

DEMOS

# TRUSTWATCH 2024

LIVE CITIZENS' VERDICT ON  
THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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# INTRODUCTION

General election campaigns are when the often insider game of politics goes mainstream. For the period of the campaign, party politics saturates our media (Euros aside) and politicians embark on a roadshow to make their case to the public. Though the 2024 campaign is still in its early days, we have already been treated to the sorts of bold policy promises, photo-ops, controversies and, inevitably, the gaffes that define a pre-election period. This is all very exciting for those of us working in and around politics but how is the campaign cutting through beyond the Westminster bubble?

During the 2024 general election campaign, Demos - an independent, cross-party think tank - is convening a 32-person "citizens' conversation", an ongoing panel of the public to understand how attitudes towards political trust change throughout the pre-election period. Citizens' conversations are a model Demos is developing to deepen insights from ordinary focus groups by reconvening the same group of citizens over longer periods of time to understand how attitudes change. We will also use reactive instant messaging with participants, interviews and additional polling to further understand the public's immediate reactions to the big election stories as they happen. This citizens' conversation project is called Trustwatch 2024. This work sits within Demos's ambition to build a more collaborative democracy, which you can read more about [here](#).

In this initial briefing paper, we introduce our Trustwatch 2024 panel and share some emerging findings and reflections on the current state of public trust in elections.

Our Trustwatch 2024 panel - members of the public from various socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic groups, ages, political perspectives, and parts of the UK - will share their thoughts on key campaign moments as they happen throughout the campaign. The panel will then reconvene after the election to reflect on the extent to which politicians, the media and other actors have acted in a way that has engendered trust in the election, and what might be done to improve political trust going forward. At different points in the campaign, we will also be using rapid polling to gauge the public response to key election moments and what they mean for trust in elections and in politics more generally.

This paper sets out our approach and presents a rapid summary of some of our early panel and polling findings. We find that, contrary to politicians' rhetoric, the public has little trust in the power of elections to deliver the changes they feel the country needs. Our Trustwatch panel feel politicians need to do more to show they are acting in the public interest rather their own. However, they also recognise the thorny challenges and tensions that politicians must navigate during election campaigns. For instance, the panel would like to see politicians present a positive vision for the future but also level with the public about the challenges they would face in government. Elsewhere, our panellists shared differing views on the qualities they want politicians to exhibit during campaigns - some feel charisma engenders trust, whereas others have learnt to treat big characters with suspicion. Early Trustwatch insights also reveal the importance of looking at trust at different geographical scales, namely differences between trust in national political figures like party leaders and the national broadcasters, and more local actors, such as mayors, constituency MPs and local press.

# A CRISIS IN TRUST

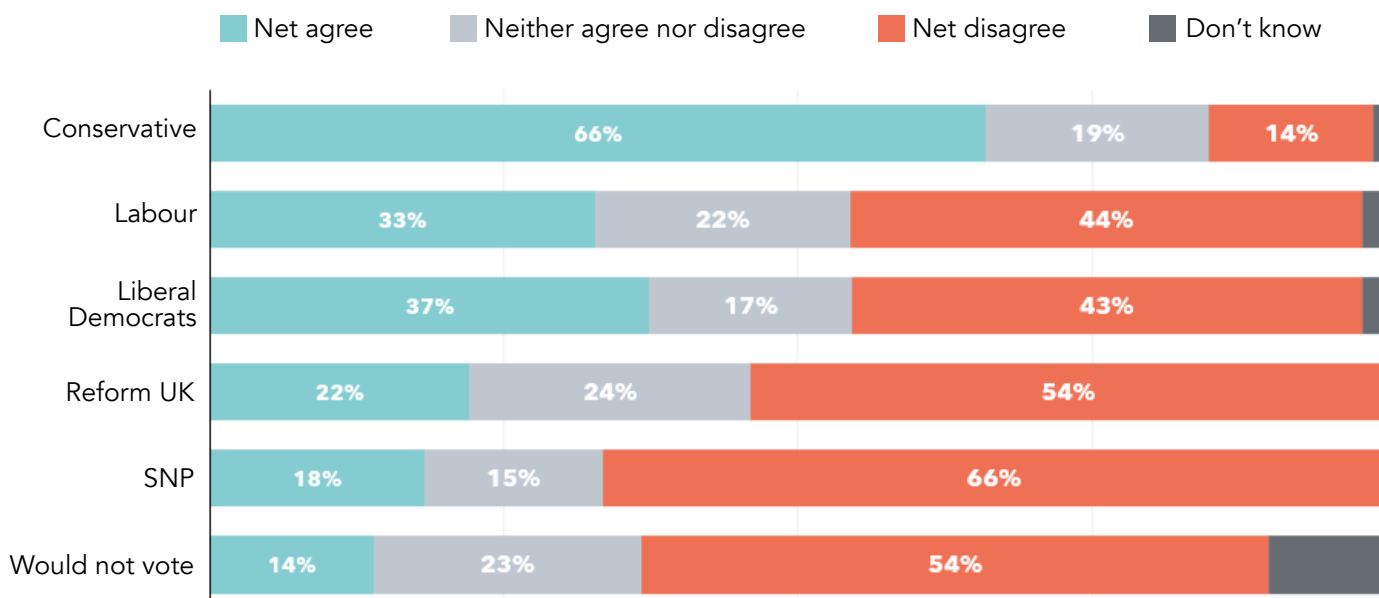
## DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT?

