Power to Change

Backing community business

Closing the void

Can we reconnect politics with associational life?

May 2025
Josh Westerling, Linda Hien and Nick Plumb

Contents

About Power to Change

Power to Change
Backing community business

Power to Change is the think–do tank that backs community business.

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them. We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive.

Acknowledgements

Summary of recommendations

For government

1. **Establish a Democratic Trust Fund**

2. **Introduce a Right to Voluntary Service**

3. **Establish community covenants to embed mission-driven government at a local level**

4. **Establish a Partnerships Unit within the Mission Delivery Unit to reconnect government with associational organisations**

For political parties

5. **Shift to a shared – rather than transactional – approach to politics**

6. **Commit party budgets to get behind community organising**

For associational organisations

7. **Introduce projects to boost associational organisations' roles as democratic training grounds**

8. **Provide spaces for positive disagreement**

9. **Ensure local projects bridge across lines of difference**

Introduction

The time in which comfort could be found in our democratic system has passed. We are living in an anxious time, in which old certainties look fragile at best and new ones have yet to emerge.

But this story did not begin today. In *Ruling the Void*, the political scientist Peter Mair declared that, "The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society… that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its current form."[i]

This thunderous statement from over a decade ago should ring through the heads of all those who care about our democracy. It is the starting point we take for this paper, in which we will examine the relationship between involvement in associational organisations[1] like community businesses and trust in politics, political parties, and government. We will try to uncover whether it is possible to help 'close the void' by rebuilding connections between party democracy and wider society.

Why now? Democracy has to be cared for and looked after, and were the UK's democracy to go for a check up at the GP it would not get a clean bill of health. 45% of people – a record high – 'almost never' trust governments to place the needs of the nation above the interest of their own party, whilst 58% do not trust politicians of any party to tell the truth.[ii] Consistently over 70% of people feel that they have little or no control over decisions that affect their neighbourhood or local community.[iii]

In short, trust is lacking and people don't feel connected to decisions that affect their lives.

The arguments made in *Ruling the Void* help us to understand this moment. Of particular interest to us are those that concern civil society, political parties and the state. Here, Mair sets out how political parties, having hitherto existed somewhere between society and the state, are now closer to the latter and less connected to the former.

This is a two-way process in which the societal roots of political parties, for example partisan attachment and party membership, have been eroded, whilst at the same time parties themselves have actively sought to distance themselves from civil society. At the same time, the wider organisational environment in which political parties operated and were rooted – working men's clubs, trade unions, social clubs, and rotary clubs – has declined. This is due to the weakening of these types of organisations as well as the increasing individualisation in society decreasing their relevance to many people. Political parties, in the context of wider social forces contributing to the decline of civil society and their own volition to distance themselves from those actors, have therefore moved away from civil society and ever closer to government and the state.[iv]

---

1. We define an 'associational organisation' as any organisation whose members come together for a common cause and is (mainly) not for profit. More details on our definition are in the technical appendix.

Mair contends that political parties have relocated within society and their traditional functions have transformed. A void is created where:

> Citizens withdraw from parties and a conventional politics that no longer seem to be part of their own world: traditional politics is seen less and less as something that belongs to the citizens or to the society, more and more as something done by politicians. There is a world of the citizens – or a host of particular worlds of the citizens – and a world of the politicians and parties, and the interaction between them steadily diminishes. Citizens change from participants into spectators, while the elites win more and more space in which to pursue their own particular interests. The result is the beginning of a new form of democracy, one in which the citizens stay at home while the parties get on with governing.[v]

And stay home they did. Turnout at the 2024 general election was 59.7%, the lowest turnout since 2001 and a drop of 7.6 percentage points from 2019, also the largest dip in turnout between elections since between 1997 and 2001. Whilst within the range of turnout results since 1918, the period from 2001–2024 represents one in which turnout has not reached the levels seen between 1922 and 1997.[vi]

Figure 1: Turnout at UK general elections since 1918[vii]
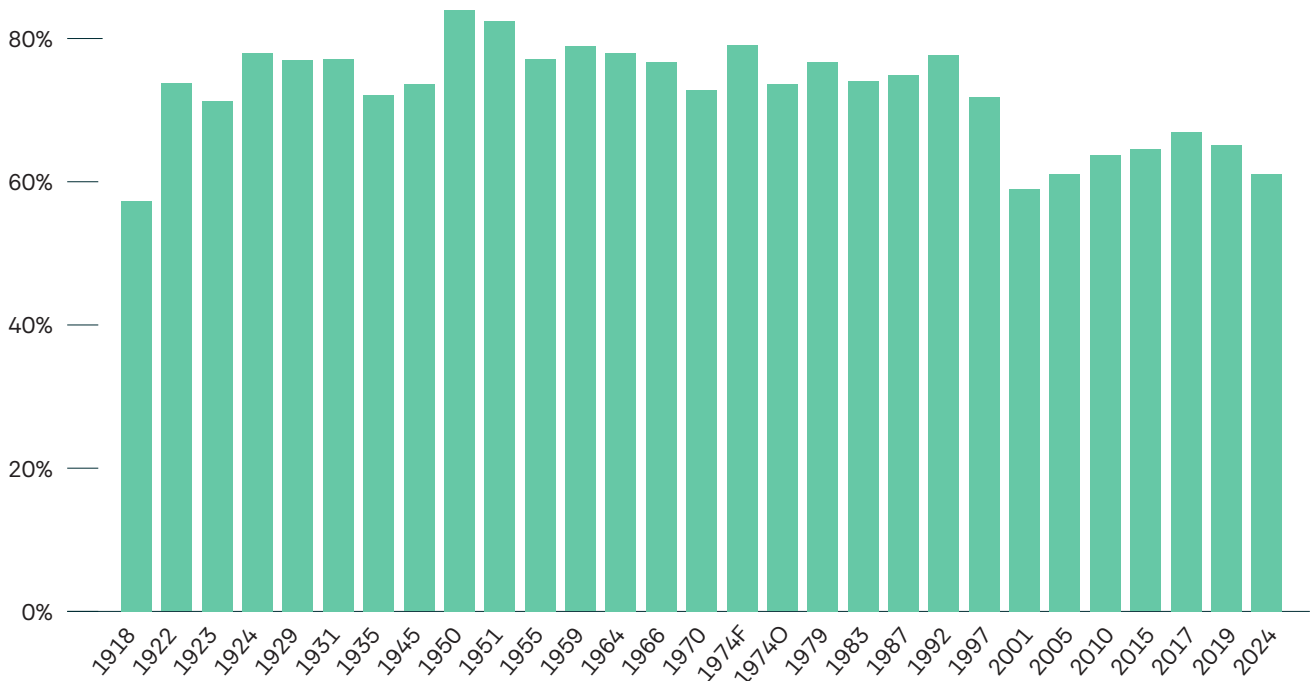
Part of the challenge here, for this new form of democracy, is that much greater importance is placed upon governing effectively in order for trust to be maintained. Whilst before, that trust could be upheld through the connection to politics as part of associational organisations or through membership of parties themselves, a political system in which the parties' role is primarily to govern makes this the core contingency of trust being maintained.

In the context of European political party systems, Mair wrote:

> It is possible to speak of a growing divide in European party systems between parties which claim to represent, but don't deliver, and those which deliver, but are no longer seen to represent.[viii]

With public services in a dire state, a series of significant elite policy and state failures stretching back over the last quarter century alongside – be that the Windrush Scandal or Infected Blood Scandal, it is fair to raise the question, what happens when parties no longer represent but are also failing to deliver?

Such a question has shaped the current Labour government's focus on delivery. Yet at the same time a debate has ensued about the extent to which delivery of policy is sufficient, with some contending that this needs to connect with ordinary voters.[ix] This is drawn from arguments made in the United States surrounding 'deliverism', a term describing an approach to governing focusing on policy delivery to improve people's lives which in turn creates a political benefit for the governing party. It is argued that deliverism is insufficient in the face of emotive storytelling that creates a sense of community and a clear 'other'.[x]

Following in this vein, and acknowledging the different context in the UK, we are sceptical that deliverism can address the dissatisfaction people feel with government and politics. Instead we see it as needing to operate in tandem with connection to ordinary people. Delivery needs to connect with ordinary citizens.

Currently, UK political parties are not well placed for this to happen due to the altering of their representative function resulting from the decline of partisanship, party membership and the movement of parties away from civil society. We see a strong civil society as a means whereby interests can be aggregated and connected to party structures and through which policy making can be more responsive.[xi] Outside of polling and focus groups, this would be a more organic and fluid connection built on genuine relationships that last over time rather than snapshots of public opinion. In turn, through stronger relationships, an ability to affect policy, and more responsive policy making, we'd contend that trust in both politicians, political parties and trust in government would be strengthened whilst governance itself would be more effective.[xii]

We also think that associational organisations can have internal effects that help to strengthen democratic engagement for citizens and can help to 'close the void'. Associations help to introduce habits such as cooperation that are vital for participating in public life. They help encourage the practical skills necessary for political participation, such as public speaking and organisation, that are difficult to develop outside of a group setting. These organisations also nurture civic virtues like trustworthiness and reciprocity that strengthen democratic life.[xiii] In short, if citizens are to no longer be spectators in public life, building social capital through associational organisations – with the positive external and internal effects this can bring – is crucial to closing the void.

That is what we want to test in this paper. Taking Mair's *Ruling the Void* as our inspiration, we will examine the relationship between involvement in associational organisations like community businesses and trust in politics, political parties, and government. We want to uncover whether the relationship exists – suggesting the void can be closed – and then make the case for doing this by strengthening associational organisations and their connection to politics and government.

We approach this as an organisation that backs community business and wants to see whether there is a role that community organisations like this can play in strengthening democracy. Our hope is that the findings can be used by people working in civil society, politics, and government to inform the choices that they make.

Considering the dark side of social capital

As long as social capital has been put forward as a positive asset to nurture and draw strength from in society, people have countered that social capital can drive regressive outcomes or attitudes, or be drawn upon for nefarious ends. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Putnam addresses two of these arguments head on: the first that social capital can drive intolerance, the second that it can hamper efforts toward equality. On the former, he puts forward a conception of a *civic community* (i.e. one that exhibits high tolerance and social capital), and then proceeds to illustrate that correlation in evidence from the United States. On the latter, he illustrates similar correlations, positing that strong intra–group solidarity is often the bread and butter of egalitarian movements and the basis for policy change.[xiv]

But we cannot deny the potential links between social capital and community and intolerance or inequality, so we do take those arguments seriously. History provides cautionary tales on this subject. In *The Civic Foundation of Fascism in Europe*, Dylan Riley challenges the "Tocquevillian" thesis that the development of civil society necessarily produces liberal democracies. He argues that, "the consequences of associational development for regime outcomes… depend on the presence or absence of hegemonic politics." In countries such as Italy, Romania, and Spain the development of civil society facilitated the rise of fascism. Democratic demand, expressed through civil society, came before strong political organisations and took on an authoritarian and illiberal form thus creating a crisis of politics within which fascism grew.[xv]

A similar argument is made in regard to fascist Germany. Germany in the 1930s had a strong network of social clubs and associations. These played a role in facilitating the rise of the Nazis by helping to communicate the Nazi Party's message and to increase contact with party members. German citizens were more likely to become members of the Nazi Party in areas where associational life was strongest, and this includes institutions promoting 'bridging' social capital, not merely bonding. This effect was found to be strongest in Weimar Germany where the institutional political context was weak, whilst in Prussia, with more resilient democratic institutions, the relationship between Nazi Party entry and associational organisations was significantly weaker up until 1930.[xvi]

Those of us advocating for a more robust civil society must acknowledge the possibility of this mobilising democratic demands within a political system in which institutions are widely seen to be failing, and the negative outcomes this could produce. We hope to demonstrate that involvement in associational organisations *can* strengthen trust in democratic institutions, but that does not mean it *will*. Civil society should not be considered in isolation but through its connection with democratic institutions. Yet the onus surely lies on those of us who value social capital in its most positive sense to ensure that it is drawn on for societal good. Indeed, this should be done not just as a good in itself, but because failure to do so may risk the cultivation of social capital by those who wish to sow division.

As the onus is on civil society to cultivate civic community, so too is the onus on our democratic institutions to better connect with civil society. We will make recommendations not just regarding strengthening civil society, but also regarding connection to civil society both for political parties and government.

State of engagement

What is the current state of engagement between associational organisations and political institutions? We have provided an illustrative, rather than exhaustive, picture in the interests of brevity for this paper.

Civic engagement

Aspects of our associational life are in decline.

One such aspect is trade union membership. The number of people who are members of trade unions began to rise in the 1930s and did so rapidly until the late 1940s. It then gradually increased before spiking in the late 70s to reach a peak in 1981 at more than 13 million people. From that point it declined rapidly until the late 90s, when trade union membership entered a period of steady decline to today – when 6.4 million people are members of trade unions.[xvii]

Figure 2: Trade union membership figures between 1892–2023[xviii]
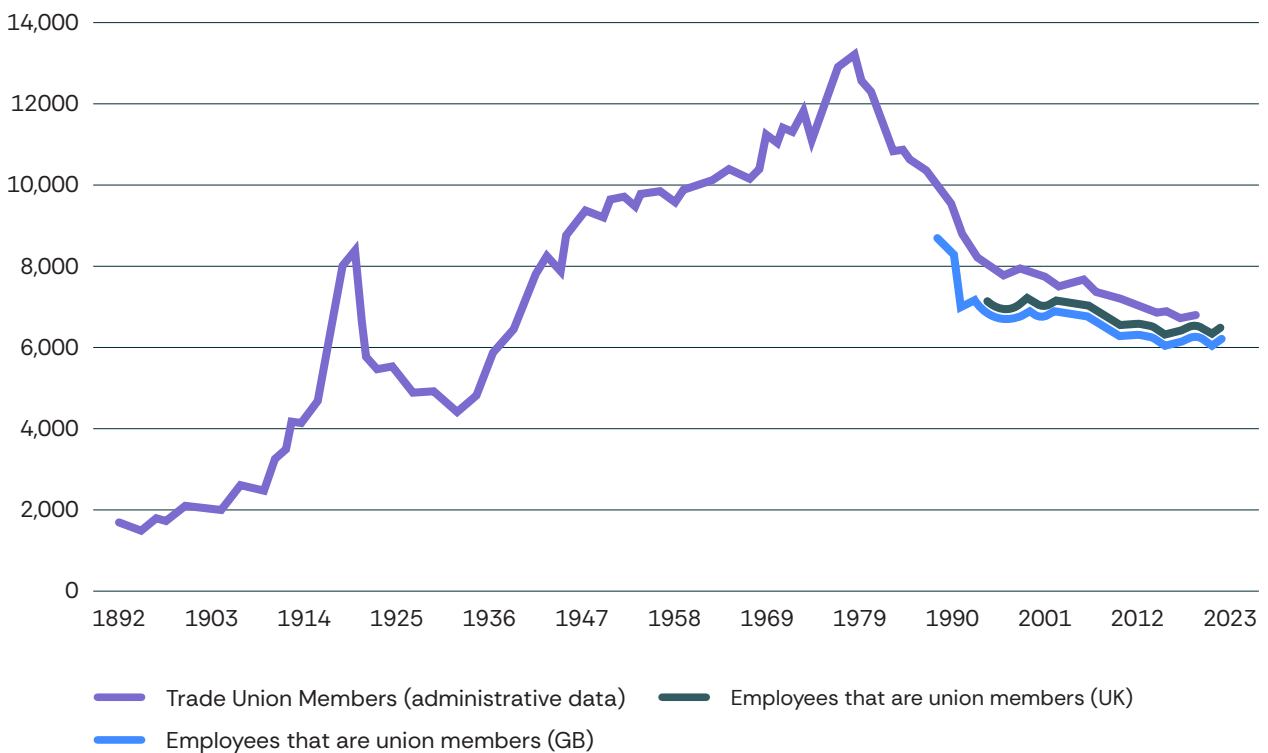
Volunteering – in many ways the lifeblood of civil society – also shows a worrying decline. Over the last decade, there has been a decline in the percentage of people volunteering formally. The largest decrease is among those volunteering at least once a year, which has fallen from 45% in 2013–2014 to just under 30% in 2023–2024. More regular volunteering – at least once a month – has also fallen, though not as drastically, to 16% from 27% in 2013–2014.[xix]

Figure 3: Formal volunteering figures in England since 2013–14[xx]

