Executive
Summary

The **UK'S** CHANGING **DEMOCRACY**

The 2018 Democratic Audit

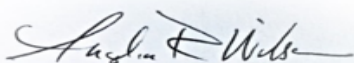Edited by
**Patrick Dunleavy,
Alice Park
and Ros Taylor**

Foreword from the Political Studies Association

The Political Studies Association (PSA) is the professional society for the UK's political scientists, and we are delighted to support the online publication of *The UK's Changing Democracy*, working in partnership with Democratic Audit and LSE Press and the funders, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

The book's objectives could not be better aligned with our own strategic mission – both in terms of engaging the citizens of the UK with the democratic process, and in making cutting-edge research in political science accessible to a wide audience. We are particularly pleased that the range of contributions covers a wide spread of UK universities and individual researchers, reflecting the diversity of the PSA's membership and the political studies community.

The Political Studies Association is committed to supporting schools and A-level students especially with teaching and learning resources. We have recently launched a new scheme making membership of the PSA accessible for every school in the UK. We have a range of new resources for teachers and students coming in 2019 and look forward to working with Democratic Audit again in the near future.

We would particularly like to thank Patrick Dunleavy for leading this work and to all those who have contributed their time to this publication. We hope you enjoy the book and its contribution to furthering knowledge and understanding of contemporary political engagement.

Professor Angelia Wilson, Chair

Political Studies Association

The UK may be one the world's oldest democracies, but it is also one of the best illustrations that the task of democratisation is never finished. Against the backdrop of the Brexit referendum and populist calls to 'take back control', Patrick Dunleavy and his colleagues provide a masterful stocktake of how UK democracy has changed since the last full audit in 2012. They provide a timely reminder that democracies are elaborate constructions of countless, mutually dependent institutions. The book is essential reading for students of UK politics, for citizens wanting to make sense of the UK's shifting democratic order, and for policy-makers grappling with the task of defining the future shape of the UK polity. It also sets out a crucial challenge for political scientists to really get to grips with the micro-foundations of democracy, and to understand the threats democracies face.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg, *lead author of the 2012 Audit of UK Democracy, Chair of the Democratic Audit Trustees and Trustee of the UK Political Studies Association.*
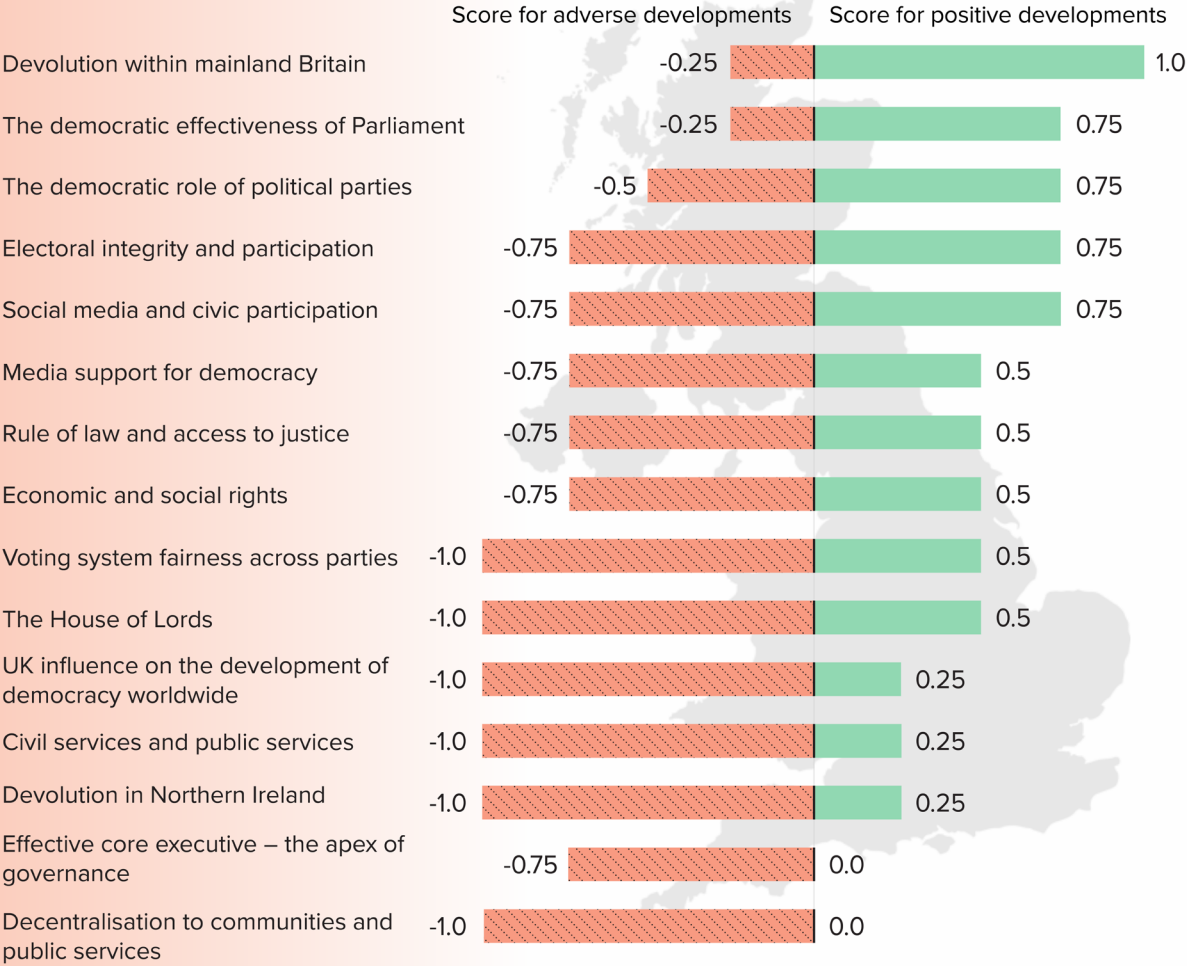
The Context