*“You want to feel like you’re gonna make a difference”* - Millennial based in Glasgow

For a democracy to function, citizens need to feel that their actions (whether casting a vote, signing a petition, attending a demonstration, or speaking up in a public debate) can help shape the nation’s direction of travel. For this to happen, citizens need to believe that political actors - including those they disagree with - tend to act honestly and in a way that has the nation’s interest at heart. Without trust in individuals, organisations and institutions, citizens may become politically disengaged. This then weakens our democracy and the legitimacy of its decisions and policies.

In the UK, a long-term decline in political trust has been accompanied by concerns surrounding political disengagement,<sup>1</sup> raising questions about the functioning of our democracy. Demos pre-campaign polling (3rd-5th May 2024) reveals that just 32% of the population believe the UK as a well-functioning democracy, with great variation by voting intention (Figure 1). While two-thirds (66%) of Conservative voters agree the UK is a well-functioning democracy, this is true of just one-third (33%) of Labour voters and 37% of Liberal Democrats. Figures are even lower for Reform UK (22%) and SNP (18%) voters, while just 14% of those not intending to vote view the UK as a well-functioning democracy.

**FIGURE 1**  
AGREEMENT ON WHETHER THE UK IS A WELL-FUNCTIONING DEMOCRACY, BY VOTING INTENTION



1 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>

Elections appear to encapsulate issues with UK politics at large. In Demos pre-campaign polling, we find that some 71% of the public feel that politicians being dishonest poses either a very high (37%) or quite a high risk (34%) to the fairness and integrity of the upcoming election, with fake news (64% combined) and bias in the media (62%) also seen as a significant risk.

In this context, our Trustwatch 2024 project looks to better understand the state of public trust in elections and in politics more generally, understanding the triggers and mechanisms through which public attitudes change throughout the campaign.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TRUST?

*“Trust has an ineffable quality that resists most of our attempts to quantify it. It’s not a sin and it’s not always a virtue. It can be good. It can be blindly foolish”*  
- Ros Taylor (2024, p.133)<sup>2</sup>

In everyday conversation, we have all heard people say they “don’t trust politicians” and that “they’re all the same”. Politicians also evoke trust as a key part of their campaign messaging. Just over a week into the election campaign, Rishi Sunak claimed that “You can’t trust Labour to keep this country safe”,<sup>3</sup> while Labour shared a campaign video titled “The Tories can’t be trusted with your money”.<sup>4</sup> However, trust is a complex, slippery and context-dependent term. You might trust your younger brother to keep a secret but not to iron his own clothes. Similarly, you might trust a certain politician to ‘get things done’ but not to act in the public interest or tell the truth. You might trust your general election vote to be legitimately counted but not for that vote to make a tangible difference to the future prosperity of the UK. There are also further distinctions one might make, such as between a lack of active trust and active distrust, and between mistrust and distrust.<sup>5</sup>

Through Trustwatch 2024, Demos will get under the skin of the different ways the public think about trust and how this affects engagement with elections: Do people trust local candidates more than political parties to level with them about the challenges they will face should they be elected? How do different forms of trust change across election campaigns and what triggers these changes in attitude? Is new technology shaping the way people consume and critique campaign policy promises?