Legend: At least once a month (green) — At least once in the last year (blue)

Data points:
- At least once a month: 2013/14 27%, 2014/15 25%, 2015/16 21%, 2016/17 22%, 2017/18 22%, 2018/19 22%, 2019/20 23%, 2020/21 17%, 2021/22 16%, 2023/24 16%
- At least once in the last year: 2013/14 45%, 2014/15 40%, 2015/16 37%, 2016/17 37%, 2017/18 38%, 2018/19 36%, 2019/20 37%, 2020/21 30%, 2021/22 27%, 2023/24 28%
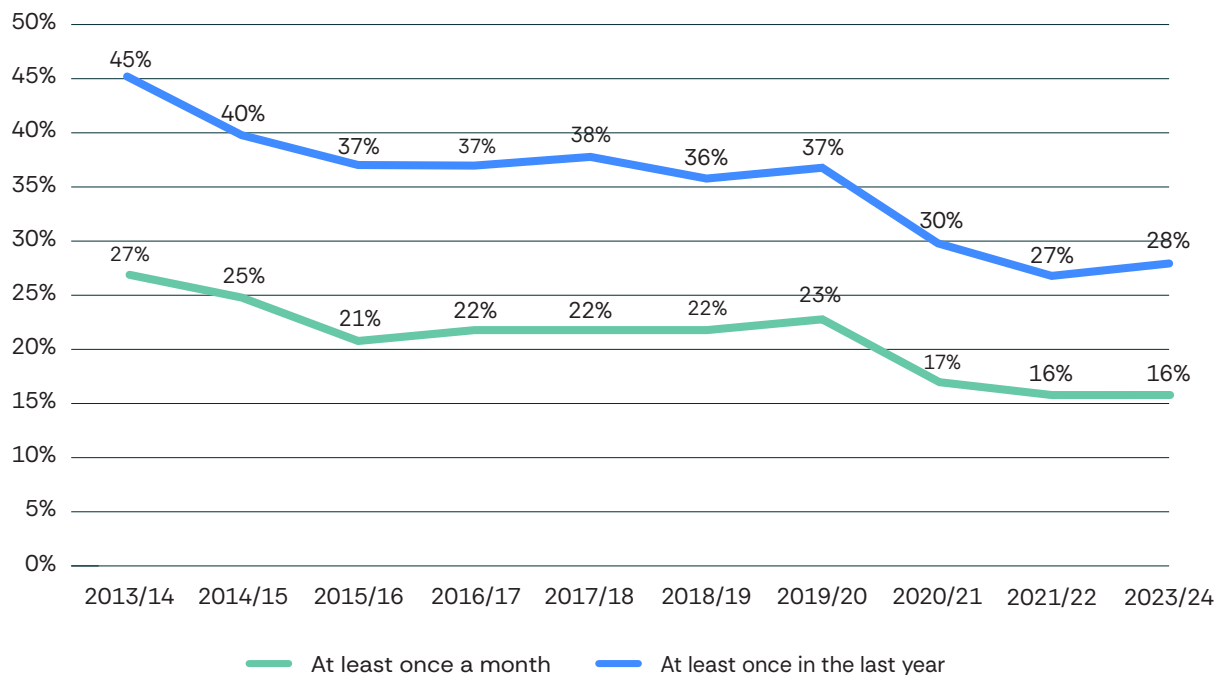
Other traditional sites of associational life have also been on the decline. Since the 1980s, the British Beer and Pub Association reports that the number of pubs has declined by a third.[xxi] A similar trend can be seen with working men's clubs. In the 1970s, 4,500 venues were members of the Club and Institute Union but this has since fallen to just 1,100.[xxii]

Figure 4: Number of pubs in England between 1980–2024[xxiii]
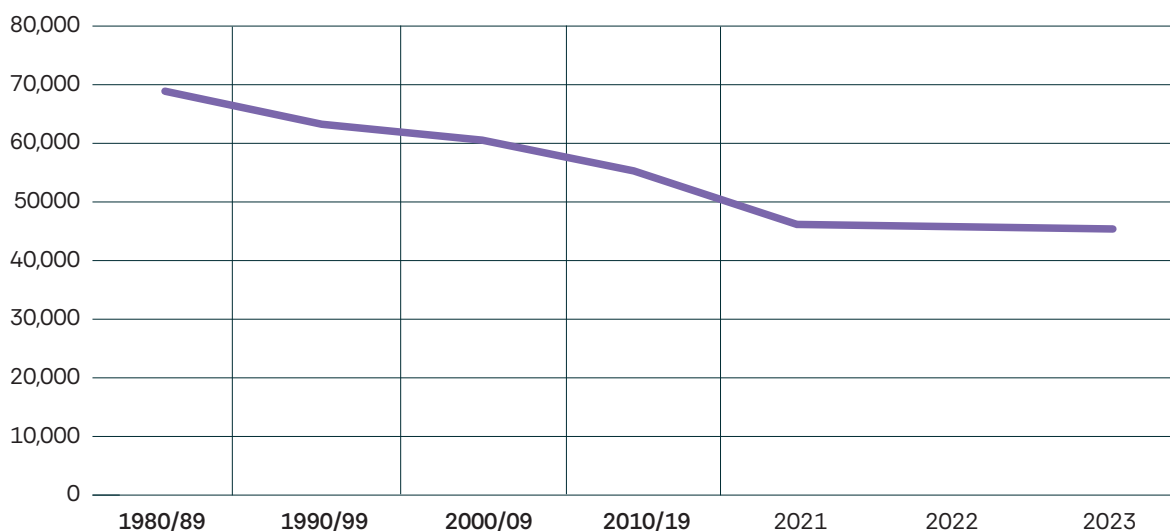
There are various possible explanations for this. Shifts in our political economy no doubt have played a role: traditional industry and trade unions have weakened, at points abetted by the actions of governments. This too will have contributed to the degrading of shared spaces and communities of work that often sustained them, exacerbated by the financialisaton of asset ownership. Changes in the labour market have likely left people with less time to volunteer or take part in civic life, as two incomes are required to make ends meet and precarious employment practices have proliferated.

The common theme is that these are all trends happening over a long period of time and that by and large there has been little significant government response to address them.

Green shoots

While traditionally represented associational life is in decline, there is still cause for optimism in newly emerging social infrastructure.

In a piece for Stir to Action, a national co-operative infrastructure body focused on strategic economic development projects and democratic ownership, Dan Gregory set out the new social infrastructure that we are seeing in our communities. The table below summarises this analysis, showing predominant ownership types and estimations of the number of these spaces where possible.[xxiv]

Table 1: Types, ownership, and numbers of new social infrastructure emerging in the United Kingdom[xxv]

Type	Ownership	Number
Skateparks	Local councils Social enterprises Local businesses	Over 1,600
Climbing walls and bouldering	Privately owned Social enterprise / charity	Over 450
Gyms, health and fitness clubs, & exercise studios	Mostly private commercial Some non-profits	Over 7,000
Mosques and Gurdwaras	Individual, family Trust, charity	1,800
Martial arts dojos	Privately owned Some non-profits	6,225
Soft play centres	Mostly privately owned Some non-profit Some public sector	1,300
Laser tag, bowling alleys, escape rooms, & karting	Privately owned	1,960
MUGAs and outdoor gyms	Publicly owned	No available data
Men's Sheds, hackspaces, & makerspaces	Charity	769
Nail salons	Privately owned	4,000
Board game, animal, & death cafés	Charity	No available data
Microbreweries & tap rooms	Mostly privately owned Some community owned	3,000

This presents a significant and diverse landscape of new social infrastructure, whose opportunities for engaging in civic life should be considered alongside declines in traditional associational life.

Alongside this there is strength in the values of the public that are a resource for associational life. The number of British people who think most people can be trusted stands at 46%, the highest level since 1981, a rebound seen across other high-income countries. The UK is second only to Sweden for trusting people of different nationalities, and it is only Sweden and Norway where people trust people they meet for the first time more than in the UK.

Table 2: Countries by % of people who trust people of another nationality[xxvi]

Country	Percentage of people who trust people of another nationality
Sweden	91%
United Kingdom	84%
Norway	84%
Canada	82%
Australia	76%
United States	74%
France	67%
Spain	65%
Germany	60%
Italy	51%
Poland	43%
Russia	37%
Brazil	35%
Iran	34%
Nigeria	32%
Morocco	30%
Philippines	30%
Mexico	23%
Indonesia	21%
Greece	20%
South Korea	19%
Egypt	18%
China	17%
Japan	16%

Looking at bonding trust within groups and bridging trust between groups, the picture is also positive. The UK is the fourth most trusting within groups, and scores the highest of any country for bridging trust.[xxvii]

Brits also have significant feelings of belonging, both to their neighbourhood and to the country as a whole. 61% of people feel they belong either 'very strongly' or 'fairly strongly' to their immediate neighbourhood. It should be noted here that there are significant variances in some demographics, for example sexual orientation and ethnicity.[xxviii] At a national level there is an even stronger belonging to Britain with less significant variance between groups. Black Britons identify most strongly with Britain at 86% whilst 77% of mixed race Britons do (compared to 84% of all Brits).[xxix]

This is all reflected in a recent study by the Behavioural Insight Team looking at social capital using data on economic mobility and Facebook. The study found that friendships in the UK bridge across economic divides, and communities with higher rates of cross-income friendships have higher rates of upward mobility.[xxx]

A mixed picture

The relationship between associational life and trust in politics that we seek to build on in this paper is a mixed picture. There is certainly worrying declines in places, but green shoots have appeared in others, on soil of fertile trust.

With this new social infrastructure arising, the nature of associational organisations as a whole may be changing. Although some of the newer forms of associational organisation are arguably more transactional in nature than previous ones like former pubs, trade unions or working men's clubs, new types of organisation may offer lower barriers to entry thus greater opportunity to get involved.

Within this context, we will now look at the relationship between involvement in associational organisations and trust in politics and government.

Analysis of the data

We posit that associational organisations can engender closer connection to political processes and democratic engagement. Participation in these organisations could therefore help to rebuild political trust and 'close the void' between citizens, the state and politics.

We have taken a mixed methods research approach to exploring this. To examine the relationship between involvement in associational organisations like community businesses and trust in politics, political parties, and government, and whether greater involvement in those organisations correlates to greater trust, we carried out polling with the public in Great Britain.

We also wanted to further explore the mechanisms by which participation in associational organisations may support satisfaction in democracy and trust in the political system, as well as to understand how people perceive their own participation in associational organisations and their connection to local and national politics. To do this, we facilitated four focus groups with associational organisation participants, including community business leaders.

Our key research questions, answered through our polling and focus groups, were:

1. Do individuals engaged with associational organisations exhibit higher trust in political parties, government institutions, and democratic institutions?
2. Does level of political trust vary by level of involvement, and/or by type of associational organisation?
3. Are there mechanisms within these organisations that reconnect individuals with the political process?

Polling

Methodology

Polling was undertaken by More in Common for Power to Change between 15th and 18th February 2025. The polling drew a representative sample of 2,088 GB adults aged 18 or over. To increase the sample size and enable further statistical analysis, More in Common also polled 1,001 adults who identified as being part of at least one of the associational organisations listed below.

For the purposes of this research, we defined an 'associational organisation' as any organisation whose members come together for a common cause and is (mainly) not for profit. While this definition mainly draws on formal associational organisations with clear democratic structures embedded within them (e.g. voting in elected members), we also wanted to consider 'new' and nascent forms of associational organisation such as book clubs, as well as larger organisations which may involve more passive forms of associational involvement such as The National Trust. In polling, we therefore asked the public to self–select whether they were involved in any of the following organisations:

- A local sports club or team
- A trade association
- A voluntary association or group
- A residents' association
- A work union
- A working men's club
- A community business
- A religious organisation
- National organisations with local chapters
  (e.g. Scouts, Extinction Rebellion, Royal British Legion)
- The National Trust
- A local social club
- A political party
- A school parent–teacher association
- A book club

Our measures of political trust closely aligned with the National Centre for Social Research's 'British Social Attitudes' survey questions on trust in the political system.[xxxi]

We asked the following questions:

- How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?
- How much do you trust British governments of any party to do the right thing for Britain, even if no–one is looking?

We also used the following measures of political trust:

- Trust in political parties
- Trust in local politicians
- Satisfaction with democracy
- Desire for a strongman leader compared to our current democracy

What we found

Involvement in associational organisations is associated with higher trust in democratic institutions

Compared to those not involved in any associational organisations, someone who is a member of at least one organisation is 16 percentage points more likely to trust British governments to place the needs of the nation over their own party, and 17 percentage points more likely to trust them to do the right thing, even if no one is looking.

Figure 5: How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	8%	29%	42%	21%
Not a member of any organisation		19%	46%	33%
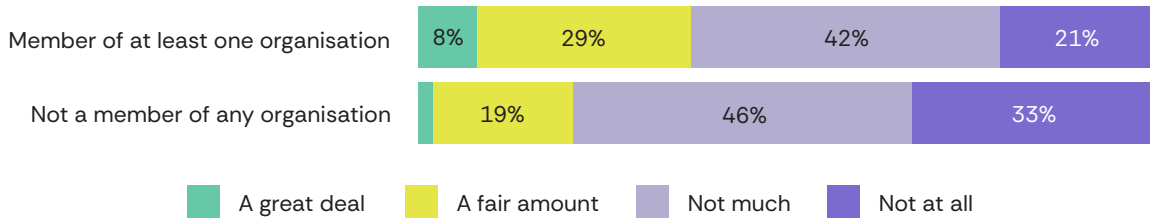
Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Figure 6: How much do you trust British governments of any party to do the right thing for Britain, even if no-one is looking?

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	9%	32%	41%	18%
Not a member of any organisation		20%	44%	32%
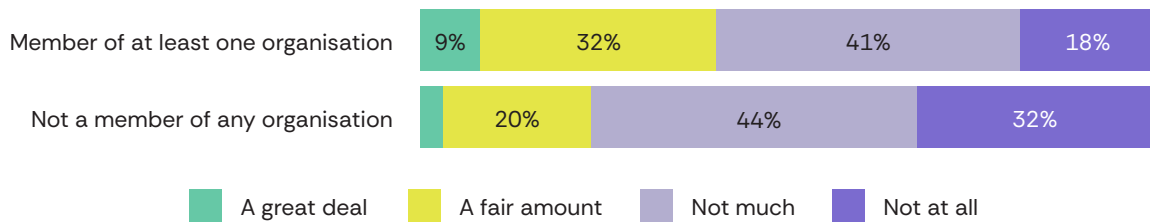
Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

The same is true for the four main political parties. Members of at least one associational organisation are 18 percentage points more likely to trust Labour compared to non-members, 13 percentage points more likely to trust the Conservatives, 7 percentage points more likely to trust Reform and 15 percentage points more likely to trust the Lib Dems.

Figure 7: How much would you say you trust each of these political parties?

Labour

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	15%	24%	29%	32%
Not a member of any organisation		17%	29%	50%

The Conservatives

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	5%	27%	37%	31%
Not a member of any organisation		17%	36%	44%

Reform UK

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	11%	24%	29%	36%
Not a member of any organisation	10%	18%	30%	42%

The Liberal Democrats

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	6%	32%	37%	25%
Not a member of any organisation		20%	40%	37%

Legend: ■ A great deal ■ A fair amount ■ Not much ■ Not at all

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

This holds true across a range of individuals and institutions, from MPs to housing developers, where members of at least one associational organisation are more likely to trust these actors to do the right thing locally than those who are not members.

Figure 8: To what extent would you say each of the following listen to people like you in making decisions that affect your local area?

Your Member of Parliament

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	11%	35%	39%	15%
Not a member of any organisation		25%	35%	36%

Your local councillors

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	10%	40%	37%	14%
Not a member of any organisation	5%	27%	36%	32%

Your neighbour

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	25%	47%	20%	8%
Not a member of any organisation	17%	43%	23%	16%

Local businesses

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	11%	62%	22%	
Not a member of any organisation	9%	51%	24%	15%

Local housing developers

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	6%	26%	46%	21%
Not a member of any organisation		21%	48%	29%

Community organisations

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
Member of at least one organisation	15%	54%	25%	7%
Not a member of any organisation	5%	48%	29%	18%

Legend: ■ A great deal ■ A fair amount ■ Not much ■ Not at all

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Greater involvement is associated with greater trust

We also find that greater involvement in associational organisations correlates with increased democratic and political trust. In most instances, we see the effect is greater the more organisations that someone is involved with, suggesting that the real 'trust dividend' comes when significant civic engagement is nurtured.

