Disenchanted with Democracy – but Divided Brits Unite Around What We Need to Fix

The mass population in the UK is now the second-least trusting in the world—above only Russia.

Democracy and capitalism are under scrutiny with the majority of Brits questioning their effectiveness and impact.

There are signs of hope—more people think the UK is on the right track and 4 in 5 agree on the priorities for reform.

LONDON, January 20th, 2020 - Britain is at its lowest ever position in a global table of trust among the mass populations of 28 countries*. Only Russia is a less trusting society.

That is the stark finding of the 20th Edelman Trust Barometer, the largest survey of institutional trust in the world, which surveys a total of 34,000 people—including 3,000 Britons polled in separate research either side of the General Election.

The Barometer reveals that 3 in 5 Britons say they are losing faith in democracy as an effective form of government, and over half believe that capitalism does more harm than good.

Institutions are seen by Brits as less competent and more unethical compared to the global average. The public blame politicians for creating an environment of fear for their own political gain.

But while the public ferociously condemn political leaders who lie—with a quarter of people even wanting them jailed—a significant proportion of them take a much more pragmatic attitude and tolerate deceit if it supports causes they believe in and gets things done. Strikingly, this moral flexibility and complicity is almost twice as likely to be found among the better-informed and wealthier people in society than in people on the lowest incomes.

Despite all of this, there are signs that the nation has turned a corner on Brexit and there is an opportunity to build trust. While Brits may feel that they are divided on issues facing the UK, evidence suggests that the public are in fact united on the issues that matter most. The NHS, crime, improving the standard of living are all concerns shared by between 80% and 85% of the population. And they believe that healing divisions in society is one of the most urgent tasks of government.

Ed Williams, President and CEO, Edelman EMEA, said: “Capitalism is in the dock and people are questioning the effectiveness of democracy. Political and business leaders need to raise their ethical standards, partner on the big issues, and deliver tangible change in the people’s lives if they are to build the trust of the British public.”

Last year, 43% believed they would be worse off in 12 months’ time; this year that figure has dropped significantly to 33%. The proportion of those who think they will be poorer in five years also dropped from 32% in 2019 to 28% this year.

There are glimmers of hope and indications that political leaders have much to play for: Edelman’s latest research, conducted since the Prime Minister won his mandate in December’s General

* for the definitions of these audiences, please see the boilerplate below
Election, shows a big drop in the number of people saying that the country is on the wrong track, from 65% last year to 52% this year, and trust in government has risen by 10% since Britain went to the polls.

The Conduct of Politics and Politicians is Harming Democracy

Despite some signs of optimism, evidence suggests that government has a long way to go to convince the public that it represents their interests.

For instance, in 2020, the Barometer reveals that only 9% of people say their views are “well represented” in British politics today and only 19% believe that their fellow citizens are interested in the views of other people.

61% said the UK was a divided country and two-thirds (67%) said they believed the conduct of politicians is making society more divided. Similar proportions agreeing that the behaviour of the political classes undermined trust in government (66%) and stunningly that politicians deliberately set out to undermine national institutions for their own gain (61%). Also, around six in 10 thought that political parties undermined democracy by acting as they do (61%) and that in general the behaviour of our politicians makes things worse in Britain (57%).

Capitalism Under Pressure

Like many developed countries, Britons are asking questions about the effectiveness and fairness of our economic system.

Just as 60% of people said they were losing faith in the effectiveness of democracy, so too is capitalism coming under sceptical scrutiny by Brits. A majority agreed with the statement that capitalism does more harm than good in the world (53%).

People want business to change how it operates and, as an institution in the UK, it is seen as unethical. Many people feel powerless to influence the behaviour of business and believe that it is essentially self-interested. Asked about whether the various institutions acted fairly, government scored -41 points and business -32.

3 in 5 of British people believe the pace of technological change is too fast (60%), with technology making it impossible for people to know whether what they are seeing or hearing is real (67%). A similar ratio believe that the government is inept and unprepared for effective regulation of technology (72%).

But the inherent trust in employers’ shines through, more than 4 in 5 of those in work say they believe it is important that their bosses speak out on the issues above. In more general terms, the relationship with “my employer” remains the most trusted of all relationships that people have with the outside world.