2 Taylor, R. (2024). The Future of Trust. London: Melville House.

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBudLkD56DA>

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pu6oovly298>

5 <https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/trust-issues-dec-21.pdf>

# TRUSTWATCH 2024

## PANELS, POLLING, POST-ELECTION ANALYSIS

Trustwatch 2024 is Demos's innovative approach to understanding and tracking trust in elections and politics more generally across the course of the general election campaign. In particular, we will attend to the actions, behaviours and principles that politicians and the media should follow to build trust in elections. As part of this process, we will explore the tensions between these actions, behaviours and principles, and how politicians and the media might navigate them (e.g. presenting a hopeful vision for the future vs levelling with the public about the challenges they would face in government).

The below gives a brief overview of our Trustwatch 2024 method.

### PHASE 1 - PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN:

- a. **Polling:** Demos commissioned Yonder to survey a nationally representative sample of 2,000 citizens, asking them questions relating to different aspects of trust and engagement in elections. These results contain a rich range of insights, with cross-breaks by demographics, voting patterns, media consumption and other differentiating factors. The survey was completed 3rd-5th May 2024.
- b. **Focus groups:** The Trustwatch 2024 panel is comprised of four segments of the population, reflecting different voting patterns - 'always voters', 'usually voters, swing', 'sometimes voters' and 'non-voters' - and adjusted to ensure diversity in terms of demographics and political attitudes.<sup>6</sup> We held the first of these focus groups between 15th May - 23rd May 2024<sup>7</sup> to dig deeper into public views about trust and engagement in elections, and in politics more generally, and how these attitudes have changed over time. In the process, panellists shared their perspectives on what politicians and the media could do to increase trust in elections, and in politics more generally. We will be returning to the same panel through the campaign.

### PHASE 2 - RESPONSIVE CAMPAIGN ANALYSIS:

- a. **Responsive fieldwork:** During the election campaign, we will be returning to our Trustwatch 2024 panel, using instant messaging to capture the panel's immediate takes on big campaign-defining moments. Whether it be manifesto launches, TV debates, gaffes or policy rows, these can each have a bearing on public trust. When such stories break, we will turn to our panel to hear their thoughts, using follow-up interviews and focus groups to get a deeper sense of the public reaction.
- b. **Overnight polling:** In addition to our panel, we will be using rapid polling to understand how the wider public feel about the election campaign as it develops, including their response to the significant moments described above. In addition, we may use polling to measure changes in trust against our pre-campaign baseline.

### PHASE 3 - POST-ELECTION ANALYSIS:

- a. **Focus groups:** Following the election, we have scheduled a follow-up series of focus groups with our Trustwatch 2024 panel, split by voting pattern ('always voters', 'usually voters, swing', 'sometimes voters' and 'non-voters'). Here, we will discuss key trust-related themes that have emerged throughout the election and assess the extent to which politicians and the media have acted in ways that engender trust.
- b. **Analysis and reporting:** We will combine analysis of all elements of the research into a report to be published in Summer 2024, including some suggested ways forward.

<sup>6</sup> Further information on our sampling approach will be available in our full Summer 2024 report.

<sup>7</sup> Three focus groups were held between 15th May - 16th May 2024, with another held 23rd May 2024 - the day after the election was called.

The following sections outline five emerging themes from our work so far. This analysis is not exhaustive but reveals some narratives that will be worth exploring throughout the election campaign. Overall, our early Trustwatch 2024 findings reveal trust to be a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, with public attitudes varying among members of the public and depending on the political actors in question. There is a long way to go in building public trust in elections and in politics more widely but there is also cause for hope. The Trustwatch 2024 panel recognises some of the trade-offs and tensions that politicians and the media have to navigate - they just think politicians and the media can do a better job of doing so. This may require changes to individuals' actions and behaviours but also to the wider systems that inform and shape these actions and behaviours.

## 1. LISTENING TO PUBLIC CONCERNS, ACTING IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

*“If a politician wants us to get engaged with them, then they will have to make the first move - they will have to actually reach out to the general public and listen to the grievances or any issues or local issues affecting them”* - Gen X based in London