On satisfaction with democracy there is a relatively small difference between non-members and members of one organisation, but this increases by 11 percentage points when someone is a member of more than two organisations, compared to those who are not members of any.

Figure 9: Level of satisfaction with democracy, by the number of organisations respondents are involved with

Category	Value
0 organisations	13%
1 organisation	14%
2 organisations	24%
3–5 organisations	26%
6+ organisations	33%
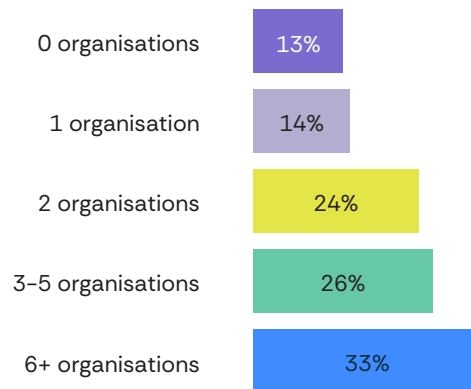
Note: Proportion ranking their satisfaction with democracy at 5 or 6, on a scale of 1–6.
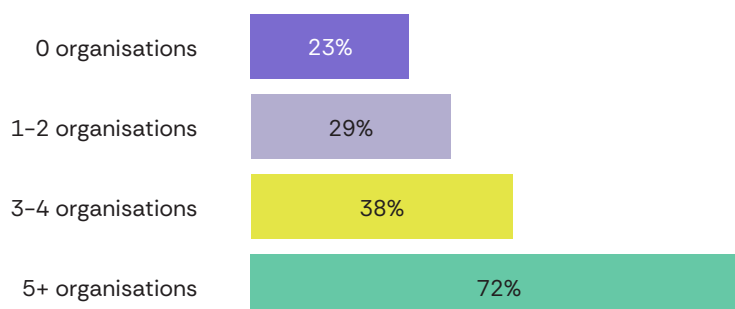Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

There is a similar shape to the data when looking at trust in politicians to put the nation's interests over those of their party, and to do the right thing even if no one is looking; however the effect is significantly more pronounced once someone is a member of more than 5 associational organisations.

Figure 10: Total trust in British governments to place nation above party, by number of organisations respondents are involved with

Category	Value
0 organisations	21%
1–2 organisations	27%
3–4 organisations	33%
5+ organisations	65%
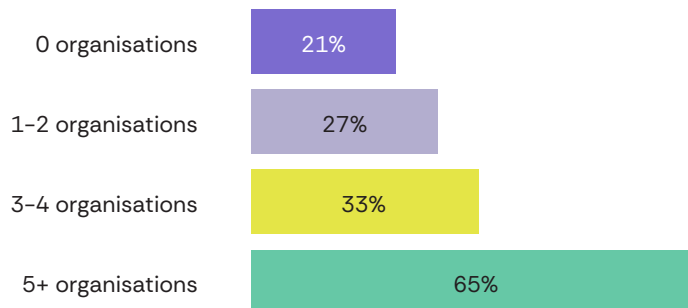
Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Figure 11: Total trust in British governments to do the right thing even if no-one is looking, by number of organisations respondents are involved with

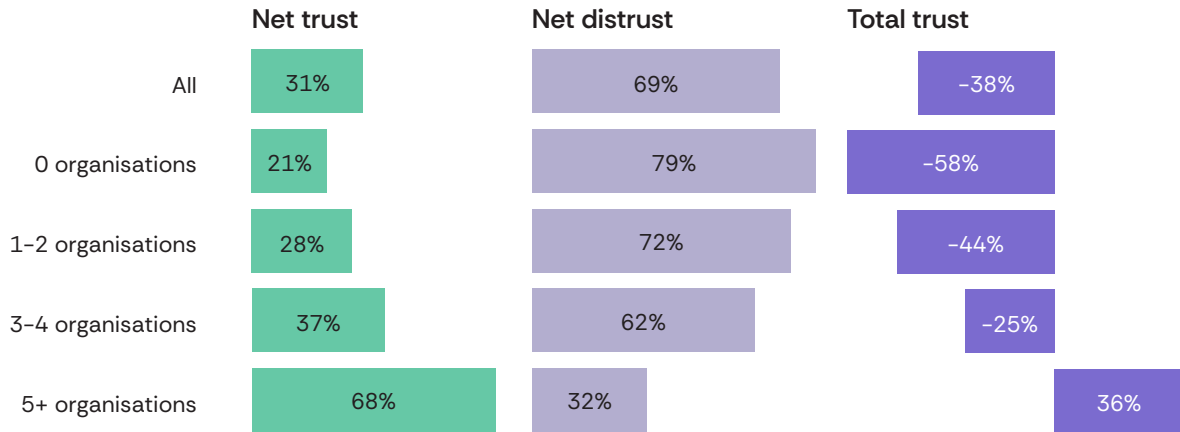| Category	Value
0 organisations	23%
1–2 organisations	29%
3–4 organisations	38%
5+ organisations	72%

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Trust in political parties also increases with increased involvement with associational organisations, though the effect varies between each of the parties.

For Labour, the party is only net trusted once there is involvement with more than five associational organisations.
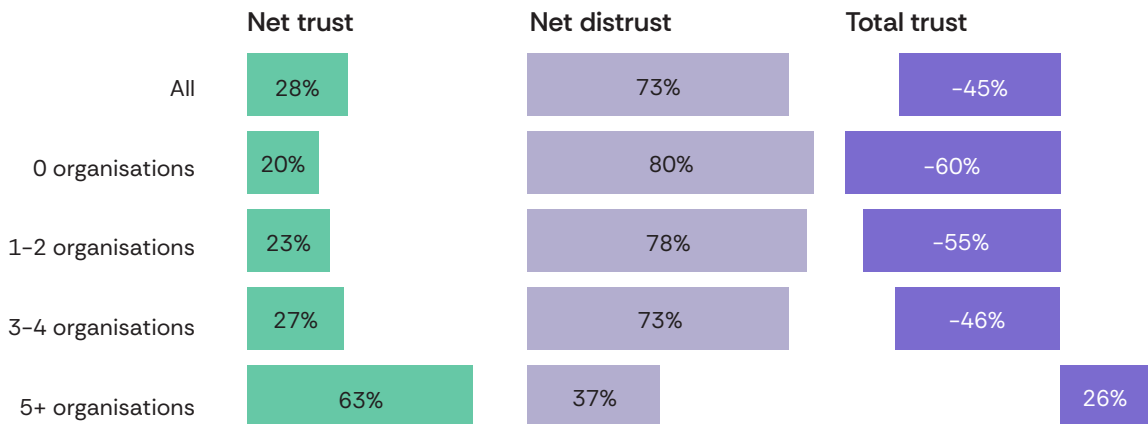
Figure 12: Trust in Labour, by number of organisations respondents are involved with

	Net trust	Net distrust	Total trust
All	31%	69%	–38%
0 organisations	21%	79%	–58%
1–2 organisations	28%	72%	–44%
3–4 organisations	37%	62%	–25%
5+ organisations	68%	32%	36%

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Trust in the Conservatives follows a similar trend though to a lesser extent, possibly reflecting overall discontent with the party.

Figure 13: Trust in the Conservatives, by number of organisations respondents are involved with

	Net trust	Net distrust	Total trust
All	28%	73%	–45%
0 organisations	20%	80%	–60%
1–2 organisations	23%	78%	–55%
3–4 organisations	27%	73%	–46%
5+ organisations	63%	37%	26%

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Similarly for Reform, trust does increase with membership of more organisations; however total trust is much lower than it is for either Labour or the Conservatives.
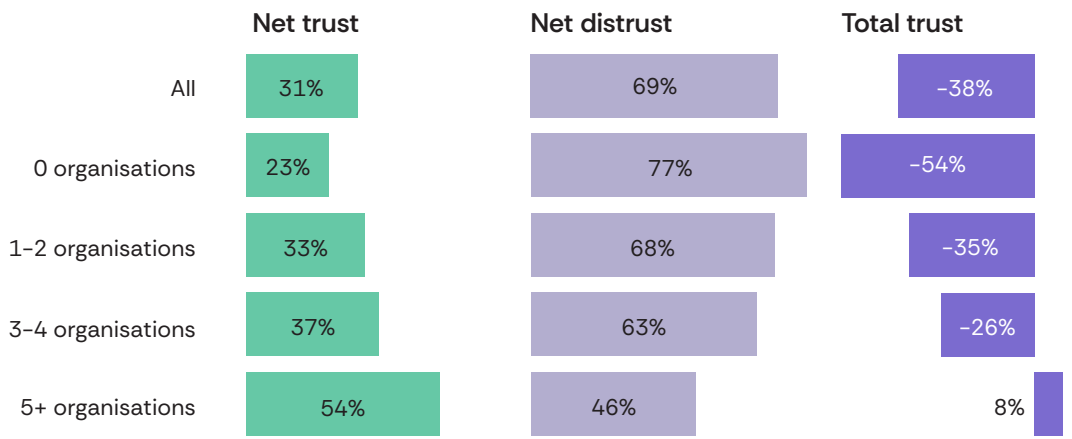
Figure 14: Trust in Reform UK, by number of organisations respondents are involved with

	Net trust	Net distrust	Total trust
All	31%	69%	–38%
0 organisations	28%	72%	–44%
1–2 organisations	27%	73%	–46%
3–4 organisations	36%	63%	–27%
5+ organisations	52%	46%	6%
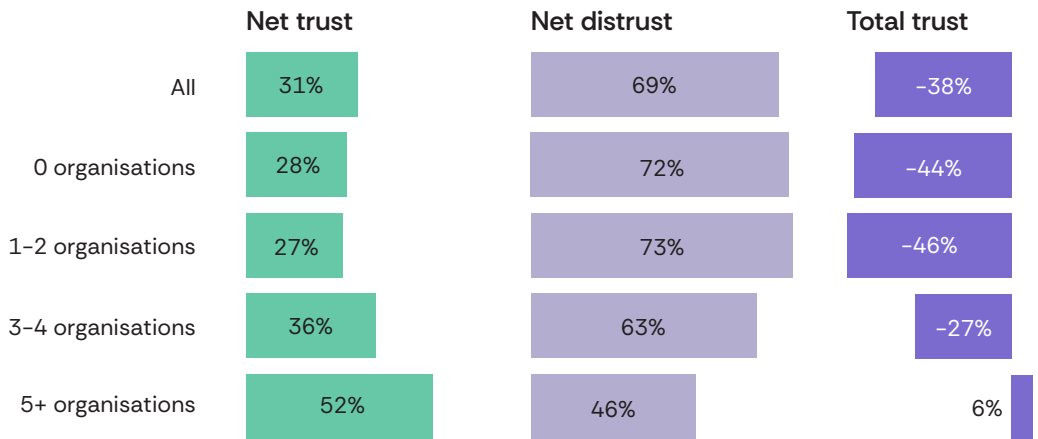
Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

The trends for the Liberal Democrats most closely reflect those for Reform.

Figure 15: Trust in the Liberal Democrats, by number of organisations respondents are involved with

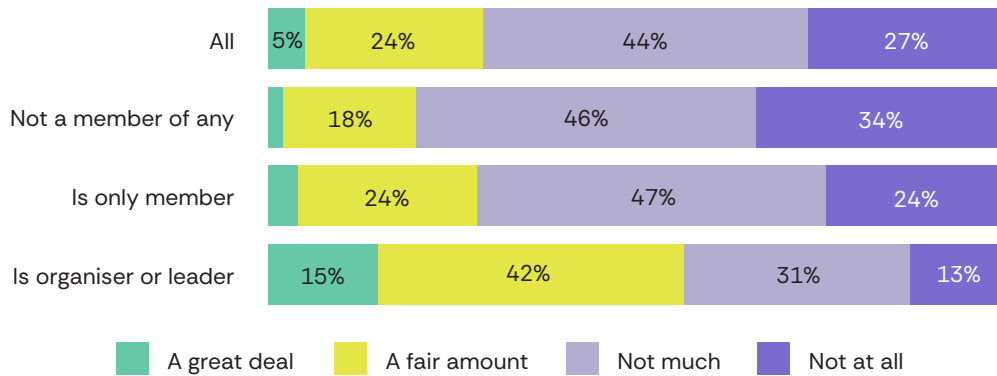|	Net trust	Net distrust	Total trust
All	31%	69%	–38%
0 organisations	23%	77%	–54%
1–2 organisations	33%	68%	–35%
3–4 organisations	37%	63%	–26%
5+ organisations	54%	46%	8%

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

People who are involved with more associational organisations are more likely to trust political parties in the round. Trust is greatest among those who join multiple associations, and towards the two most established parties in our party system which tend to form governments: Labour and the Conservatives. This indicates the potential trust dividend in encouraging multiple membership of associational organisations is greatest for these two parties over smaller parties.

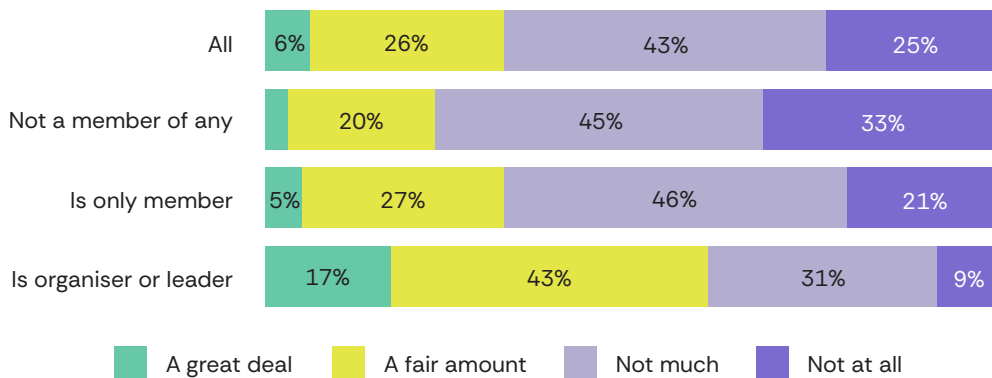## Deeper involvement is associated with higher trust

There is also a relationship between deeper involvement in associational organisations and trust. Someone who leads or organises within an associational organisation is nearly twice as likely to trust British governments to put the needs of the nation above the interests of their party and do the right thing when no one is looking, compared to the average Briton. However, when someone is only a member of an associational organisation they are no more trusting than the average Briton, whilst being slightly more trusting than those who are not members of any associational organisation.

