

Key findings and
recommendations

Power to
Change

Closing the void: Can we reconnect politics with associational life?

Josh Westerling, Linda Hein, Nick Plumb



Key takeaways

- Trust in politics and democratic institutions is low.
- Involvement with associational organisations correlates with higher levels of trust in politics.
- Focus groups show re-engaging potential of associational organisations.
- We make recommendations for government, political parties and associational organisations to harness this potential.

Context

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Our democracy is not in good health

- 45% of people '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.
- Consistently over 70% of people feel that they have little or no control over decisions that affect their neighbourhood or local community.
- Citizens are spectators in politics. Turnout at the last election was 59.7% and the period from 2001-2024 represents one in which turnout has not reached the levels seen between 1922-1997.



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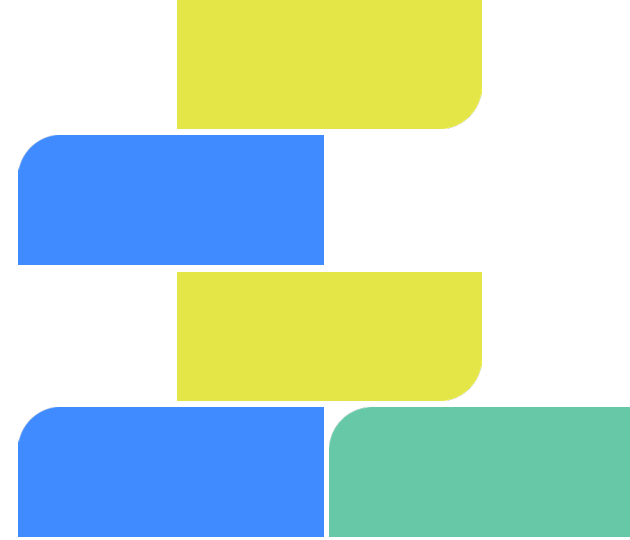
Why did this happen?

- The societal roots of political parties, such as partisan attachment and party membership, have eroded.
- 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 increasing individualisation in society decreasing their relevance to many.
- In response to broader social shifts and their own strategic choices, political parties have distanced themselves from civil society and grown closer to the machinery of the state - contributing to a growing 'void' between politics and everyday life.



How can we close the void?

- A focus on delivery is likely to be insufficient to address the dissatisfaction people feel with government and politics.
- There needs to be greater connection with ordinary citizens.
- Our view is that associational organisations, through their positive internal and external effects on engagement, can help to close the void between people and politics.
- This informed our thinking behind testing the relationship between involvement in associational organisations and trust in democratic institutions.



Polling findings

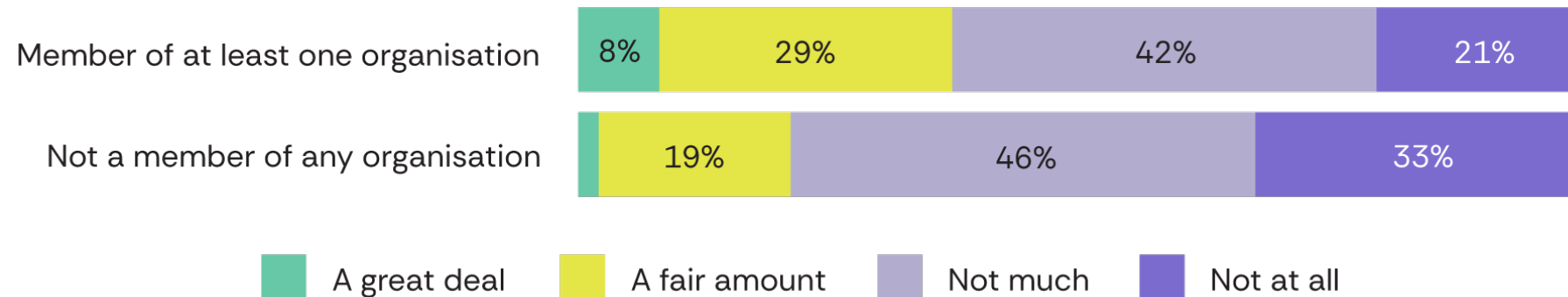
Polling was undertaken by [More in Common](#) for Power to Change between 15 -18 February 2025.

Polling found that membership and active involvement in associational organisations, especially in smaller, more participatory groups, is linked to higher trust in democratic institutions. The trend holds across different political affiliations and voter segments.