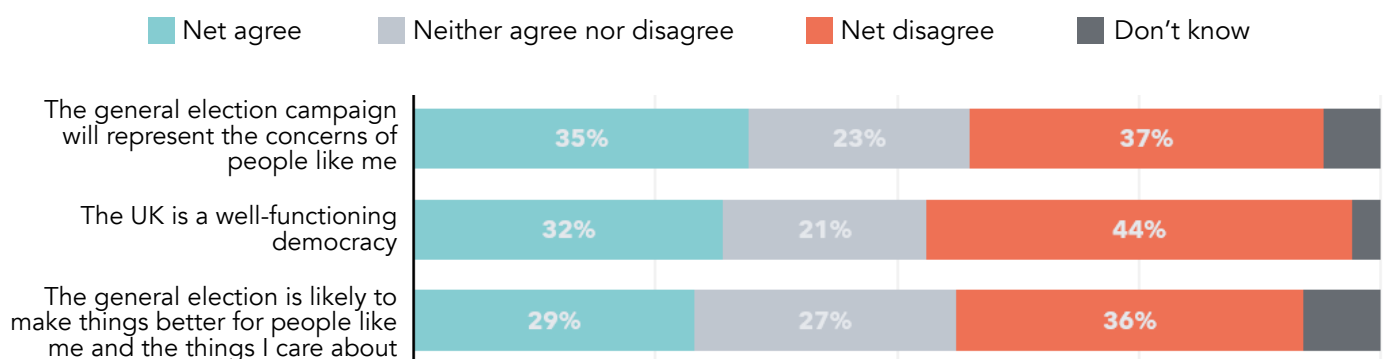
In elections, parties and candidates try to persuade the public that they have their best interests at heart and that their policies will improve their lives and those of their families, friends, communities, and the country at large.

Our pre-campaign polling reveals that just 35% of the public think a general election campaign will represent the concerns of people like them (Figure 2). This was reflected by our Trustwatch 2024 panel, many of whom described their trust being at an all-time low, with a sense of despair about the state of UK politics. Panellists felt that politicians too often did not listen to the public and that, as one non-voter put it, they “spend a lot of time thinking about themselves” rather than the public interest. Some panellists felt politicians were preoccupied with their own interests - whether this be looking to make additional money during their time as Members of Parliament or manoeuvring into positions of power. In this context, there were calls for greater transparency on who politicians have been meeting with (including lobby groups) so voters have clarity on potential sources of influence.

There were, however, some more positive accounts about people’s experience in devolved administrations and with local politicians. For instance, one panellist in mid-Wales felt that the public often had their voices heard through the Welsh Government and that in their rural community local politicians were “very visible”, which improved their connection with the public. They wondered whether this visibility was a greater challenge for London-based politicians covering constituencies with denser populations.

**FIGURE 2**

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND THE STATE OF UK DEMOCRACY  
 Agreement with statements about UK democracy

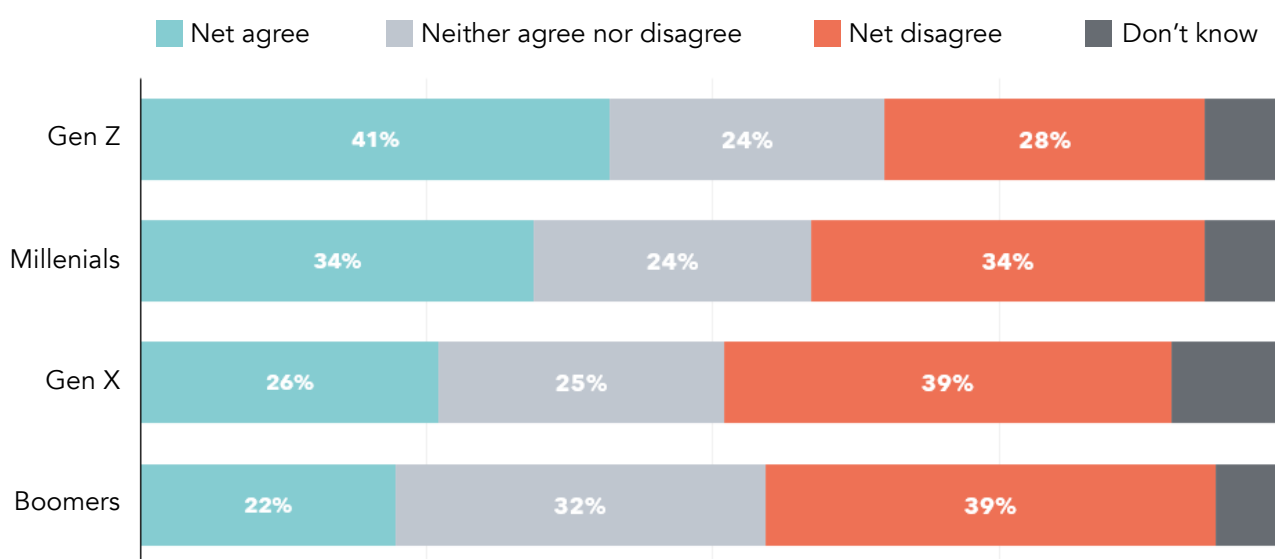


Our pre-campaign polling also reveals significant inter-generational differences in attitudes towards the election, with Gen Z (41%) much more likely than Boomers (22%) to feel that the general election is likely to make things better for “people like me and the things I care about”. This likely reflects generational differences in voting patterns and the expected outcome of the next election. Our polling also found that Gen Z are more likely to say they are voting to oppose a particular party than to support one. These findings are interesting, given several early policy announcements have had quite clear generational targeting.<sup>8</sup> We will return to inter-generational differences during the Trustwatch 2024 project, particularly as we approach the release of manifestos.