Figure 16: Trust in British governments to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party, by level of involvement in organisation

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
All	5%	24%	44%	27%
Not a member of any		18%	46%	34%
Is only member		24%	47%	24%
Is organiser or leader	15%	42%	31%	13%

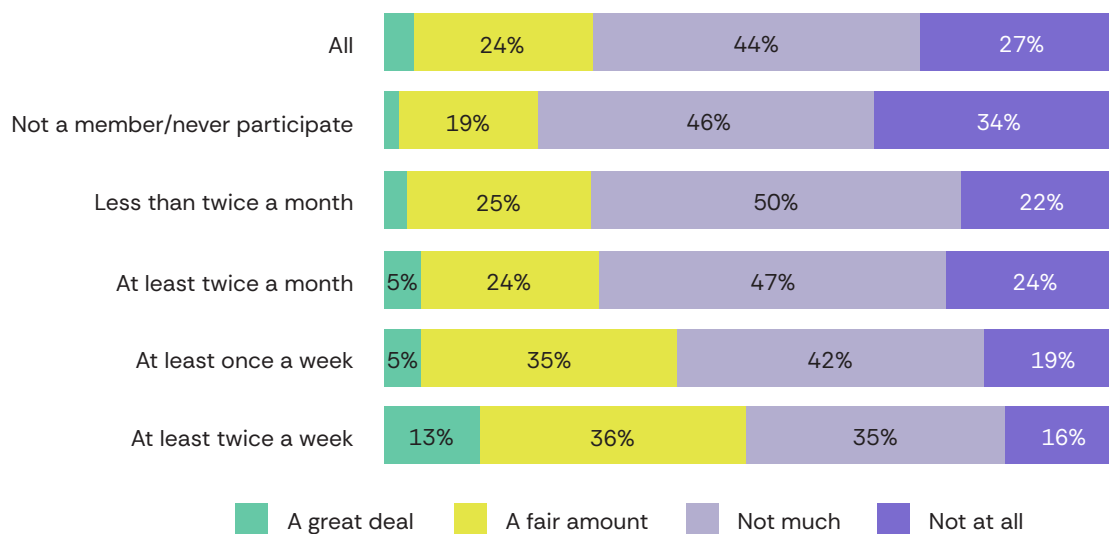Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Figure 17: Trust in British governments to do the right thing for Britain even if no-one is looking, by level of involvement in organisation

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
All	6%	26%	43%	25%
Not a member of any		20%	45%	33%
Is only member	5%	27%	46%	21%
Is organiser or leader	17%	43%	31%	9%

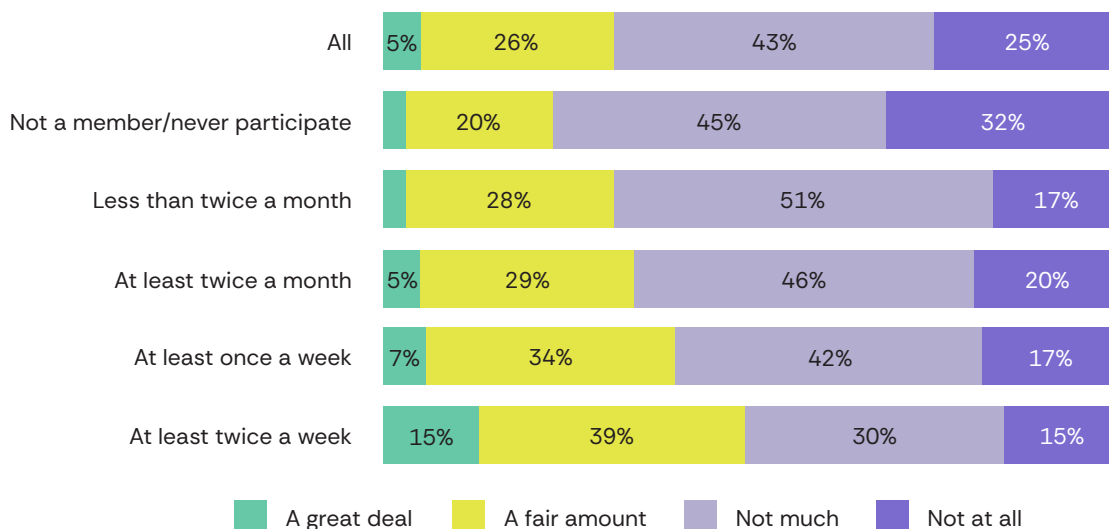Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

We find a similar trend when looking at how frequently someone participates in an associational organisation. Once someone participates at least once or twice a week they are just over 10 percentage points more likely to trust governments to place the needs of the nation above their party and to do the right thing when no one is looking. Again, there is no discernible impact on trust for those who are less frequently involved in associational organisations.

Figure 18: Trust in British governments to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own party, by frequency of involvement

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
All		24%	44%	27%
Not a member/never participate		19%	46%	34%
Less than twice a month		25%	50%	22%
At least twice a month	5%	24%	47%	24%
At least once a week	5%	35%	42%	19%
At least twice a week	13%	36%	35%	16%

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Figure 19: Trust in British governments to do the right thing even if no-one is looking, by frequency of involvement

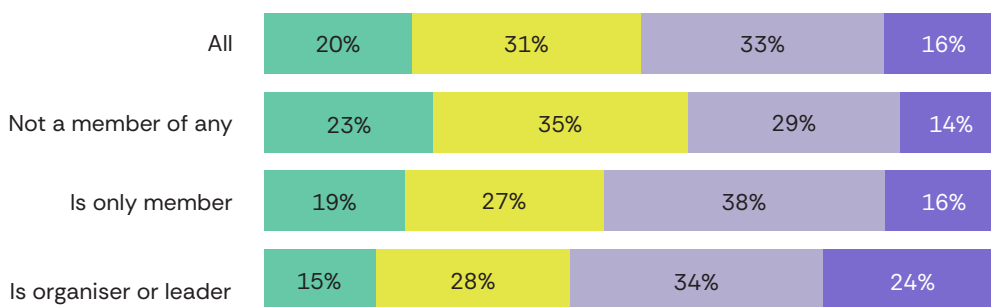|	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
All	5%	26%	43%	25%
Not a member/never participate		20%	45%	32%
Less than twice a month		28%	51%	17%
At least twice a month	5%	29%	46%	20%
At least once a week	7%	34%	42%	17%
At least twice a week	15%	39%	30%	15%

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

However, there is much less variation in views towards 'strongman' leadership and populist democracy. We asked whether Britons agree that our current democracy is the best form of government, compared to either alternative forms of democracy in which citizens are given more power, or forms of government where power is centralised in leaders.

Being a leader or member of an associational organisation made respondents only marginally more likely to reject alternative forms of democracy than the average Briton. An associational organisation leader is 3 percentage points less likely than members to think alternative forms of democracy in which citizens are given more power should be considered, and 8 percentage points less likely than those who are not members. There is no meaningful difference between associational organisation leaders, members and non-members in appetite for leaders to have more power.

Figure 20: Agreement that we need to consider alternative forms of democracy where citizens are given more power, by level of involvement in organisation
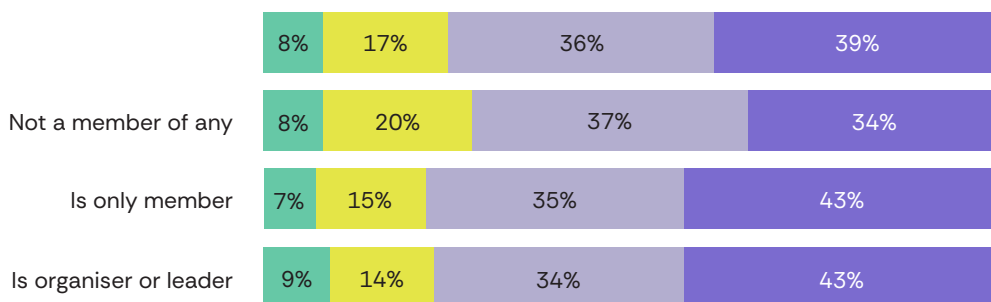
	1	2	3	4
All	20%	31%	33%	16%
Not a member of any	23%	35%	29%	14%
Is only member	19%	27%	38%	16%
Is organiser or leader	15%	28%	34%	24%

Which of the following do you agree with more?

- 1 – We need to consider alternative forms of democracy where citizens are given more power
- 2   3   4 – Our current democracy is the best form of government for United Kingdom

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Figure 21: Agreement that we need to consider alternative forms of government where leaders are given more power, by level of involvement in organisation

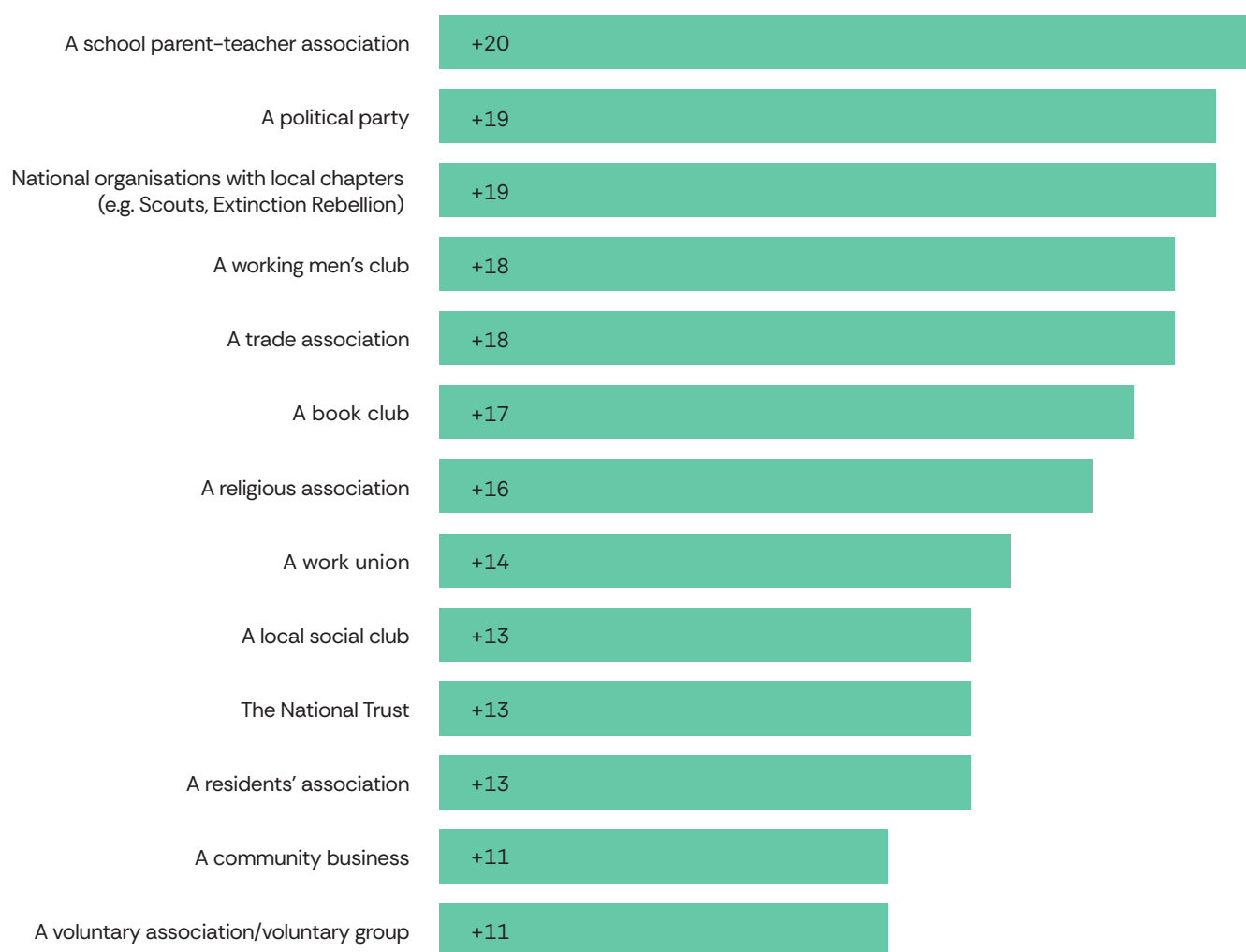|	1	2	3	4
	8%	17%	36%	39%
Not a member of any	8%	20%	37%	34%
Is only member	7%	15%	35%	43%
Is organiser or leader	9%	14%	34%	43%

Which of the following do you agree with more?

- 1 – We need to consider alternative forms of democracy where leaders are given more power
- 2   3   4 – Our current democracy is the best form of government for United Kingdom

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Trust and satisfaction with democracy depends on the type of associational organisation

Membership of every type of associational organisation tested is associated with higher satisfaction with democracy. However there is a greater increase in satisfaction for members of certain associational organisations.

Figure 22: Increase in satisfaction with democracy for those involved in specific associational organisations, compared to those who are not involved

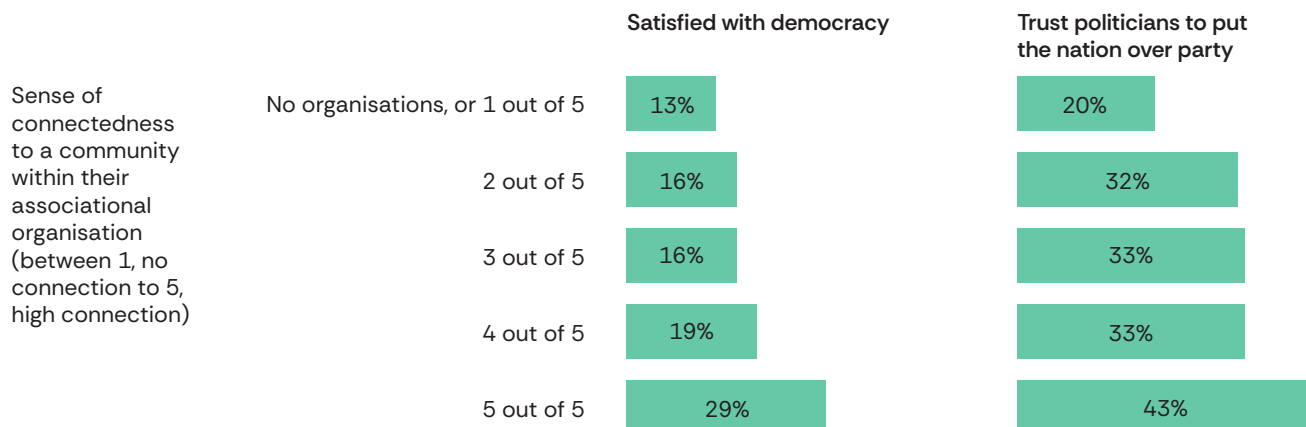| Organisation	Increase
A school parent–teacher association	+20
A political party	+19
National organisations with local chapters (e.g. Scouts, Extinction Rebellion)	+19
A working men's club	+18
A trade association	+18
A book club	+17
A religious association	+16
A work union	+14
A local social club	+13
The National Trust	+13
A residents' association	+13
A community business	+11
A voluntary association/voluntary group	+11

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

While the differences are relatively small, we would tentatively suggest some reasons behind them. The organisations whose members have the highest increase in satisfaction – parent–teacher associations, political parties, and national organisations with local chapters – are those that are most explicit in enacting change and making activity happen, therefore leading to greater satisfaction in democracy which at its heart is the citizen feeling they can enact change. The next four organisations represent communities of interest cultivating strong bonding capital, but perhaps not as explicitly linked to making change happen. The remaining organisations from unions to the National Trust, are those that we posit the membership is more likely to be passive, being connected to change occurring but not directly involved in it through their membership.
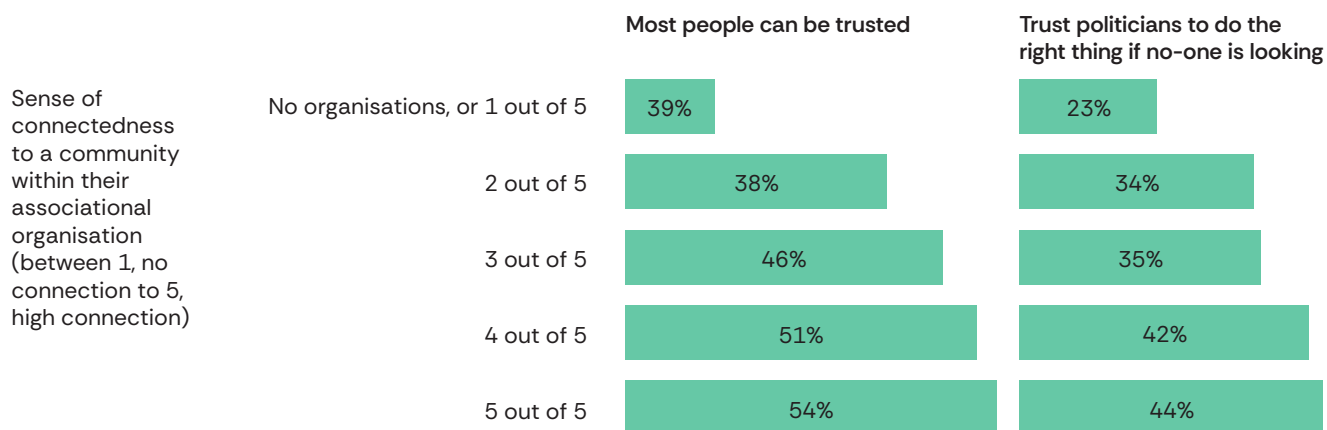
It is also worth noting that membership of an organisation is not a panacea. People also need to feel part of a community within those organisations for membership to have the greatest impact on trust. When asked to rank their sense of connection to the community of each organisation they are involved in (using a scale from 1 to 5), people who feel closer to a community within their organisations have both higher democratic and political trust. In fact, by some measures membership of organisations without feeling close to a community has no impact on democratic or political trust.