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The 2018 Democratic Audit presents the most comprehensive survey of recent trends across all aspects of the UK political system. Carefully assessing liberal democratic trends within the UK has never been so important in recent times because:

✦ From April 2019 the UK government will cut loose completely from the convergence on a 'European' template for liberal democracy, which has previously dominated most recent constitutional and political changes since 1997.

✦ The UK's famously 'uncodified' (or messy) constitution faces another period of dramatic upheaval.

✦ New loads will be placed on the UK central government by 'taking back control' of trade policy and immigration. Steering a single-country course is more difficult also within a world economy and system of international relations that is increasingly dominated by giant nation states (China, USA, India) and the EU, and where realpolitik 'power politics' seems to be renascent (as with Russian policies).

✦ The background international context for liberal democracies has also worsened dramatically:

  • Some iconic liberal democracies (like the USA) are now backsliding on respecting democratic basics, such as maintaining the integrity of elections.

  • More recent liberal democracies have slipped back into semi-democracies where incumbents skew the scales of elections in their favour and penalise political opponents (as in Turkey, Thailand and the Philippines).

  • Even within the EU powerful populist incumbents are skewing constitutional arrangements in their favour (for example, in Hungary and Poland), while elsewhere corruption remains a serious threat.

  • Established semi-democracies have become more authoritarian and locked-in over time, with breaches of rights and overseas excesses increasing (as in Russia).

  • China continues to demonstrate that an authoritarian government can post remarkable economic growth and maintain relatively stable governance, and at immense scale – undermining liberal democracy's claim to uniquely support economic modernisation and social development.

  • Some evidence suggests that Western publics have increasingly lost sight of or mentally downgraded the importance of living in a democracy.