**FIGURE 3**

**GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WHETHER THE GENERAL ELECTION IS LIKELY TO MAKE THINGS BETTER FOR PEOPLE LIKE THEM AND THE THINGS THEY CARE ABOUT**

*Agreement on whether ‘The general election is likely to make things better for people like me and the things I care about’, by generation*



**2. PRESENTING A POSITIVE VISION, LEVELLING WITH THE BRITISH PEOPLE**

*“Have realistic promises, not to over-promise and under-deliver. I prefer the other way around, if they can say that they can only provide a small amount of whatever, then great, because that makes me believe that they can actually fulfil those promises”*

- ‘Always voter’

The next government is going to inherit a wealth of challenges: low growth and productivity, the ongoing impacts of the cost of living crisis, a chronic shortage of affordable housing, and under-pressure public services, to name a few. In our early focus groups with the Trustwatch 2024 panel, we have seen the public’s desire for an honest account of the challenges and limitations the next government will face.

Panellists spoke about how they felt the public had been lied to repeatedly by different political actors, citing the Lib Dems “selling out after they went into coalition with the Tories” (Boomer based in Cambridgeshire) and Brexit among other examples. Here, panellists explained that they understood politicians need to be political and to make the case to the public but a hopeful vision should be balanced with the need to level with the British public about the challenges they would face in government.

One panellist argued that “people want to be optimistic for the future” and that “doom and gloom” was unlikely to be a vote-winner, while another explained that politicians “need to just be honest and be realistic

<sup>8</sup> The Conservatives have promised National Service for 18 year-olds, a crackdown of ‘low-value’ degrees to support apprenticeships, and a ‘triple-lock plus’ on pensions. Meanwhile, Labour has announced the lowering of the voting age to 16.



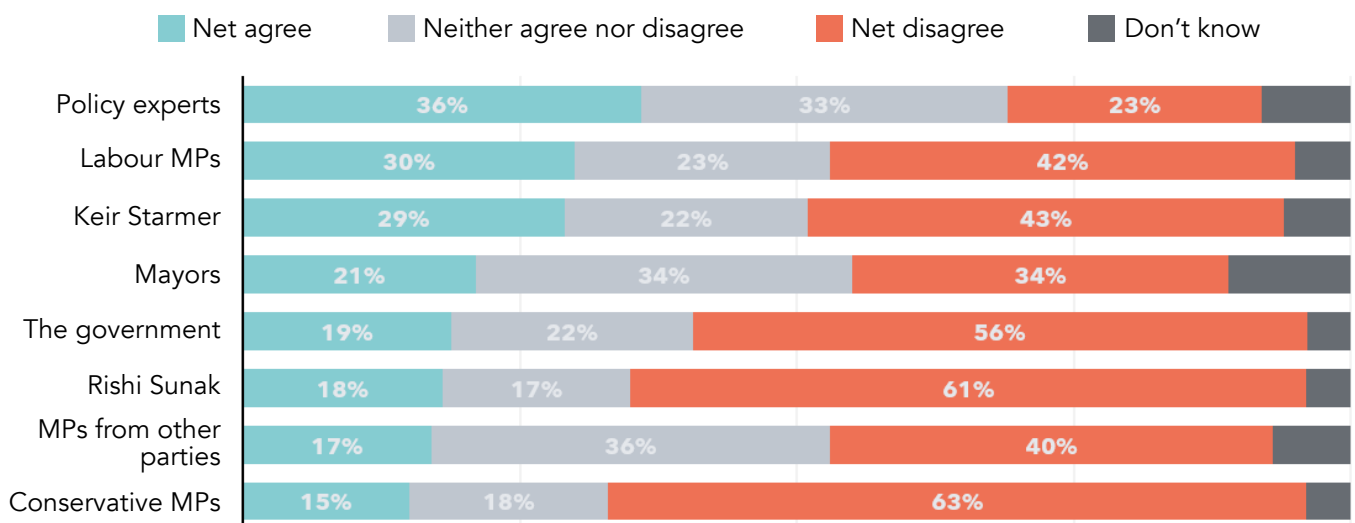
with people” and should not “try and sell a dream or kind of sugarcoat things, or say stuff that you know that they know they can’t deliver”. We are seeing this tension play out with Labour at the moment. The party is still trying to position itself as a safe pair of hands, though this has seen them face criticism for being light on policy promises and lacking a clear, compelling vision for the public to rally behind.