Figure 23: Maximum strength of connection to community, related to measures of political trust

Maximum strength of connection to a community in associational organisation
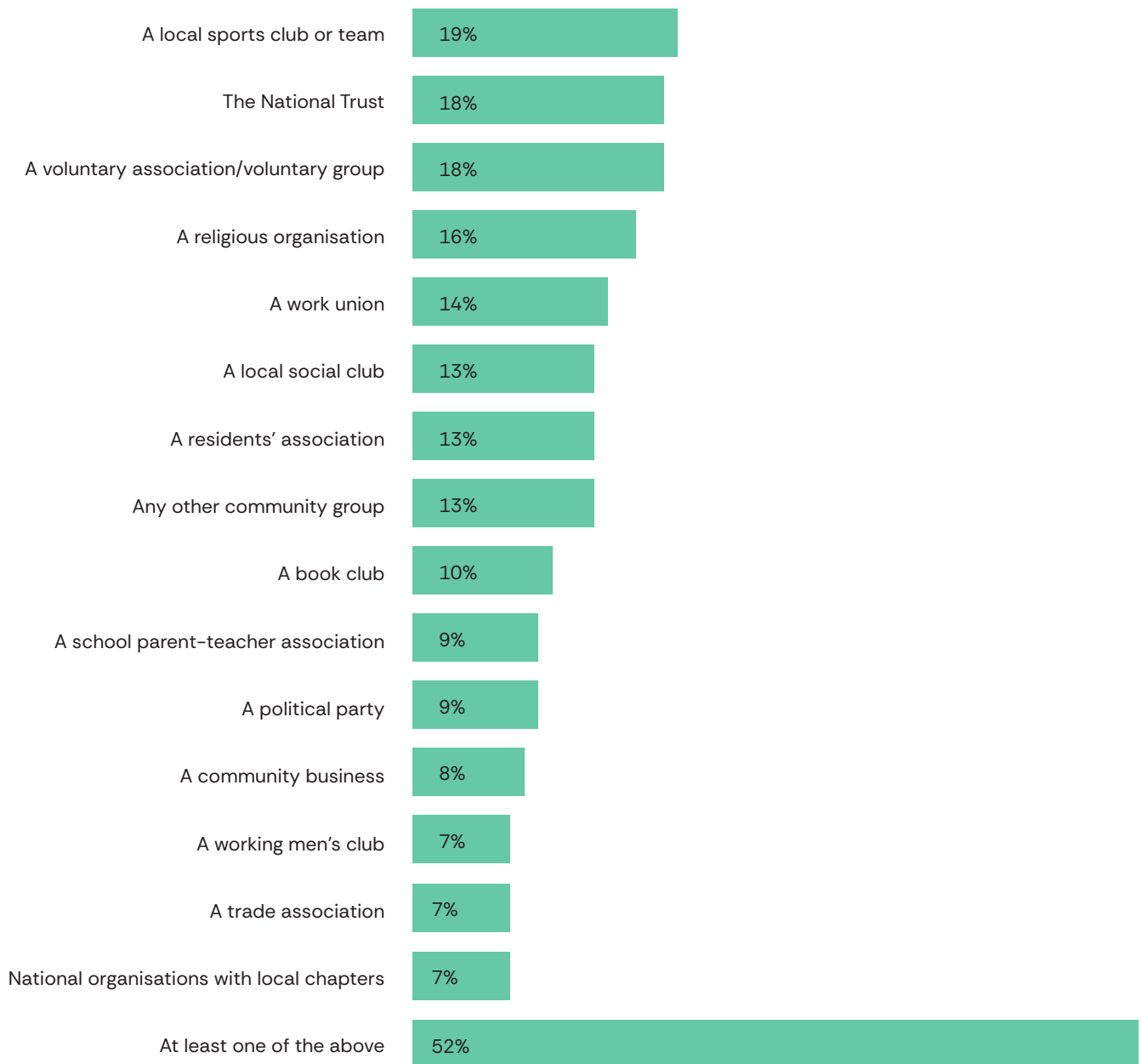
		Satisfied with democracy	Trust politicians to put the nation over party
Sense of connectedness to a community within their associational organisation (between 1, no connection to 5, high connection)	No organisations, or 1 out of 5	13%	20%
	2 out of 5	16%	32%
	3 out of 5	16%	33%
	4 out of 5	19%	33%
	5 out of 5	29%	43%

Maximum strength of connection to a community in associational organisation

		Most people can be trusted	Trust politicians to do the right thing if no-one is looking
Sense of connectedness to a community within their associational organisation (between 1, no connection to 5, high connection)	No organisations, or 1 out of 5	39%	23%
	2 out of 5	38%	34%
	3 out of 5	46%	35%
	4 out of 5	51%	42%
	5 out of 5	54%	44%

Note: Question was, 'For each of the organisations you are involved in, please indicate the extent to which you feel connected to a community there, using a scale from 1 to 5'.
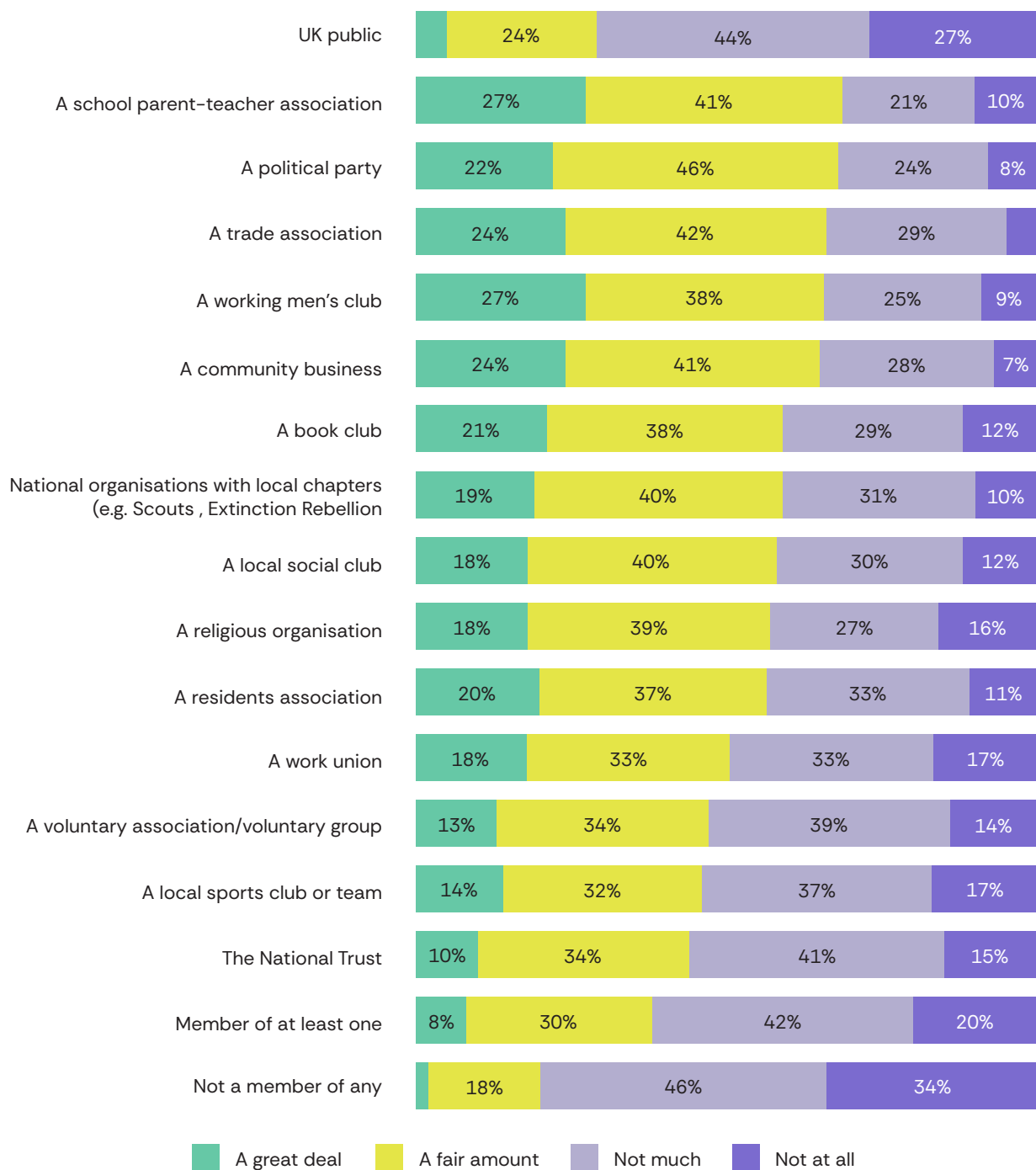Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

This is reflected in data on the most trust–building organisations. There is an inverse relationship between how common membership of an organisation is, and the impact on trust. Organisations like the National Trust or local sports clubs, where membership is most common, see relatively little increase in trust when compared to groups it is less common to be a member of, like parent–teacher associations, working men's clubs, or community businesses.

Figure 24: Please indicate whether you are involved with any of the following organisations - either as a member or taking part in their activities as a non-member.

Organisation	Percentage
A local sports club or team	19%
The National Trust	18%
A voluntary association/voluntary group	18%
A religious organisation	16%
A work union	14%
A local social club	13%
A residents' association	13%
Any other community group	13%
A book club	10%
A school parent-teacher association	9%
A political party	9%
A community business	8%
A working men's club	7%
A trade association	7%
National organisations with local chapters	7%
At least one of the above	52%

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Figure 25: Trust in British governments to put needs of nation above party, by involvement in type of organisation

Organisation	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	Not at all
UK public		24%	44%	27%
A school parent-teacher association	27%	41%	21%	10%
A political party	22%	46%	24%	8%
A trade association	24%	42%	29%	
A working men's club	27%	38%	25%	9%
A community business	24%	41%	28%	7%
A book club	21%	38%	29%	12%
National organisations with local chapters (e.g. Scouts , Extinction Rebellion	19%	40%	31%	10%
A local social club	18%	40%	30%	12%
A religious organisation	18%	39%	27%	16%
A residents association	20%	37%	33%	11%
A work union	18%	33%	33%	17%
A voluntary association/voluntary group	13%	34%	39%	14%
A local sports club or team	14%	32%	37%	17%
The National Trust	10%	34%	41%	15%
Member of at least one	8%	30%	42%	20%
Not a member of any		18%	46%	34%

Legend: ■ A great deal ■ A fair amount ■ Not much ■ Not at all

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

A nation of clubs

Despite some of the worrying evidence presented at the beginning of this paper, the polling conducted by More in Common suggests that we are a nation of book (and other) clubs. More than half of us (52%) say we are members of at least one associational organisation, the top being sports clubs and voluntary groups. Whilst we should note this is self-reported involvement, so may be a slight overestimate of actual numbers, it still shows we are a country who likes to join clubs.

Membership is not evenly distributed across the population however. There is a u-shaped curve to the age gradient of associational organisation membership, where the youngest and oldest are the most likely to be members. Older and young groups are also involved in more associational organisations and are slightly more likely to say they are a stronger part of the community for the organisations that they are involved with. This gradient is likely due to the increased family and work pressures that tend to come with middle life such as children and other caring responsibilities. From this, to level the curve and increase overall participation in associational organisations (with the benefits this can bring), policymakers should focus on measures that make it easier for those in middle life to take part in these organisations.

Figure 26: The inverse relationship between age and involvement in any associational organisation
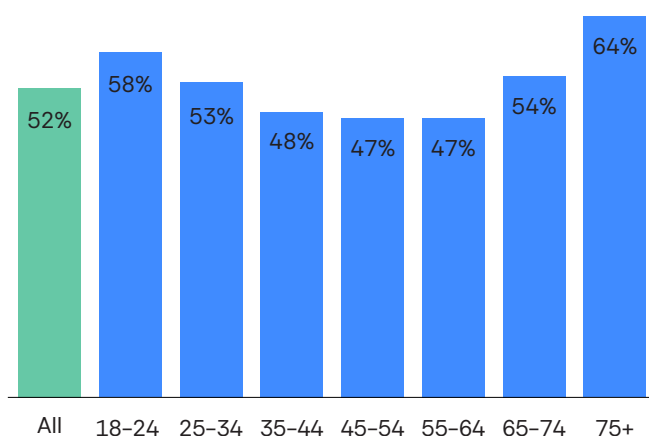
Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Looking at education level, which increasingly serves as a proxy for social class, for every type of associational organisation, people with a degree are more likely to be members than those who do not have one. The gap is smaller for some associational organisations than others. For working men's clubs, for example, the gap between those who do and do not have a degree is 7 percentage points, whereas it is double that (14 percentage points) for organisations such as the National Trust.

Figure 27: Involvement in each associational organisation, by whether one has a degree or not

Organisation	Has a degree	Does not have a degree	All
A local sports club or team	26%	16%	19%
The National Trust	28%	14%	18%
A voluntary association/voluntary group	28%	13%	18%
A religious organisation	26%	12%	16%
A work union	22%	10%	14%
A local social club	19%	10%	13%
A residents' association	21%	8%	13%
Any other community group	20%	9%	13%
A book club	18%	6%	10%
A school parent–teacher association	19%	4%	9%
A political party	18%	5%	9%
A community business	14%	5%	8%
A working men's club	12%	5%	7%
National organisations with local chapters (e.g. Scouts, Extinction Rebellion)	12%	5%	7%
A trade association	13%	4%	7%

Legend: ■ Has a degree ■ Does not have a degree ■ All

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Turning to participation in associational organisations amongst More in Common's *Seven Segments*,[xxxii] a mapping and categorisation of the British public into seven heterogenous groups based on their core beliefs and psychology, also shows a revealing if not surprising story. The most likely to participate in associational organisations are the most typically politically engaged: Progressive Activists, Established Liberals, and Backbone Conservatives.

This suggests that whilst engagement with and connection to associational organisations may not reach the most disengaged voters, it may be a good way for a political party to reach its core vote or the most politically engaged of other parties and earn their trust. It is also striking that – whilst not one of the most engaged segments – more than half of Loyal Nationals (56%) participate in an associational organisation. As the closest segment to a 'red wall' voter that has been the focus of Westminster discourse and parties' electoral strategies in the last two elections, this also suggests engagement with these organisations may help earn the trust of these voters.

Figure 28: Level of political engagement and general political trust by segment
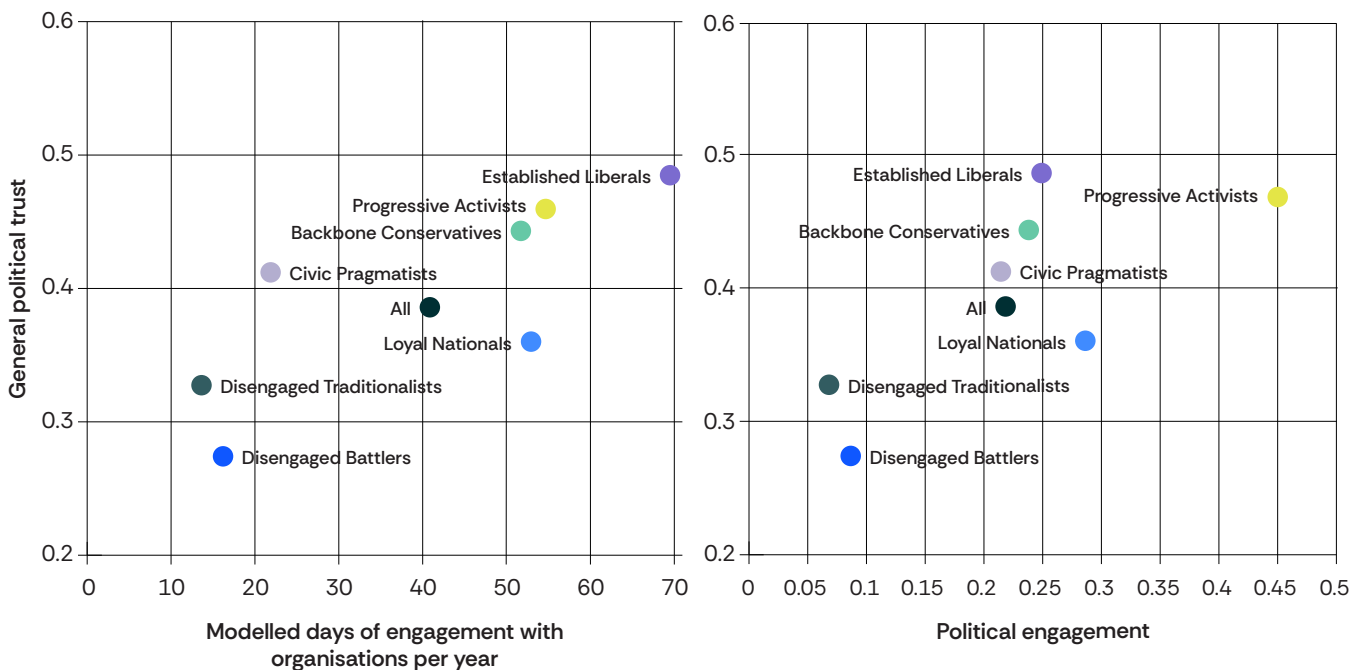
Note: see technical appendix for definitions of 'General Political Trust' and 'Political Engagement'.
Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Alongside engagement with the most participatory groups, there is a case for encouraging participation in associational organisations to strengthen trust in democracy and in politics. There is a lower barrier to entry in membership or involvement with associational organisations compared to political parties, that could lead not just to greater trust in democracy and politics, but greater involvement in politics itself. One example here for all UK parties might be the Rural Urban Bridge Initiative, a Democrat–aligned organisation in the United States, through which local Democratic Parties have engaged with community organisations to work on local projects which has over time led to an increase in the membership of the local party.[xxxiii]

It should be noted that whilst the data shows it does not appear likely that higher engagement in these groups causes people to be more trusting in politics and government, it does suggest participating in these organisations is a marker for other kinds of political behaviour, acting as a stepping stone to greater trust for example. It also indicates that engaging with these organisations could be a route for political parties to reach groups of voters.

