

Reforming Politics: Citizens' Priorities Gerry Stoker (University of Southampton) April 2012

The Hansard Society's Ninth Audit of Political Engagement in Britain shows a continuing frustration with politics, politicians and the political system among many citizens. Evidence from focus groups run alongside the survey work reveals that citizens and elites are on different wave lengths when it comes to reforming politics.

Citizens do have concerns about the processes of politics not just the performance or outputs of politics. Some do want to have more of a say themselves but to an even greater extent citizens want politics to be conducted in a different way and politicians to be more accessible. Most of the citizens' reform ideas were about changing the behaviour and culture of modern day politics. That is the agenda that needs to be worked with and the challenge is to develop reforms that address those concerns directly.

The research conducted by Southampton and Sheffield Universities with the Hansard Society involved 14 focus groups conducted in various locations around Britain between Autumn 2011 and Spring 2012 with a mixed range of citizens. After roughly 90 minutes discussion about how politics works we asked the participants to identify in writing three reform ideas for improving politics. In total there were 153 participants giving a potential 459 reform ideas. Only a few members of the focus groups did not offer three ideas and even fewer offered ideas that were difficult to fathom. We ended up with 450 useable suggestions.

What is striking about citizens' reform ideas is how little resonance they have with the reform agendas on offer from political elites, particularly that of the Coalition government. Table 1 presents the evidence drawing on UCL's Constitution Unit paper on various elements constitutional and political reform programme of the current government and looks for evidence of support for those items on the reform agenda of citizens involved in the focus groups. We find a substantial mismatch between the agenda of reform currently on offer from political elites and the ideas emerging from

citizens, with only just over five per cent of the reform ideas from the Coalition government forming part of the reform agenda from citizens.

TABLE 1: Public Lack of Support for Constitutional and Political Reform Ideas from the Coalition Government

Reform Ideas from Government	Endorsement from citizens' list (out of 450)
Fixed Term Parliament	3 supporting mentions and 2 tangential supporting suggestions
Referendum on Changing voting system	2 supporting electoral reform and 3 suggesting reform to avoid coalition government in the future
Reduce Size of House of Commons	2 supporting
Reform of House of Commons	6 mentions in total, 4 supporting greater power to backbenchers and 2 supporting greater agenda setting by petitions
Reform of House of Lords	2 supporting mentions
Devolution	4 supporting greater devolution, 1 independence or Scotland and 3 calling for greater powers for local and regional government
Human Rights/Bill of Rights	4 supporting mentions
Europe	1 supporting mention
Parties	1 mention supporting greater state funding of parties
Greater Transparency in decision-making	No mention of need for details of spending as proposed but 12 mentions of more details need of what the government is doing in making decisions
TOTAL of Supportive Mentions (Total of Other Mentions)	Number Total : 26 (20) Percentage of all reform ideas: 5.7 (4.4)

Is it that citizens do not care about constitutional issues, what they care about is the performance or output of politics? We gave our focus group participants no steer as to what type of reforms they should identify to make politics better in their opinion. The evidence from their responses was that 58 out of 450 could be classified as about getting politics to achieve a different outcome. The key issues mentioned were: saving the NHS from reform, doing something about immigration, changing the relationship with Europe and limiting the amount of cuts in public services. On the balance between a spotlight on outputs and a spotlight on process it was the latter that won hands down, with the overwhelming remainder of reform suggestions being focused on issues of process in terms

of how politics is conducted, who should be involved and who should be more influential and who less influential. In short about 9 out of 10 suggestions were directed to issues of process.

Do citizens make suggestions for reform that are about giving themselves more power, as some reformers would suggest that the key to improving politics is about giving citizens more decision-making authority. Perhaps surprisingly, only 73 out 450 reform suggestions involve mechanisms for giving people more of a say over politics.

As Table 2 suggests a tentative classification of the reform ideas from focus group participants indicates that it is the reform of representative politics which is closer to the hearts of citizens. The top preference in reform ideas was to find ways of ensuring that those who made decisions, especially elected representatives, were open in what they did and accountable for their performance. In the discussion in the focus groups there were many occasions when unfavourable comparisons made between the accountabilities that people found themselves subject to in their own working lives and the unaccountability of elected representatives and basic lack of performance delivery mechanisms available to citizens to hold them in check. Another big issue was improving communication and ensuring that fair and accessible information about decisions and why they are made is provided. A further issue was about broadening the social base and experience of people encouraged to stand as elected representatives.

There remains much to explore in the ideas of citizens but the broad thrust of their reform ideas could perhaps be summed up as: it would be desirable if representative democracy was in practice more like it is described in textbooks on democracy. Designing the mechanisms to bring about reforms to convince citizens that such a bringing together of aspiration and reality is possible remains a significant challenge. But what this research does is make us a little clearer about what citizens themselves want from politics and political reform. We will explore in future work what the scale of support for different reforms is and what kind of reforms might attract public support.

Table 2: Classification of Political Reform Ideas from Citizens

Reform Idea	Numbers of Mentions (%)
Change processes of politics to make it more accountable, transparent and to ensure that what is promised is delivered	128 (28)
Better education, information exchange and less spin in communication	68 (15)
Give citizens more of say (especially through referendums)	73 (16)
Deals with issues that are of concern	58 (13)
Improve representativeness and accessibility of MPs	43 (9)
Institutional changes to parliament, constitution reform or changes to electoral system	41 (9)
Get more experts involved in decision-making	15 (3)
Create a more positive media environment for politics	13 (3)
Give local communities more of a say	7 (-)
Get politicians to be more normal	4 (-)