for concern.

² Statement from the new Prime Minister Theresa May, 13 July 2016. www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may, accessed 14 September 2016.

While Theresa May has dropped George Osborne’s target of achieving an absolute financial surplus, she remains committed to the former Chancellor’s programme of cuts to public services. At the same time, pressures on public services are mounting. Improving the quality of schools and hospitals in this climate will be extremely challenging and requires an urgent plan for implementation – which, as our Spending Challenge paper said, is likely to involve tax increases or borrowing. The Government must also contend with promises made during the referendum campaign: the public tends to be unforgiving of politicians who backtrack on high-profile policy commitments.

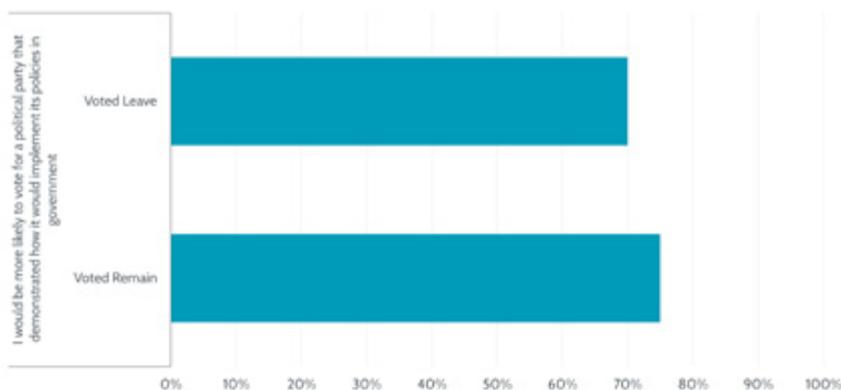
The Government might also struggle to reconcile some Leave voters’ expectations that they will get a good deal on the economy as well as a fairer immigration system. But failing to deliver on these fronts could easily damage the fragile confidence the public have so far displayed in May’s government.

The public don’t want big announcements – they want to know how things will get done

Politicians put a lot of energy into policy announcements, but our polling suggests people are unimpressed by them. In fact, only 4% think making big announcements should be a priority for politicians. Instead, people want politicians to tell them how they are going to deliver their policies. 70% of Leave voters and 75% of Remain voters say they would be more likely to vote for a party that could demonstrate how it would implement its policies in government (see Figure 7). The overall percentage of respondents saying this has increased since 2014.

Figure 7

'Thinking about General Elections and the policies political parties in the UK propose, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: I would be more likely to vote for a political party that demonstrated how it would implement its policies in government?' - Populus



Source: Polling conducted by Populus for Institute for Government. Populus interviewed 2033 GB adults online, 24-25 August 2016. Weighted to be nationally representative. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council, abides by its rules.

Over two months into May’s government, there is little detail on how Brexit will be negotiated and delivered. A number of different policies have been announced or at least implied – grammar schools, a new industrial strategy and a new push on social mobility – with scant further explanation.

Conclusion

Our polling suggests that for now, many people are relatively hopeful about government – more people believe politicians are focused on running government effectively than they did two years ago. But public scepticism about whether the Government will be able to deliver on some key Brexit and domestic policies could fast dent public confidence, unless it can prove those doubts are unfounded.

Beyond big announcements, people want to know how policies will be implemented. Soon they will want to hear more details about key policies on the economy, immigration, public services and social mobility and how they will be delivered. 'Brexit means Brexit' might not cut it for much longer.

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