Engagement, trust, and 'established' parties

This is reflected in data looking at engagement, trust and political parties. The voters of the three 'established' parties – the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats – all display higher than average political trust, civic engagement and political engagement. On the other hand, voters of what we might call 'insurgent' parties of the left and right – the Greens and Reform – are politically engaged but less trusting of politics than the voters of established parties. This is not surprising, given these voters are likely to – at least in part – be expressing discontent with more established political parties and the political system, but it does point to a need for established parties to find strategies to engage with these voters both with a view to the stability of the party system and trust in politics and government writ large.

Figure 29: Level of political engagement and general political trust by political party affiliation
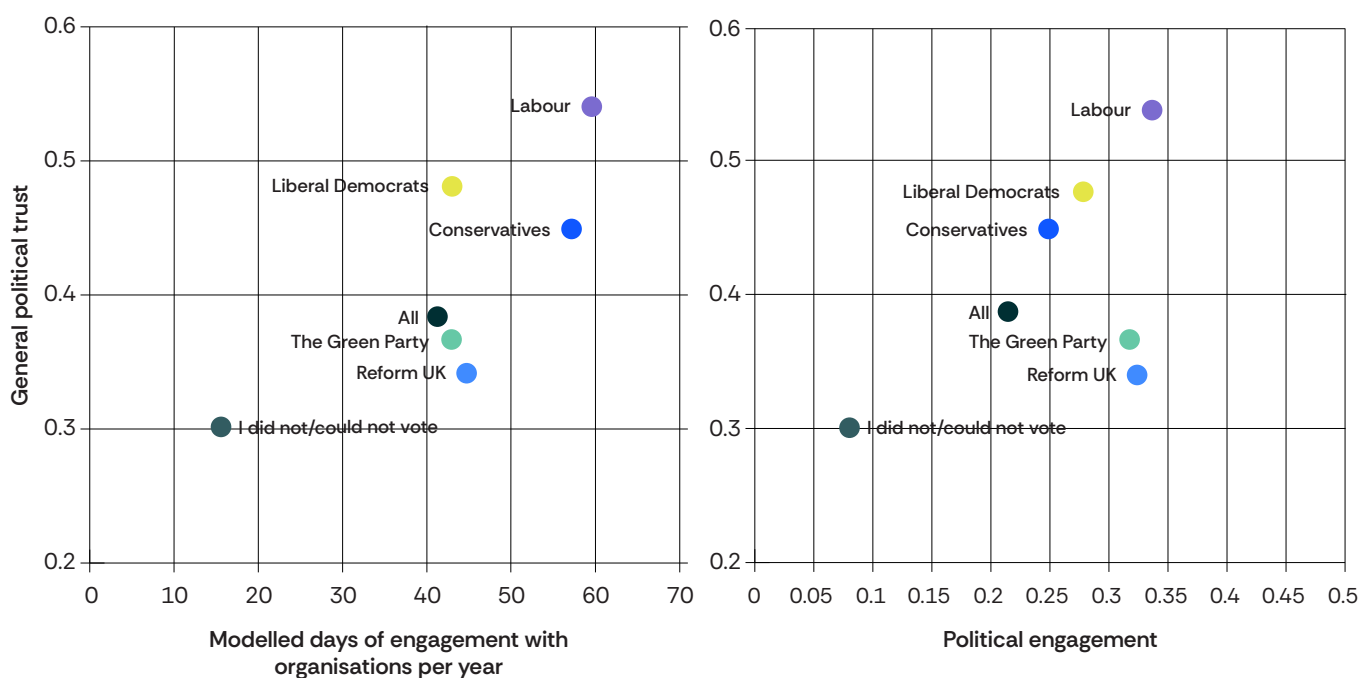
Note: see technical appendix for definitions of 'General Political Trust' and 'Political Engagement'.
Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Even when controlling for demographic factors, engagement in associational organisations is statistically significantly associated with higher levels of political trust

More in Common conducted regression analysis in order to identify the relationship between engagement in associational organisations and trust, when controlling for demographic factors. These included:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Whether someone has a degree or not (a proxy for socioeconomic class)
- Whether someone lives in London or not
- The other organisations someone is a member of

Even when you control for these factors, engagement in associational organisations tends to show a statistically significant relationship with trust. That being said, in many cases – such as involvement in volunteer groups – this boost in trust is very small or non-existent. However, involvement in parent-teacher associations (82%), political parties (73%), community businesses (34%) and religious organisations (46%) all show a statistically significant and larger boost in political trust compared to those who are not members of these organisations.

The linear regression used two models to test whether a causal relationship is present. In one model, looking at involvement in the round, it found involvement of an individual in an organisation on average increases their general political trust by 0.064 points on a scale of 0 to 1, controlling for other demographic variables. In the other model, the number of days an individual is involved in associational organisations each year has been tested against general political trust, controlling for demographic factors. This found that for every day an individual is involved in a civic activity each year, their general political trust is on average 0.0005 points higher, on the same scale. This compares to average general political trust sitting at 0.39 (with a standard deviation of 0.25).

More in Common also undertook an ordered logistic regression, shown in Figure 30. This found that members of specific organisations are significantly more likely to report more trusting attitudes to the government compared to non-members, when controlling for demographic factors and the other organisations someone is a member of. As noted above, that effect is greater for some organisations than others.

Further details on the regression analysis can be found in the technical appendix.

Figure 30: The % increase in the odds of selecting a more trusting response (to whether 'British governments prioritise nation over party') as a member of an organisation compared to non-members, controlling for demographic variables and membership of other organisations

Organisation	%
A school parent–teacher association	82%
A political party	73%
A religious organisation	46%
A community business	34%
A local social club	26%
A work union	25%
A residents' association	25%
A book club	15%
A working men's club	14%
A local sports club or team	12%
The National Trust	8%
A voluntary association/voluntary group	7%
National organisations with local chapters (e.g. Scouts, Extinction Rebellion)	4%
A trade association	0%
Any other community group	–2%

Source: More in Common polling, February 2025 (base: 2,088)

Summary of the polling

There are some key takeaways from this polling that will be further considered in the recommendations for this paper.

1. Involvement in associational organisations is associated with higher trust in democratic institutions.
2. Greater involvement is associated with greater trust.
3. Deeper involvement is associated with greater trust.
4. Trust and satisfaction with democracy depends on the type of associational organisation
5. We are a nation of clubs: More than half of us (52%) are members of at least one associational organisation, the top being sports clubs, voluntary groups and religious organisations.
6. The voters of the three 'established' parties – the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats – all display higher than average political trust, civic engagement, political engagement.
7. Even when controlling for demographic factors and membership of other organisations, engagement in associational organisations is statistically significantly associated with higher levels of political trust.

Focus groups

We wanted to further explore the mechanisms by which participation in associational organisations may support satisfaction in democracy and trust in the political system, and to understand how people perceive their own participation in associational organisations and their connection to local and national politics. We facilitated four focus groups to explore this.

Two groups were held with community business leaders, one with associational organisation members and one with leaders and managers of associational organisations across England. Associational membership across the groups was diverse, including involvement in resident associations, work unions, voluntary groups, sports clubs, farms and charities.

Associational involvement drives closeness to 'community', but not necessarily local communities

There was strong consensus among leaders and members of associational organisations that their participation within these organisations enabled a positive connection to 'community'. When asked which word members associated with their organisations, 'community' was most cited, alongside terms such as 'inclusivity', 'social contact' and 'belonging'.

However, the definition of 'community' was treated fluidly, and conceived of differently both within and across member/leader groups. For example, community was spoken of in relation to immediate members and peer groups within the local community:

> "
> I'm definitely more connected to my local community through what I do and volunteering for the league. You get to meet parents from other schools for instance.
>
> **Woman, member of local sports club in the South East**

> "
> As a parent you drop your kids off, you might have a little bit of chitchat, small talk in passing, but you don't really get to know the other parents. You don't get to know what they do, what they're like, what's important to them. That's made a big difference, having that forum for people to share.
>
> **Man, member of local sports club in the North East**

Participants also spoke of their organisations enabling them to engage with a wider sense of community, including local issues they may not have been aware of previously. In some cases, this included taking up more active roles of involvement within their local community:

> "
> They do a monthly newsletter. So you do find out things which are quite interesting that maybe you wouldn't have known about the surrounding area if you wasn't actually part of the club.
>
> **Woman, member of local sports club in the North West**
> "

> "
> I chose to send my daughter to one of the local schools which wasn't the easiest of options, but as we've done that, I've become more involved in the school and now [I'm] chair of governors
>
> **Man, community business leader in Yorkshire and the Humber**
> "

> "
> We've got a building that everybody uses, but it just means I'm more aware of the different groups out there. I had no idea how much loneliness – there's an elderly demographic as part of our community. We run something called 'Coffee Pot Plus', where they come together. And I thought their problem was financial, but it's actually loneliness. So that's something I hadn't actually picked up on before. It's making me more aware of different communities than I might have been before
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary organisation in the South East**
> "

In several cases, this connection to wider community was taken as self–evident and an assumed part of associational involvement, as the organisations were committed to delivering place–based common good, therefore enabling a direct link to areas of their communities. Leaders in particular spoke of the cyclical nature of associational organisations being rooted in and visible in community, thereby continually responsive to community issues:

> There was an old cartoon where it shows a husband reading the newspaper about world affairs and the wife getting on with getting food on the table. And I think that's been a bit of a shift for me – my focus has become much more local. An inch wide and a mile deep, and less focused on the big ticket stuff that gets talked about [nationally].
>
> **Man, community business leader in the Midlands**

> As an organisation, we've been around for more than 50 years, so we're very much rooted and part of the local community […] But as [others] have already said, ideas for where your work goes next come from the community.
>
> **Woman, community business leader in London**

> For me the answer to that [whether they have become more engaged with local issues] is self fulfilling, because you're giving more of your heart. It comes back, doesn't it? For me, anyway. And so that's increased my engagement in other areas of the community as well
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary organisation in the South East**

A few participants took part in associational organisations that were not local, or were work–based rather than place–based, therefore had difficulty with the idea of engaging with 'their' community. Nonetheless, they experienced engagement to 'a' community, indicating that associational involvement still enables wide social connection.

Associational organisations engage members in democratic processes that closely mirror the political system

Participants spoke positively of processes embedded in their associational organisations which enabled them to feel heard, contribute to making decisions, and enact change. While members were generally less likely to feel that they were driving direct change in their organisations, when prompted, several identified ways in which their views had been sought. This often drove feelings of connection and trust within associational organisations:

> I do feel listened to, especially with the volunteering at the farm. Before we start anything, it's very much a 'can-do' kind of place […] Maybe they aren't big decisions, but it does feel like they are asking us quite a lot of stuff about what we think. And they're not always going to agree with us and they might override us or overrule us at certain times. But they do ask quite a lot.
>
> **Woman, farm volunteer in London**

> It is a very democratic process. Nothing's a given, everything gets voted on. Whether that's made me more connected [to democratic processes], I mean, it's part of the process. I'm there. I'm the members. So yeah, it's very democratic.
>
> **Man, member of local sports club in East England**

> I think the key word for me is probably 'potential'. We are a tight community that does have the ability to share our ideas, and if we really did want to club together and, say all the coaches and all the extended parents and the businesses did feel really strongly and were really motivated to go out and do something, I think there's definitely the potential there to do it.
>
> **Man, member of local sports club in the North East**

Meanwhile, leaders were often at the forefront of driving social change, and in implementing greater participation and decision–making processes within their member base and wider communities:

> **"**
>
> We've been thinking about initiatives that help make the neighbourhood fairer, and we're moving on to think about environmental issues. So we know that they're thematic issues that people we're working with care about. But also thinking about the forms of organising and the kind of the ways in which we bring people together – so we've had more of a community organising approach in the past and we're moving towards testing out more deliberative forms of democracy. And that is in response to what we hear from people, about a lack of opportunity to come together and have conversations, including difficult conversations, about things that matter to them.
>
> **Woman, leader of community business in London**

Nonetheless, some community businesses had experienced challenges encouraging those who used their services to engage in politics of any manner, often as a result of perceived disempowerment and disengagement. Community business leaders posited their sites as one of the key ways in which members of the community could see small changes they wanted enacted, which could then lead to reengagement in political processes 'that mattered':

> **"**
>
> We kept saying to people over the years, 'get involved in it'. And unless you were part of a political group or a residence group, we weren't really engaging people. It's as though they couldn't understand – 'no, we've not got the power to do it'
>
> **Man, leader of community business in the North West**

> One of our biggest issues is that people don't want to say anything. People actually don't think that they have a voice. So even when we try to encourage people to engage, encourage people to exercise their voice, even with voting – we've got one of the lowest turnout rates of voting in the country – they just say, 'there's no point, it's going to make no difference to my life here. It's going to make no difference, it doesn't matter what I say, so there's no point'. But when they can see small pieces of work that we do in terms of, something as simple as someone said, 'it'd be really good to play pool. We haven't got a pool table.' So literally next week, there's a pool table. And [they] go, 'Did you get that? Did you do that?' And we say yeah, you said you wanted to play pool, there's a pool table there, now go and play pool, right? And it's that response to really simple things. Like gradually, hopefully we can hook people in the long term into that, into the other conversations, the external conversations that really matter to them, their future, their children's future.

Woman, leader of community business in East England

> We've had a conversation with one person who's come in and they're really passionate about something, and they want to see this happen. And then we've helped them to get started with a group or an idea or a project and that's developed into something else […] Often it's those individual conversations that happen over a cuppa or whilst they're at the cafe or volunteering or doing something else, that has then led on to something else. So trying to kind of maintain that value is important, it keeps us sane.

Man, leader of community business in the South West

Associational organisations are often a site of civil cross-party connection

It is perhaps the demonstrably democratic and civil nature of associational organisations that lends themselves well to being spaces of respectful cross-party connection. While some associational organisations did not engage with discussing politics and 'left it at the door', in many cases members spoke of working with people of different (political and otherwise) backgrounds:

> 'Complementary' is the best way of describing us because we're all from different walks of life and we all have to get on and get the job done, and that's working quite well at the moment.
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary association in the South East**

Several community business leaders had already envisaged their spaces as sites where discussion and disagreement would naturally occur. Although reticent to be aligned to any one political party, they had worked towards co-developing 'house rules' with members of their communities to ensure conversations remained respectful as well as training staff to facilitate difficult conversations. In these examples, engagement with political issues across different communities was clear, as well as leaders' abilities to positively shape the features of discourse:

> I was sat in our coffee shop, pre-American elections, listening to one of my workers sharing with a customer how he thought Donald Trump was a good thing for the world. And I was really encouraged because he had the confidence to respectfully share his opinions and listen to someone else's. It doesn't matter whether I think you're right or wrong, but you had a discussion where both of you disagree, but you walked away. They both walked away from that short 10 minute conversation, and the relationships were intact and it was a very civil conversation.
>
> **Man, leader of community business in Yorkshire and the Humber**

"

We have a public living room as well, and we encourage people to come together. So you'll have a supporter of Reform and a supporter of Jeremy Corbyn talking about fixing and repairing a clock together. And the view is that this is a space where you can bump into people with other views and other life perspectives, and you see people for the whole self rather than being too labelled [...] I think one of the 'we're getting something right' moments is when the guy I just mentioned said he likes coming here because there's no barriers to being in our space [...] He said it's the only place where we can meet people with different views, and know that you can talk with people without it becoming – you know, if it's in the pub, it becomes too much to drink and heated temperatures. We have house rules around disagreeing respectfully, but we encourage people to share views, but also to listen.