Overall, as Figure 4 shows, our polling finds that the public holds little trust in people or organisations to level with them about future challenges. Of the options presented in our polling, ‘Policy experts’ were seen as the most trustworthy source (36% net agree), with Conservative MPs polling the lowest (15%).

**FIGURE 4**

**TRUST IN DIFFERENT PEOPLE/ORGANISATIONS TO BE HONEST ABOUT FUTURE CHALLENGES**

*Agreement with the statement: “I trust the following people/organisations to be honest about what challenges and limitations the next government will face after the general election”*



While our panellists have been quite damning about the state of trust in elections, they also acknowledged that politicians have to navigate difficult trade-offs during campaign season. Over the course of the campaign, we will be asking the Trustwatch 2024 panel to consider the visions presented by the main parties during the election, with attention to how the balance of hope and realism is presented at key moments, such as TV debates and manifesto launches.

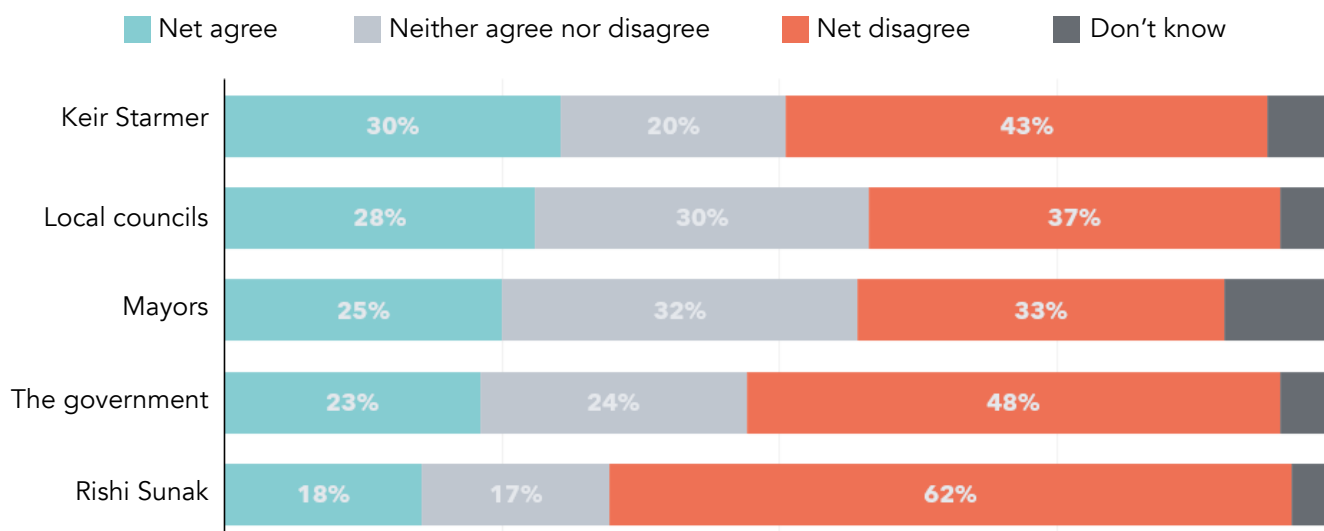
**3. POLITICIANS DOING WHAT THEY SAY THEY’LL DO VS CHANGING THEIR MIND**

Love it or loathe it, the ‘Get Brexit Done’ slogan will live long in the national memory. Following Theresa May’s three failed attempts to secure Britain’s exit from the European Union, Boris Johnson’s 2019 campaign slogan looked to appeal to voters’ desire for action and delivery, following a period of political gridlock. Sunak has also adopted similar rhetoric by strongly emphasising that he has a ‘plan’ which he will ‘deliver’, if given the opportunity.

In our pre-campaign polling, we asked the public about who they trust to “get things done” should they be elected. As Figure 4 demonstrates, trust in delivery is low across the board, though there are differences between leaders of the two major parties. 30% of the public said that they trust Keir Starmer to get things done were he elected, whereas just 18% of the public said the same about Rishi Sunak - strikingly, 62% of the public actively disagreed with the statement in relation to the Conservative leader.