✦ Recent experience demonstrates that having a few big 'building blocks' of democracy in place, such as a majority voting system and a popularly elected legislature, is not enough to prevent democratic decay or backsliding. In addition, dozens of 'micro-institutions' must also work in pro-democratic and supportive ways if an overall level of responsiveness to majority views and protection of civil liberties is to be maintained.

Results: Overview

Auditing the UK's democracy: positive and adverse developments in 2018

	Score for adverse developments	Score for positive developments
Devolution within mainland Britain	-0.25	1.0
The democratic effectiveness of Parliament	-0.25	0.75
The democratic role of political parties	-0.5	0.75
Electoral integrity and participation	-0.75	0.75
Social media and civic participation	-0.75	0.75
Media support for democracy	-0.75	0.5
Rule of law and access to justice	-0.75	0.5
Economic and social rights	-0.75	0.5
Voting system fairness across parties	-1.0	0.5
The House of Lords	-1.0	0.5
UK influence on the development of democracy worldwide	-1.0	0.25
Civil services and public services	-1.0	0.25
Devolution in Northern Ireland	-1.0	0.25
Effective core executive – the apex of governance	-0.75	0.0
Decentralisation to communities and public services	-1.0	0.0

Notes: Each score indicates the answer to the questions: 'Have positive and substantial pro-democratisation trends occurred?' (for positive scores); or 'Have substantial threats or problems to democratic quality emerged in this area?' (for negative scores). 1 = clearly Yes to the question posed; 0.75 = tending towards Yes; 0.5 = impossible to say Yes or No to the question; 0.25 = tending towards No; 0 = Clearly No to the question posed.
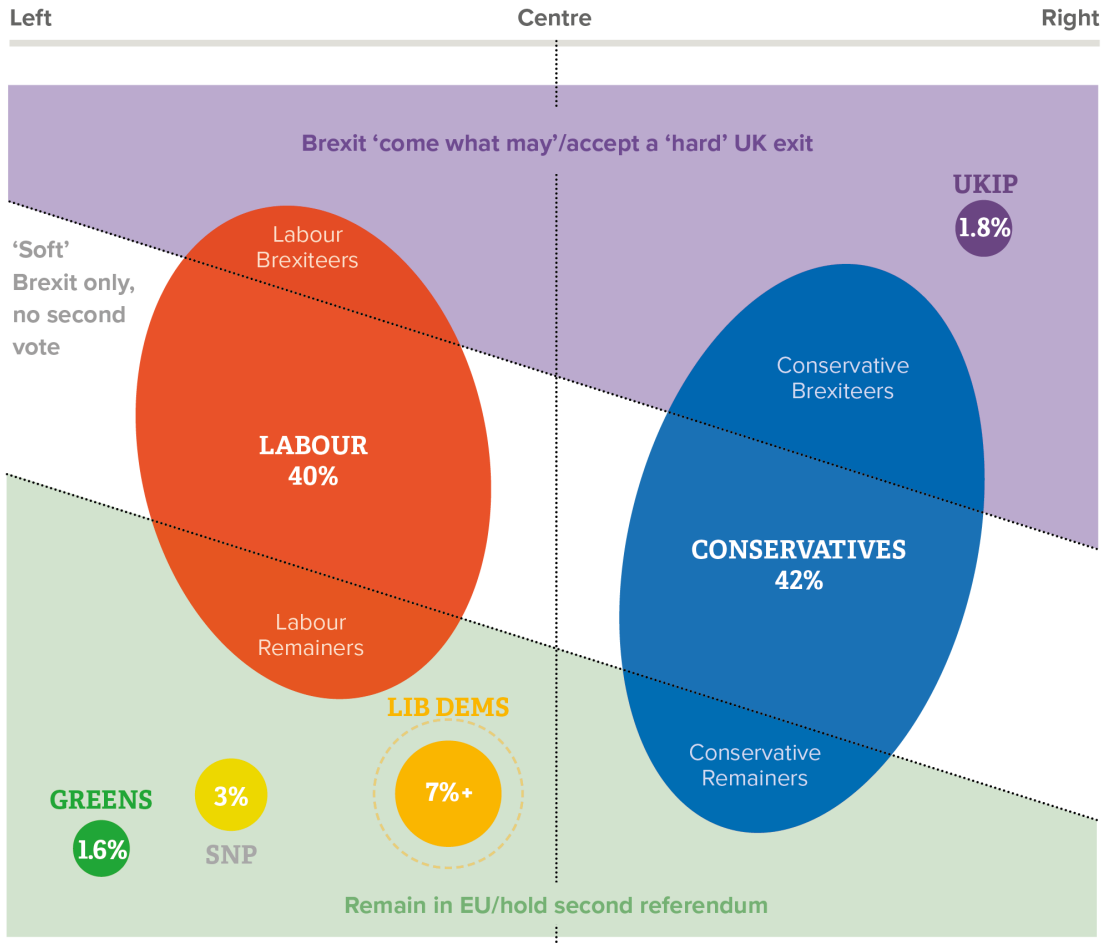
Source: Scores from Chapter 8.1: The UK's recent democratic gains and losses. Infographic by Stacey McCormack.