The growing movements in different parts of the business world to make businesses work more for the community at large win strong support from British people. Asked which group should be the priority for companies to serve, only 7% said shareholders, with the rest choosing local communities (8%), employees (47%) or customers (38%).

A Complex Relationship with the Truth

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For the first time, Edelman asked people for their reactions to the idea of politicians lying to the electorate and the figures are revealing.

More than half (56%) thought that politicians today were more likely to be dishonest than those in the past. Britons believe that their political leaders exploit issues mainly to attack opponents (67%) or to create a climate of fear for their own ends (60%), rather than being genuinely committed to solving the problems of the nation (29%).

Political lies should be more firmly punished than they are, people said. While clear majorities said politicians caught lying to the public should resign (59%), apologise (57%) or be banned from public office (52%), minorities were prepared to go even further. More than a third wanted mendacious politicians fined (34%) and a quarter thought they should be jailed (24%).

Yet when asked about their own principles when it came to telling the truth, double standards emerged. Almost half (48%) of the general population agreed that there were circumstances in which it would be justifiable for a politician to lie with the highest level of support for national security reasons.

1 in 5 people said it would be acceptable if a politician lied to “Get Brexit Done” (20%), while almost as many (17%) thought it would be OK to do so to “Stop Brexit”. The same proportion said they would have no problem if a politician misled the public “to get the party I support elected”.

Intriguingly, these figures jumped significantly when asked of people in the informed public* category, compared to everyone else.

They would be much more likely than the mass population to tolerate lying to get Brexit done (28% against 18%) or to get their favoured party in power (28% against 15%). In each case, the answers of the mass population were either at or below the general average, showing that they were markedly more upright than their wealthier counterparts.

Asked if they would be more or less likely to vote for a political party after their preferred leader was exposed as a liar, 65% of the whole population said less likely (with 26% saying “a lot less”), but more than a quarter say it would make no difference to them. In some sectors of the population, up to 4 in 10 would vote for a party regardless of proof that its leaders were deceitful.

**Johnson won the trust battle and has opportunity**

Whilst neither Boris Johnson, nor Jeremy Corbyn are considered trusted leaders, Boris Johnson won the trust race overall. Mr Johnson had a trust score of 41% compared with 26% for Jeremy Corbyn.

Following the election in December, 48% of Brits now say we are on the right track, which is up 13 points from a year ago. We have also seen a significant reduction in the number of people who think their standard of living will get worse in the next year (down from 43% to 33% year-on-year).

If the Prime Minister hopes to hold on to support lent to him by traditional Labour voters, it is clear he will need to make a real, quantifiable difference to the issues that matter most to electors. Healthcare is important to 85% of the population and tackling crime to 84%, but only 27% and 26% respectively are satisfied with progress on these issues.

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Of the 12 areas of policy that people were asked about, the least pressing were said to be gender-equality and protecting the rights of people from the LGBTQ+ community, but even so, these were important to more than half of Britons. And all this suggests that despite being seen as a divided country (as 61% of people do), Brits have much more in common than they think.

There is a significant opportunity for government and business to work together to make progress — 77% of people say government and business should be collaborating to solve social issues.

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About the Edelman Trust Barometer
The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer is the firm’s 20th annual trust and credibility survey. The survey was powered by research firm Edelman Intelligence and consisted of 30-minute online interviews conducted between October 19 and November 18, 2019. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer online survey sampled more than 34,000 respondents, which includes 1,150 general population respondents across 28 markets and 200 informed public respondents in each market, except China and the U.S., which have a sample of 500 informed public respondents each. All informed public respondents met the following criteria: aged 25-64, college-educated; household income in the top quartile for their age in their country; read or watch business/news media at least several times a week; follow public policy issues in the news at least several times a week. To add further insight the UK supplementary survey was done by research firm Edelman Intelligence and consisted of 20-minute online interviews conducted between 19 December 2019 and 6 January 2020. The 2020 UK Supplement online survey sampled more than 2,000 respondents consisting of 2,000 general population respondents aged 18 and over, and boosts of high net worth individuals and those from low income households. The general population sample is nationally representative of the UK population with regard to gender, age and region. The overall margin of error at the 95% confidence interval for the general population sample is ±2.2%.

For more information, visit www.edelman.co.uk/research/edelman-trust-barometer-2020

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