**FIGURE 5****TRUST IN DIFFERENT POLITICAL ACTORS TO 'GET THINGS DONE IF THEY ARE ELECTED'**

Agreement with the statement: "During the general election campaign, I trust the following to get things done if they are elected"



*"I think for me, it's [trust in politicians is about] whatever they are campaigning for, to get the voters to vote for their party or themselves, that they make that become truth basically, to follow up on it and materialise it"* - 'Sometimes voter'

Our Trustwatch 2024 panel explained that 'getting things done' was a key aspect of their trust (or lack thereof) in politicians. The panellist quoted above explained that, for them, trust in politicians is about delivering on what you say you will. Another panellist outlined the importance of delivering on what you have said you will during the campaign:

*"Just the reliability on (...) what they've promised and to deliver that as well. You know, a lot of them they talk, they talk, talk, talk, but they don't really sort of deliver (...) if you're going to talk about something, campaign about something you need to deliver it as well"* - Gen X based in London

In these early focus groups, we posed various hypothetical scenarios to panellists and asked them how they would like to see politicians and the media respond to them. One of these hypothetical scenarios was one in which a politician promised something during the campaign and then, after being elected, felt that circumstances had changed and they wanted to change course. Here, a non-voter emphasised the need for "the politician to be honest, transparent, to give the reasons to why it can't go ahead".

In other discussions about delivery, a 'usually voter' suggested the government needed to keep the public better informed about the progress it had made and issues it had encountered. They suggested having "smaller goals, quarterly goals and every quarter go through as to sort of how they progressed with it" and that, where progress had not been made, the government outline clear actions on how they will navigate this going forward. On the subject of accountability and scrutiny, Trustwatch 2024 panellists voiced frustration at politicians' performance on the media circuit and non-committal, avoidant 'politician's answers'. One 'sometimes voter' explained that politicians "never give straight answers", while another felt the public would have more trust in politicians if they admitted mistakes and explained how they were going to respond accordingly.

As the campaign progresses, Trustwatch 2024 panellists will use real-time events (e.g. gaffes, controversies, announcements, debates) to explore the tensions and trade-offs that politicians and the media must navigate, and consider productive ways forward.

## 4. CHARISMA AND CHARACTER

[Imagine a politician you could trust. What would that look like?]

***"I think someone that's, like, relatable in some sense (...) they're like down to earth and they're not too much in their own bubble"*** - Gen-Z based in Cambridgeshire

***"I just detest that sort of photo-op crap where they sort of always get dressed up in costumes and stuff (...) Some people love that don't they? Sorry, but I just don't and I can see right through it"*** - 'Always voter'

If we were to play a game of UK election bingo, 'politician pulling a pint at the pub' and 'politician pointing earnestly in a hard-hat and high-vis' would almost certainly feature. Politicians all yearn for that special status with the public - 'someone I could get a pint with'. It supposedly acts as an indication that the public are comfortable with and can relate to the politician in some way. However, as our Trustwatch 2024 panel can attest, this quest for sincerity and relatability can be challenging. While one 'sometimes voter' praised Rishi Sunak for frequenting construction sites and doing interviews with his blazer off, others felt his wealthy background made these attempts feel disingenuous.

Rather than appearing pint-friendly, both Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak are frequently cast as 'boring' and 'uninspiring'. A recent Telegraph headline suggested "This could turn out to be the most boring election campaign in history", referring to the campaign as "a match between two grey and uncharismatic candidates".<sup>9</sup> While this may partly be a question of personality, there is also a strategic question here about trust: do we value charisma and character (and pint-friendliness!) or might the public be more trusting of politicians if they are, in fact, more 'grey'?

These questions illustrate one of the tensions in trust-building reflected in our Trustwatch 2024 panel. On the one hand, some panellists felt they would be more trusting of a charismatic leader - associating this with trustworthy personality traits like representativeness and reliability. Others said the opposite, expressing cynicism towards any sort of charisma, which could be a method of distraction from serious issues. Instead, these panellists preferred politicians that took a more serious tone.

Those who praised charismatic politicians often used overtly non-political imagery to explain their point:

***"[Blair] had personality. He was a brilliant speaker, [would] make a very good car salesman - used car salesman. And in a way Boris was exactly the same - slightly different, a bit more humour to him - but it was exactly the same. And that's interesting. And I trust people that have got a bit of personality"*** - 'Always voter'

An 'always voter' explained that charisma engendered trust as the politician in question would be seen as someone who could express themselves and give the public confidence in their ability to represent them. Elsewhere, a 'non-voter' suggested that a candidate that "wasn't a conventional position" and had character could use their outsider status to appeal to voters.