Results I: Causes for concern

We find seriously worrying adverse changes in the democratic quality of some core political processes in the UK.

✦ British party politics is in an unprecedentedly chaotic condition. Divisions over Brexit cross-cut the top two Conservative and Labour parties (see Figure 1, next page), and the two parties' leaderships have proved unable to develop any effective consensus on the UK's strategy. The attempt to force through a governing-party only solution for leaving the European Union (forswearing any national consensus, especially Conservative–Labour co-operation) has created protracted uncertainty, depressed economic growth, and cost households and enterprises dear.

✦ Meanwhile in England the smaller parties (Liberal Democrats and UKIP) are locked into seriously adverse positions by their own recent records and decisions.

✦ Systems for internal party democracy allowing wider party memberships to elect party leaders are theoretically in place. But they were by-passed by Conservative elites in 2016, so that Theresa May became Prime Minister without any contest. They have also failed in the Liberal Democrats since 2015 (because there are too few MPs to sustain a competition). And in 2015 many Labour MPs proved unable to accept the election of Jeremy Corbyn, or work with him, despite his convincing win, rerunning the contest in 2016, and only really reconciling to his leadership in spring 2017.

✦ The cumulative adverse impacts of austerity and non-growth policies (2010–18) on core executive capabilities, the civil service, public services and local government have rapidly increased since 2015. Civil service efficacy has radically declined, the quality of public services has significantly worsened, and local government has been hollowed out.

✦ The once smoothly operating central government apparatus around the Prime Minister, Cabinet and major departments has stuttered and malfunctioned with increasing frequency – generating policy disasters over Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Brexit in foreign affairs, and in the domestic realm over NHS reorganisation (2010–12), Universal Credit (2011–18) and the complete erosion of building safety regulations that became evident in the Grenfell Tower catastrophe.

Figure 1: The UK's changed party system at the 2017 general election and the subsequent Brexit negotiations phase

| Left | Centre | Right |

Brexit 'come what may'/accept a 'hard' UK exit

UKIP
1.8%

'Soft' Brexit only, no second vote

Labour Brexiteers

Conservative Brexiteers

LABOUR
40%

CONSERVATIVES
42%

Labour Remainers

LIB DEMS

Conservative Remainers

GREENS
1.6%

3%

7%+

SNP

Remain in EU/hold second referendum

Notes: The positions of the party ovals show their approximate left/right position; their size shows their vote shares at the 2017 general election; and their shape shows how party opinion spreads across the green, white or purple Brexit positions shown. (The Liberal Democrats' dotted line shows their stronger local election performance.)

Source: From Chapter 3.1: The political parties and party system (Figure 2).