Man, leader of community business in the Midlands

"

"

'We've done a lot of training around things like having difficult conversations and we've done some participatory co–design of our 'rules' of the space. Because we did have plenty of times where somebody would start going off on their questionable opinions, or let's say offensive opinions. And we would have to find a way to tell them that that kind of way of talking is going to potentially make other people using the space feel unsafe or not welcome, and that's not our objective as an organisation, we want everyone to feel welcome and safe. So actually these are the rules – like the 'terms of use' of this space, is that you think about what you're saying.

Woman, leader of community business in the North West

"

A conversation between community business leaders demonstrates how associational organisations can provide public spaces in which current affairs and politics could be discussed in the open. It also demonstrates leaders' work in explicitly facilitating a safe space in which people felt they could have 'permission' to engage in potentially difficult discourse. These in–person spaces were often posited in contrast (or in response) to nationwide polarisation and societal breakdown, as well as the use of tools like social media to incite political and ideological division:

> **Man**: One thing I am going to do in this building that we're in, we're going to build a little stage and that's going to be called 'Speaker's Corner'. Because I really recognize that in our community – well, there isn't space where different people come together and disagree civilly over different things, and I love arguing and disagreeing with people. I think it's great. So we want to create a space where we actively encourage civil discourse.
>
> **Woman**: I was really interested in what he was saying about people disagreeing – that is something that we have been giving quite a lot of thought to. And the project that we're working on at the moment, the neighbourhood project – I think one of the main things that we're hoping to do there is to enable a space for people to come together, to have conversations about things that matter to them and disagree well! I think we see such a decline in people's ability to disagree well, with the way that's done in such an adversarial or aggressive way on social media, and actually what does it mean to have conversations with your neighbours about things where you probably don't agree? So some of the work that we've been doing – I think with that work, the small 'p' politics is absolutely at the centre of that. And that obviously involves – if you're talking about conditions on a local estate or you're talking about how the neighbourhood could be fairer – people are going to talk about austerity and why people are going to food banks. People are going to talk about why it's hard for people to continue to live in [the area] because of high rents. It's just part and parcel of the work, and we would absolutely want to provide space for those conversations.
>
> **Woman**: I think for these conversations to happen well, I think people coming together in a shared space is really important. Sometimes people need the permission to feel that they can disagree, or that their views are valid and that people want to hear them, particularly people who perhaps don't usually have their voices heard in these kinds of processes. And then I think on the other hand, there is just also this sense of actually, in a public space people will come and talk about what they want to talk about, and that's great and good. They might seem like two contradictions. But I certainly see both in the work we do.
>
> **Man**: You were saying about giving permission and I think sometimes that's explicit, sometimes it's implicit. So with the boys' group that we run from this building, the tagline is 'a safe space for risky activities and dangerous conversations'. And the parents smirk and teachers do. But we've got young lads where their thoughts, beliefs and ideologies have been shaped through social media, and they've been told very clearly certain things are wrong and that shuts down that sense of 'I can talk about this'. So we've turned around and just asked open questions like, 'why would somebody like what Andrew Tate has got to say'? And because you lift the lid, you've given permission for them to go, 'OK, you can say that'.

For some leaders, their involvement in associational organisations and their community work had enabled themselves to become more open to opposing political figures, indicating that this effect can extend across both members and leaders:

> So I've always been Labour, and yet it was my local Conservative councillor that got the 400K in – and he knows I'm Labour and I know he's Conservative. But I walked up to him and shook his hand to say, well done man. That to me was a really beautiful moment to be able to go up, shake his hand and say, listen mate well done. Because you brought it over the line and you got us that 400 grand. And that was a big moment for me personally as well, because normally I see them over there in that corner and I'm over there in that corner.
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary association in the South East**

> I did some work around Teesside a few months back and even though I'm quite politically agnostic and I don't believe that my political views align in any way with the mayor of that locality – what he's done and the efforts that he's been making in and around the area, I have to take my hat off to him. So I think that when you can get local people who have got a personally vested interest involved in local initiatives, if you can get that in your politics and I think it sort of echoes what [other participant] was saying about local councillors. I never really look at local councillors as political beasts. I look at them as local people who just want to do the best for their localities.
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary association in London**

Whether people perceive their associational membership to drive higher trust in local or national politics is mixed

Participants' involvement in associational organisations and their communities was often directly discussed in contrast to their involvement in political processes. Community-based work was, in several cases, seen as an antidote to the state of national politics. Nonetheless, most participants had interacted directly with local authorities and local politicians during their time in associational organisations, particularly where work included council-owned land or council negotiations. While in many cases, this was seen as a purely transactional relationship (and at times, tenuous based on whether politicians 'needed' something from community groups), several participants expressed positive connections with individual councillors. A humanisation of councillors was apparent, particularly where councillors were seen to be engaged with and 'caring' about their communities:

> [Our local councillor's] really engaging with the local community. I've even got a telephone number in my phone, so that's how engaged I am with her! It's for all various reasons. It started off with something locally, a local development was beginning and we were all opposed to it. And she actually came out and spoke to all the residents and listened to our concerns.
>
> **Woman, member of local sports club in the South East**

> Our local councillors are very active. Quite a few Liberal Democrats in this area. And I've got friends who are very close to them as well. And they do care. And they do want to engage. And through my committee involvement with the club, we are liaising directly with councillors on various issues. So I think [there's] definite connection now.
>
> **Man, member of local sports club in East England**

> [Around] devolution, working in those communities and with those sort of local authorities, I've certainly found that there is a true, passionate investment in those local issues.
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary association in London**

Even where there was general scepticism around the efficacy of political processes, greater opportunities to connect directly with local politics, particularly at the council level, meant there was a greater awareness of local political processes and understanding of the benefits of direct connections. In some cases, this also led to greater engagement in local politics, such as being invited to local forums and council boards, and in one case, a question of becoming a councillor themselves:

> I'm more aware of the political situation locally, because of the effect that it had for us on getting the financial support. I mean we raised 400 grand, and 100 grand came from the community. So during that fundraising you get a lot of people who turn up for photos, from all different political parties! So you start to get a flavour of, and a better understanding of what it's about, and you get more engaged with it because it's not so distant as it once was. It is up close and personal when you're trying to raise funds to get building together. And you see things I think with more clarity than you might have done before because you've got more interest, you're more engaged.
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary association in the South East**

> I think my understanding of processes has shifted, and I understand how politics work and I know where to go within politics to get what I need, more so than I did.
>
> **Man, community business leader in the South West**

> Even our local MP was saying to me, 'do you not fancy being a councillor?' And it was fascinating because I said to him, well, I'm just somebody who's in the local community, I've got a passion for what we do and no interest in politics. But he was saying that's who we want. We want just people who are not family related. We just want people in the community who just have a passion.
>
> **Man, leader of community business in the North West**

In some cases, opportunities to connect and work with local councils and MPs even evoked greater sympathy around local politicians:

> "
>
> I think that being involved in some of the places that I've been in has been enlightening and also has given me a little bit more confidence in the, 'actually there is a process, there is a system, there is' [...] We take potholes and people think, oh, why can't we just fix the potholes? But if you sit in a meeting and you listen to the endless process and you know the money, the policy behind how we keep our roads updated, the entire transport infrastructure. It's a lot more complicated, isn't it? So I suppose there's some of that. And I suppose I'm thinking more individuals than I am the entire system, that meeting with the individuals I've met... There's some renewed confidence in some decision making at a local, national government level as well.
>
> **Woman, leader of community business in East England**
>
> "

> "
>
> We welcome the local councillors. They're paid about two grand a year. They're not doing it for the money, are they? They're doing it with their heart. For their local community, it's as simple as that. So when we have a community meal, we always invite them. You know, there's the tribal politics that's going on at a national level. And then there's what's happening at a local level, and most of them are doing it for the right reasons. I would say 99% of local councillors are in it for the right reasons, to look after their own– or better their own community, and I think that gets lost in the noise of the tribal politics that's going on out there.
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary association in the South East**
>
> "

Others made connections implicitly to their work in their associational organisations and their willingness to re–connect with the political process – indicating the democratic levers involved within associational involvement that could drive greater engagement with politics:

> "
>
> Since I've been a union rep, I will listen to people more because I'm used to listening to people and stuff like that now. So when it's election time and I get the Lib Dems, the Labour Party, the Conservatives, when they come around normally, I would shut the door in their face or take a leaflet and just smile. But now I'm more into what they're doing in my local area, and then I'll actually follow it up and go on online and check what they've actually done in the area, and go on their social media, and I start being all nosy and things like that.
>
> **Woman, leader of work union in the South East**

Nonetheless, when asked explicitly about political trust, most, if not all, of the groups expressed strong scepticism and distrust at both local and national level. Positive individual experiences were not enough, it seems, to cut through distrust at a national level, and in several cases associational organisation leaders spoke of examples where working with the council or local MPs was difficult, or not done at all, to the detriment of their community–focused objectives:

> "
>
> There's been year upon year of politicians becoming less connected to the people they're serving. And we're seeing locally, the politicians that are serving a community are actually serving a certain part of their community and it gets very divisive. So in [the area] years back when the BNP were a thing, we had BNP councillors voted in because they say we're standing up for white British values. Then in another area you had someone saying, actually we're standing up for the Kashmiri Pakistanis of [area]. And these politicians weren't there to serve the city. They were there to serve distinct, segregated parts of the city and from there just grew further, further segregation. We're living in the legacy of that. And the vast majority of people sit somewhere in the middle and want our politicians to serve the city, fight for the prosperity of communities.
>
> **Man, community business leader in Yorkshire and the Humber**

The reframing of 'local politics' as a politics of community action

Among some participants there was pushback on the conception of local politics as revolving around formal political processes, such as local councils and MPs. Instead, participants were more inclined to describe local politics as what they engaged in as part of associational life, whether that was finding out about local issues affecting communities, encouraging civil discussion in their spaces, increasing community-based decision-making power or directly enacting positive changes in their communities:

> I wouldn't want to feel that what the council does or what MPs do is the entirety of local politics. For me, politics is about people coming together and changing things where they are. And we know that that often happens in the gaps of what's happening politically, or going around or acting in opposition to what else might be happening in the local neighbourhood. So I don't feel that I've taken a step back from politics, but I guess you see what avenues are and aren't successful, when you want to see change happen.
>
> **Woman, community business leader in London**

> When I say local politics, it's more like setting up events, things that are just directly putting things in people's hands or directing something from one place to another place.
>
> **Man, leader of voluntary association in London**

> The things that we were talking about before, about facilitating difficult conversations around complex issues, that is totally politics in our communities.
>
> **Woman, community business leader in the North West**

While some of this is inevitably borne out of scepticism and disengagement from the state of politics, as discussed further below, it is perhaps this alternative conception of local politics shared across many of those involved in associational organisations that can enable a greater connection for these members to democratic institutions and the political system itself.

Discussion

The polling showcases a clear, and significant, correlation between associational participation and trust in political institutions and democracy. But our focus groups paint a more complex picture of how connections are forged, and how trust is perceived and negotiated between state, political parties and society.

Nonetheless, associational organisations can provide opportunities for citizens and politicians to re-engage with one another and build relationships, thereby going some way towards 'closing the void'. By way of their common cause – wanting to enact positive change within communities – engagement with local politics to influence change is seen as a given for many associational organisations. This engagement can lead to greater understanding of the political process, sympathy towards politicians or councils and their challenges, and in a few cases, greater involvement in local politics themselves.

This may counter Mair's argument that traditional politics is seen less as something that belongs to citizens. Indeed, we found an alternative conception of 'local politics' borne from our focus groups – not focused on the MP or local councillor, but engaged with and making change in communities. Our polling found those who feel closer to their community within their associational organisations have even higher levels of trust in politics, than other members or non-members. In this alternative conception of politics, delivery is seen as connected to the ordinary citizen, although a risk is that this conception opposes national or local politics.

We also posit that associational organisations have internal effects that help to close the void. The examples of a union leader being more willing to opening their door and listen to MPs because their job encourages listening to different people, or of a previously disengaged member of a community wanting to get more involved in community action as they have felt the positive effects of speaking up at their local community business, are powerful. This aligns with our polling, which shows trust in democratic institutions is greater the more associational organisations one is involved in, and the deeper the level of involvement. Although not the most surprising finding, this is a clear sign to encourage greater civic participation.

Directionality, however, is unclear – that is, whether individuals were more likely to engage in politics and the voting process because they were part of these associational organisations, or because of a pre-existing propensity to engage in democratic processes. Nonetheless, there are clear markers for political behaviour and engagement among participants, which can act as a stepping stone to increased trust.

Associational organisations also continue to be, as Putnam argued, sites of 'civic community'. This is during a time of broken communities, argumentative and aggressive online spaces, and the sowing of a divisive 'us vs them' approach. The importance of associational organisations enabling more face-to-face civil discourse around political issues with traditionally distrusting community members is not understated. All political parties, as our polling indicates, could reap the benefits of wider use of these spaces and greater cross-party connection.

We have touched on the danger of associational organisations perceiving themselves as strongly opposed to traditional democratic institutions. In our polling, trust for MPs and local councillors (46% and 50% respectively) is still much lower than trust for a neighbour or community organisations (73% and 69% respectively). And when asked about political trust explicitly, widespread distrust over perceived policy failures and the state of public services is so entrenched that it proves difficult to engage associational organisation members or leaders beyond criticism. There is a balance between associational involvement and forging positive connections to politics, and political disengagement borne from their participation. Transparency, visibility, and more connection with the community were seen by associational organisations as ways to overcome this.

Recommendations

Our findings demonstrate that 'closing the void' can be achieved, but that doing so will require conscious effort. We do not see effective policy delivery as a panacea to do this. Instead, government, political parties, and associational organisations – including community business – need to play their part.

For government

Government should look to rebuild trust in itself by demonstrating the faith it holds in associational organisations to make change happen and to reconnect with formal democracy. This means taking measures that can help to support these organisations. Democracy does not come free, so money will be a factor, however it is not the only one; people need the time to dedicate to this work too.

1.   Establish a Democratic Trust Fund

Ahead of the 2024 general election, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy expressed its concern over the approach of big tech and social media companies to defending democracy.[xxxiv] We are also concerned. Face–to–face social contact should be encouraged – it underpins strong communities – and the negative impact of these companies should be addressed.

We propose that the Digital Services Tax includes an additional 0.5% Democratic Levy. This should be used to establish a Democratic Trust Fund to support the associational organisations who keep democracy ticking at the grassroots. This funding should be unrestricted so that associational organisations are trusted to use the funding as they wish. A proportion of the funding should also be used for capacity building to support nascent associational organisations.

2.   Introduce a Right to Voluntary Service

The message came through loud and clear through our research that time is a significant barrier to people engaging with associational organisations, particularly those in middle life.

We are therefore building on an existing Demos proposal to allow local people the right to request time for community service.[xxxv]

This would provide individuals who are working for larger businesses or in the public sector with a statutory right to request time for voluntary service. Should there be significant uptake, this right could be expanded to all businesses.

3.   Establish community covenants to embed mission-driven government at a local level

From the focus groups we conducted it was clear that often relationships with local government and politics can be difficult for associational organisations. So our proposals aim to improve this relationship in line with the government's aspiration for mission-driven government.

The Government should establish Community Covenants to create formal neighbourhood-level power-sharing arrangements between councils and local organisations. They would enable local groups to play an active and formal role in shaping their areas, ensuring decisions reflect local needs and harness communities' strengths. This would be with the aim of making local democracy more inclusive and effective, creating genuine partnership.

In Market Drayton a covenant pilot is already underway and has been described as a 'gift' by Shropshire Council.[xxxvi] The government should use the English Devolution Bill to roll out this opportunity to all places.

4.   Establish a Partnerships Unit within the Mission Delivery Unit to reconnect government with associational organisations

Following the government's aspiration for partnership with civil society, the government should establish a 'partnership hub' within the Mission Delivery Unit. As others have argued, this shouldn't replace relationships that are held with civil society across government, but would signal the trust government places in associational organisations in helping deliver on the missions it has set for the nation – ensuring these perspectives have impact at the highest levels of government.[xxxvii]

For political parties

Political parties must reestablish themselves as a conduit between civil society and the state rather than as a quasi-state actor. This requires commitment from political parties to move to a more shared and communitarian practice of politics, seeking to build connection with associational organisations as a good in itself. Failure to do so is not only damaging our democracy, but means the parties are missing out on engaging with the wellspring of community activity happening right under their noses.