On the other hand, other voters were weary of charisma and felt that excessive showmanship could mask a lack of trustworthiness. One Gen-Z 'always voter' explained that politicians needed to be polite and represent their values but that "somebody who has lots of charisma, I immediately distrust them, because you're putting on a show (...) that is taking attention away from the important things, which is actually doing what you said you're going to do, working hard to achieve it and listening (...) to what is actually important to people". Another panellist explained that they had initially trusted Boris Johnson through "force of his personality, his charisma. He just convinced so many people that, you know, he's leading us on the right path, that Britain will be free and we'll get our sovereignty back".

Through Trustwatch 2024, we will seek to better understand how levels of trust and engagement interact with the qualities the public want to see in their politicians.

9 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/05/25/uk-general-election-rishi-sunak-keir-starmer-july/>

## 5. THE LOCAL DIVIDEND

When discussing trust in politicians and the media, it is important to distinguish between national leaders, local MPs, councillors and other actors, working at different geographical levels. A new wave of devolution is occurring across the UK, with Combined Authorities, Metro Mayors, and a push for greater local authority power in terms of raising and using revenue. Part of the argument for this movement is that locally-made decisions will deliver better outcomes for local people. This, in and of itself, should then build trust over time.

At present, in England, we see that trust in MPs falls the further away from Westminster you travel<sup>10</sup> and our Trustwatch 2024 panel spoke of how distanced national politicians were from the issues affecting the lives of the public. In contrast, some panellists felt they may be able to relate more to political actors at the local level - both in terms of who they are as people (if they are from the area) and to the issues they talk about (if they speak to local concerns). These sentiments were expressed quite clearly by one of our Trustwatch 2024 panellists:

***“I think there’s definitely something about trust in local and smaller organisations. And I think that just goes back to there being more of that human connection. And (...) they’re closer to the ground of what is actually happening within that local community, understanding the nuances, understanding the people that live there. And therefore, whatever services or messaging that they put out is reflective of what is actually true and real on the ground. Whereas I find the political organisations and people within them - and I don’t necessarily have lots of people that come to mind- it’s so far removed. And some of the stuff that they come out with, I’m like, What planet are you living on that you think that that is important?” - ‘Always voter’***

For the Trustwatch 2024 panel, if there was any local trust dividend it often came from the personal interactions that panellists had had with local politicians. One Glasgow-based panellist spoke about how their local MP was “quite approachable” and that she was “always out and about promoting whatever particular thing is pertinent to the local area”, in contrast to the “bigger, grander politics of the country itself”. Elsewhere, a ‘usually voter’ explained that at local surgeries with MPs, they would share their problems, feel listened to and would have a local authority officer come back to them saying that they were looking into the issues. Again, this was viewed in contrast to national government at large, where they felt their individual concerns might get lost among other challenges and priorities.

As the election campaign develops, we will attend to how trust plays out at different geographical scales. As well as politicians, we will also report on the role that local media plays during the campaign.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ippr.org/articles/trust-issues>

# CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

These early findings of Trustwatch 2024 have presented several emerging themes from this election season. Both the polling and panel discussions have revealed a range of rich insights - this launch paper is not exhaustive and we look forward to covering other themes as the project progresses. In particular, this early briefing paper has focused more on politicians and less on insights concerning trust in national and local media, which will be included in our full report. For instance, Trustwatch 2024 panellists have discussed the extent to which the media should cover stories about the personal lives of politicians. Some felt that personal stories should be wholly off-limits while others felt affairs, for example, may be relevant in helping the public form judgements about politicians' character. These tensions also speak to issues around the extent to which different forms of media have a duty to report what is in the public interest and how this might be balanced against commercial considerations (e.g. generating 'clicks'/'reads' and therefore revenue).

We will be sharing our more in-depth analysis over the summer. In the meantime, subscribe to our [newsletter](#) to keep abreast of all our election analysis, including insights from Trustwatch 2024.

If you are interested in learning more about Trustwatch 2024, please get in touch with **Billy Huband-Thompson** ([billy.huband-thompson@demos.co.uk](mailto:billy.huband-thompson@demos.co.uk)) or **Dan Goss** ([dan.goss@demos.co.uk](mailto:dan.goss@demos.co.uk))

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