✦ UK democracy is still limited by legacy arrangements from imperial or pre-democratic times that should have no place in a modern liberal democracy, including:

- A completely unelected second chamber of the legislature, with no accountability to citizens at all.

- An extensive 'dark state' apparatus, subject to no or only vestigial overview by Parliament or democratic institutions.

- • An unclear residue of 'crown prerogative' powers for government to take major executive actions alone, without parliamentary approval, for example on declaring war, launching military actions or incorporating former EU-era regulations into UK law.
- • A main electoral system for Westminster and English and Welsh council elections that dates from mediaeval times and erratically assigns parties seats in no fixed relation to their share of votes – for example, giving the SNP 95% of Scottish seats at the 2015 general election, on the basis of winning 50% of votes.

✦ The complex power-sharing devolution arrangements in Northern Ireland have ceased to operate, jeopardising its future governance at a key time.

✦ Even in areas where the UK has previously led good practice, democratic effectiveness has been undermined by a failure to recognise new threats and challenges. For instance, electoral integrity in the UK is normally high, but out-of-date legislation and regulation failed to properly regulate Leave spending in the 2016 referendum, prevent Russian bots influencing voters in 2016 and 2017, or curb manipulative messaging and targeting of voters using illegitimate information.

Results II: Grounds for optimism

Not all recent developments are gloomy though. Hopeful changes in UK democracy, include:

✦ Since 2010 Westminster has been a 'hung parliament' for all but two years (2015–17), instead of a single party having a controlling majority. This has increased backbench MPs' roles in policy-making on some major policy issues, and made the select committee system increasingly effective in overseeing policy implementation.

✦ Mass party memberships have re-grown in the digital era, at least in Corbyn's Labour Party and the Scottish National Party, and have helped to diversify these parties' sources of finance.

✦ Devolution in Scotland and Wales has proved increasingly successful, attracting involvement by voters, developing distinct national party systems and producing effective governments, whose powers have also grown strongly over time, and should expand further after Brexit.

✦ Positive and responsible uses of social media by most citizens (on a scale far larger than abuses of social media) have greatly extended the scope and quality of public surveillance over governing elites. Ordinary people can now make their views heard on far more issues, in specific detail, and far more quickly and effectively – increasing the responsiveness of officials and public services to public opinion.

About Democratic Audit

Democratic Audit is an independent research unit, located at the London School of Economics and funded largely by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. We seek to enhance the quality and depth of democratic practices across the UK, spreading knowledge of good practice and encouraging debate and deliberation about democracy improvement.

Our activities include:

✦ the Democratic Audit blog (at **www.democraticaudit.com**), which provides daily coverage of democratically relevant changes across the UK and overseas; and

✦ the Democratic Dashboard (at **www.democraticdashboard.com**), which helps citizens every year to connect easily with a full range of digital information about elections in their area.

Periodically our Democratic Audit exercise presents a comprehensive and balanced assessment of the state of UK democracy. It uses systematic methods that draw on five previous qualitative analysis Audits (dating back to the early 1990s, and widely adopted overseas). A network of 23 academic experts collaborated to write the 2018 Audit following guidelines set by Professor Patrick Dunleavy and the LSE team.

The analysis looked in detail at 32 different areas of democratic practice and covered:

✦ the requirements for liberal democracy that are specific to each topic area;

✦ the strengths and weaknesses of current UK practices and institutions;

✦ the future opportunities for making improvements;

✦ any future threats to the quality of democracy in that area;

✦ the latest relevant developments occurring in the area (up to late summer 2018).

The UK's Changing Democracy is an open access book, freely available (in full) for any reader to download. Each of the individual chapters can also be separately downloaded. Our analysis will be continuously updated via **www.democraticaudit.com**.

About the editors

Patrick Dunleavy is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the London School of Economics, and co-Director of Democratic Audit. He is also Centenary Professor in the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), University of Canberra.

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