5.   Shift to a shared – rather than transactional – approach to politics

In the focus groups for this paper, it came through strongly that associational organisations can often feel their relationship with political parties and politicians is transactional, with their only engagement being when there is something in it for those parties or politicians. Anyone who knocks on doors for political parties will be aware of the primacy of collecting voter data over any genuine relationship building. Both sides lose out from this, breeding distrust and harming what could be a genuine, trusting and productive relationship.

We therefore propose that political parties should commit to shifting towards a shared approach to politics where they prioritise trusting relationships with local people and associational organisations, and work with them. We envisage this including everyone from hairdressers and Sunday league football coaches, to people who run book clubs and working men's clubs.

This should be reflected in party structures – such as the staff who are employed and the functions maintained outside of election season – and directed by party HQs to regional offices, and local party branches. Relationship building should be included in training for party activists and official staff. The number of strong, trusting relationships built by a party, should be measured and valued as much as contact data.

6.   Commit party budgets to get behind community organising

As things stand, party 'organising' tends to focus on canvassing or phone banking in order to collect the required voter data so as to effectively identify voters who can be persuaded and those who already support said party and therefore must be encouraged to 'turn out' on polling day.

Parties should therefore commit party budgets, and fundraise with this purpose if necessary, to hire community organisers whose role is to focus on building trusting relationships and community power in places. Given much of this activity already exists outside of political parties, the approach should first look to engage with existing community organising or empowerment efforts within a place.

For associational organisations

There is sometimes a degree of scepticism amongst associational organisations like community businesses towards politics and government. That is understandable given the breakdown of trust on both sides. Yet associational organisations can take heart from this paper, which shows that they are playing an important role in our democracy. At the same time this research indicates areas where associational organisations could strengthen their connection to politics and government.

7.   Introduce projects to boost associational organisations' roles as democratic training grounds

There is scope for associational organisations to bolster their role as democratic training grounds for people involved in the organisation. Many associational organisations already do this tacitly, for example through participation in their own democratic structures. But more intentional projects could be of value too.

This might include projects to increase understanding of democratic processes –whether local or national – among members. Democratic skills could also be developed, such as collective decision making and public speaking. Associational organisations could also encourage people to register to vote and turnout on polling day.

8.   Provide spaces for positive disagreement

We heard in our focus groups how associational organisations had – either purposefully or inadvertently – provided spaces in which people had been able to disagree civilly, even when talking about politics. At a time when the country feels more divided than we would like, and civility is being eroded in public discourse, online and in the real–world, there is a crucial role for associational organisations to play in civic life.

Associational organisations should ensure they provide spaces where people can positively disagree with one another, finding common ground where that is possible and respecting differences where it is not.

9.   Ensure local projects bridge across lines of difference

There was a sense in our focus groups that the incentives in local politics lead to political parties representing one group, either due to the demographic factors or the perception (and sometimes reality) of a party's core voters. However, this can lead to people not feeling adequately represented by their electoral representatives, and to tensions if people feel their voice is not heard.

Associational organisations on the other hand, have more of an incentive to engage with as much of the community as possible. Often this will mean bridging lines of difference, and that should be actively pursued by associational organisations as part of their projects.

Technical appendix

Polling

Polling was undertaken by More in Common for Power to Change between 15th and 18th February 2025. Polling yielded a representative sample of 2,088 GB adults aged 18 or over. To increase our sample size and boost statistical analysis, More in Common additionally polled 1,001 adults who identified as being part of at least one of the associational organisations listed below.

For the purposes of our research, we defined an 'associational organisation' as any organisation whose members come together for a common cause and is (mainly) not for profit. While this definition mainly draws on formal associational organisations with clear democratic structures embedded within them (e.g. voting in elected members), we were also cognisant of including 'new' and nascent forms of associational organisation such as book clubs, as well as larger organisations which may involve more passive forms of associational involvement e.g. The National Trust. In polling, we therefore asked the public to self–select whether they were involved in any of the following organisations:

- A local sports club or team
- A trade association
- A voluntary association or group
- A residents' association
- A work union
- A working men's club
- A community business
- A religious organisation
- National organisations with local chapters (e.g. Scouts, Extinction Rebellion, Royal British Legion)
- The National Trust
- A local social club
- A political party
- A school parent–teacher association
- A book club

Our measures of political trust closely followed the National Centre for Social Research's 'British Social Attitudes' survey questions on trust in the political system.[xxxviii] We asked the following questions:

- How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?
- How much do you trust British governments of any party to do the right thing for Britain, even if no–one is looking?

We also used the following measures of political trust:

- Trust in political parties
- Trust in local politicians
- Satisfaction with democracy
- Desire for a strongman leader

We created composite scores for 'general political trust' based on responses to the questions:

- How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?
- How much do you trust British governments of any party to do the right thing for Britain, even if no-one is looking?
- How much do you trust your Member of Parliament to do the right thing for your local area?
- How much do you trust your local councillors to do the right thing for your local area?

Finally, we created composite scores for 'political engagement' based on respondents' participation in a range of political activities:

- Voted in a local election
- Voted in a General Election
- Attended a protest, rally, or march
- Donated money to a campaign group or political organisation
- Signed a petition
- Shared political content on social media
- Written to a local politician or Member of Parliament.

Regression analysis

More in Common has provided all results, interpretation and explanation of statistical variables in this section of the technical appendix.

To partly account for causality, More in Common ran regression models to identify the relationship between engagement in associational organisations and political trust. The full dataset (including the nationally representative sample and booster sample) was used to create linear regression models and an ordinal logistic regression model, controlling for:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Whether someone has a degree or not
- Whether someone lives in London or not
- The other organisations someone is a member of

To produce the models, More in Common developed a scale of 'general political trust', as above, combining responses to several polling questions relating to political trust, where 0 represents someone who is very untrusting and 1 is someone who is very trusting.

The coefficients (highlighted in purple in the following tables), the p-value associated with a coefficient, and the R^2 for each model are all useful for interpretation of results. The coefficients show the increase in general political trust associated with each unit increase in the independent variable.

The p-value shows the probability of a coefficient appearing randomly. The smaller the p-value, the less likely it is that this would be random. The significance of a p-value is denoted by the number of asterisks attached to the coefficients in the table. For the purposes of commercial social research, any p-value less than ~0.1 is likely of interest.

The R^2 of a model shows the goodness of fit of the general model. In circumstances where a model is trying to predict behaviour in total, one would hope for an R^2 greater than 0.6, but given that we are examining the effect of specific variables, rather than constructing a model to predict trust in general, significant coefficients and p-values are the most important metrics to focus on. We can also draw comfort from the statistically significant f-statistic, another method of estimating goodness of fit for the model.

Table 3: Full linear regression results. Model 1, regressing the number of days an individual is involved in associational organisations annually against their general political trust, accounting for demographic factors; Model 2, comparing membership to non-membership, controlling for other demographic variables.

	Dependent variable:		
	General Political Trust		
	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)
Total days estimated involvement per annum	0.0005***		
Member of organisation		0.064***	
A local sports club or team			0.018*
A trade association			–0.021
A voluntary association/volunteer group			0.024**
A residents' association			0.030**
A work union			0.022*
A working men's club			0.022
A community business			0.042**
A religious organisation			0.055***
National organisations with local chapters			0.011
The National Trust			0.021**
A local social club			0.020*
A political party			0.072***
A school parent–teacher association			0.066***
A book club			0.006
Other			0.006

	Dependent variable:		
	General Political Trust		
	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)
Age	-0.001***	-0.002***	-0.0002
Gender	0.029***	0.034***	0.020**
Ethnicity	0.067***	0.077***	0.033***
Degree	0.081***	0.092***	0.057***
London	0.046***	0.053***	0.025**
Constant	0.409***	0.421***	0.355***
Observations	3,080	3,080	3,080
R²	0.139	0.115	0.209
Adjusted R²	0.137	0.114	0.204
Residual Std. Error	0.226 (df = 3073)	0.229 (df = 3073)	0.217 (df = 3059)
F Statistic	82.740*** (df = 6; 3073)	66.860*** (df = 6; 3073)	40.390*** (df = 20; 3059)
Note:	*p<0.1; >**p<0.05; >***p<0.01		

To test the effect of associational organisation membership on categorical data, such as the questions asked in the polling, we need to use ordered logistic regression. Logistic regression is a method of using categorical and continuous data points to estimate the probability that a respondent will select an answer from a given category (such as Strongly Agree, Agree, etc.), rather than a continuous value.

Particular focus should be paid to the p–values (highlighted in green), which have the same use in this model as in a linear regression model, and the odds ratio (highlighted in purple) – which shows the ratio between the probability of one category being selected compared to another. In this model these categories are automatically set as 'higher' and 'lower' meaning that, for example, the odds ratio for membership of a resident's association (1.246), suggests that a member of a residents' association is 1.246 times (24.6 percent) more likely to select a category which is more in agreement with the pre–set question (in this case, trust in government to prioritise nation over party), than someone who is not a member of a residents' association.

Table 4: Ordinal logistic regression - trust in government to prioritise the nation's needs over the interests of their own party

	Estimate	Std. error	z value	Pr(>[z])	Odds Ratio
A local sports club or team	0.11	0.09	1.31	0.19133	1.116
A trade association	0.00	0.16	–0.01	0.99071	1.00
A voluntary association/ volunteer group	0.07	0.09	0.80	0.42324	1.073
A residents' association	0.22	0.11	2.09	0.0368**	1.246
A work union	0.22	0.10	2.21	0.02696**	1.246
A working men's club	0.13	0.14	0.95	0.34389	1.139
A community business	0.29	0.16	1.82	0.06908*	1.336
A religious organisation	0.38	0.10	3.77	0.00017***	1.462
National organisations with local chapters	0.04	0.13	0.29	0.77339	1.041
The National Trust	0.08	0.08	1.05	0.29378	1.083
A local social club	0.23	0.11	2.18	0.02931**	1.259
A political party	0.55	0.12	4.46	0.00001***	1.733
A school parent–teacher association	0.60	0.15	4.10	0.00004***	1.82
A book club	0.14	0.12	1.20	0.23065	1.15
Other	–0.02	0.11	–0.17	0.86263	0.98

Table 5: Ordinal logistic regression - trust in government to do the right thing for Britain, even if no-one is looking

	Estimate	Std. error	z value	Pr(>[z])	Odds Ratio
A local sports club or team	0.24	0.09	2.75	0.00592*	1.271
A trade association	–0.02	0.16	–0.14	0.89132	0.980
A voluntary association/ volunteer group	0.08	0.09	0.91	0.36404	1.083
A residents' association	0.22	0.10	2.11	0.03513**	1.246
A work union	0.16	0.10	1.61	0.10776	1.174
A working men's club	0.27	0.14	1.92	0.05438*	1.310
A community business	0.30	0.16	1.89	0.05833*	1.350
A religious organisation	0.42	0.10	4.17	0.00003***	1.522
National organisations with local chapters	0.14	0.13	1.11	0.2662	1.150
The National Trust	0.14	0.08	1.74	0.0811*	1.150
A local social club	0.12	0.11	1.13	0.25658	1.127
A political party	0.60	0.12	4.89	<0.00001***	1.822
A school parent– teacher association	0.68	0.15	4.65	<0.00001***	1.974
A book club	–0.02	0.12	–0.14	0.88842	0.980
Other	0.01	0.11	0.12	0.90657	1.010

Focus groups

Four online focus groups were facilitated by Power to Change in March 2025:

- Two groups of community business leaders
- One group of associational organisation leaders
- One group of associational organisation members

Power to Change commissioned Acumen to recruit 12 participants across the two wider associational organisation groups. Participants were pre-screened and selected based on whether they were involved in any of the associational organisations listed above. Participants were nationally representative and balanced between gender identity, age and political party affiliation. Participants who were at the extremes of political trust (i.e. they had no trust at all) and/or had very low involvement in their organisation were screened out.

A total of seven community business leaders were recruited to the focus groups by Power to Change through existing networks, covering a number of locations and community business sectors throughout England.

With participants' consent, focus groups were recorded for full transcription. Transcripts were then analysed and coded thematically.

Endnotes

i.   Mair, P., (2013). Ruling the Void: *The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. (p.1) New York: Verso.

ii.   National Centre for Social Research, (2024). *Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low*.

iii.   Westerling, J. (2022). *Empower communities, don't just tinker with Westminster*.

iv.   Mair, P., (2013). *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. (pp.83–85) New York: Verso.

v.   Ibid. p.98.

vi.   Sturge, G. (2024). *2024 general election: turnout*.

vii.   Ibid.

viii.   Mair, P. (2011). *Bini Smaghi vs. the Parties: Representative Government and Institutional Constraints*.

ix.   Pogrund, G. (2024). '*Labour celebrated election success — now they're targeting Reform*'.
        The Times (London, 7th July 2024).

x.   Bhargavam, D. et al. (2024). *The Death of Deliverism: Why Policy Alone Is not Enough*.

xi.   Putnam, R., (2000). *Bowling Alone*. (pp.350–359). New York: Simon and Schuster.

xii.   Ibid.pp345–346.

xiii.   Ibid. pp.338–340.

xiv.   Ibid. p.2.

xv.   Riley, D., (2019). *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe*. (pp.1–2, 193–194) 2nd edn, London: Verso.

xvi.   Satyanath, S. et al. (2014). *Bowling for Fascism: Social Capital and the Rise of the Nazi Party*.

xvii.   Department for Business and Trade. (2024). *Trade Union Membership, UK 1996–2023: Statistical Bulletin*.

xviii. Ibid.

xix.   Department for Culture, Media, and Sport. (2024). *Community Life Survey 2023/24: Background and headline findings*.

xx.   Ibid.

xxi.   British Beer and Pub Association. (2024). *Pubs & Breweries in Numbers*.

xxii.   Brown, P. (2022). Clubland: *How the working men's club shaped Britain*. London: Harper Collins.

xxiii. British Beer and Pub Association. (2024). *Pubs & Breweries in Numbers*.

xxiv.   Gregory, D. (2024). *New Social Spaces*.

xxv.   Ibid.

xxvi.   The Policy Institute at King's College London. (2022). T*he state of social trust: how the UK compares internationally*.

xxvii. Ibid.

xxviii. Department for Culture, Media, and Sport. (2024). *Community Life Survey 2023/24: Neighbourhood and community*.

xxix.   Ibid.

xxx.   Behavioural Insight Team. (2025). *Social capital in the United Kingdom: evidence from six billion friendship*s.

xxxi.   National Centre for Social Research. (2024). *British Social Attitudes 2023 Documentation of the UI Questionnaire*.

xxxii. More In Common, (2020). *7 Segments*.

xxxiii. See here for more information on Community Works.

xxxiv. See here for the Committee's statement at the time.

xxxv.   See the original proposal in Demos' paper Taking Back Control.

xxxvi. You can find more detail on the pilot here: www.fordhallfarm.com/mdcovenant.

xxxvii. This draws on a proposal made by the Future Governance Forum.

xxxviii. National Centre for Social Research. (2024). *British Social Attitudes 2023 Documentation of the UI Questionnaire*.
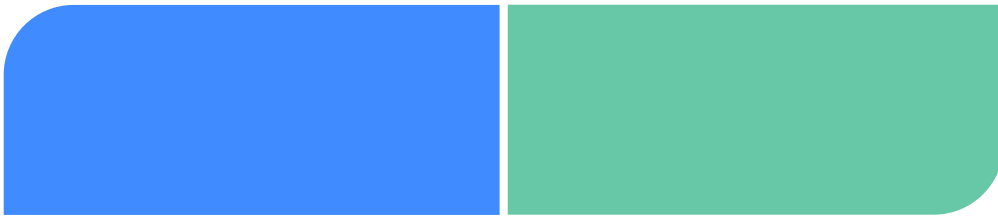
Power to Change

Power to Change
The Clarence Centre
6 St George's Circus
London SE1 6FE

020 3857 7270

info@powertochange.org.uk
powertochange.org.uk

@powertochange.org.uk

Power to Change Trustee LTD is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales, no. 08940987

Registered charity no. 1159982

COMMUNITY FUND