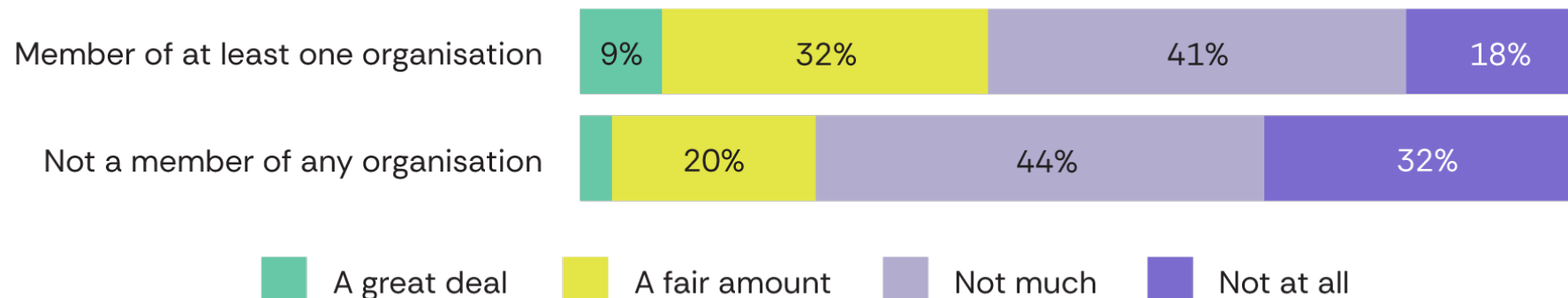
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Involvement in associational organisations is associated with higher trust in democratic institutions

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?



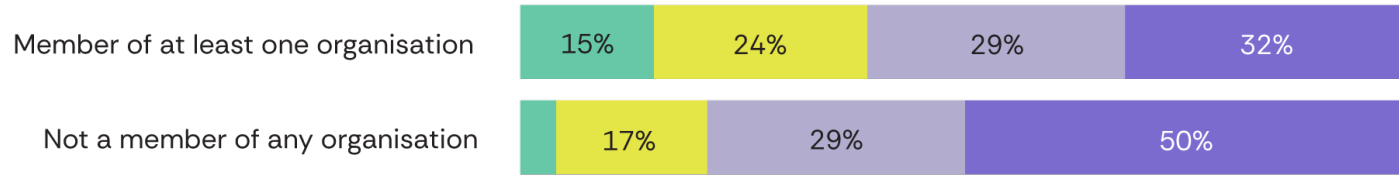
How much do you trust British governments of any party to do the right thing for Britain, even if no-one is looking?



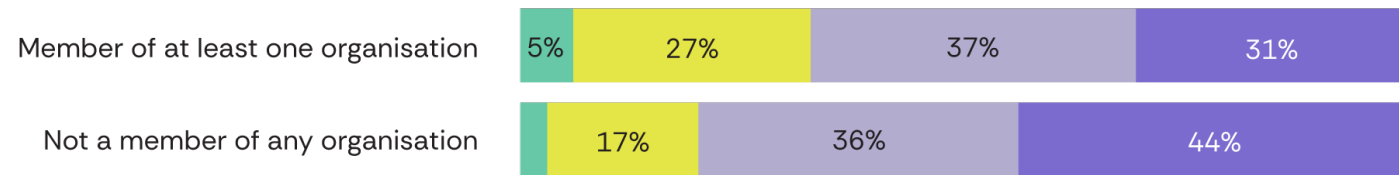
And higher trust in political parties

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

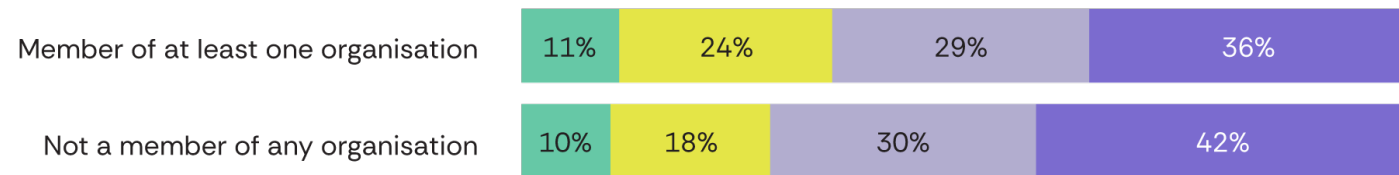
Labour



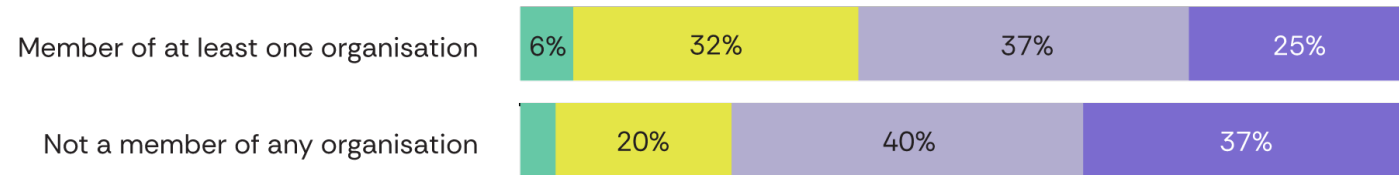
The Conservatives



Reform UK

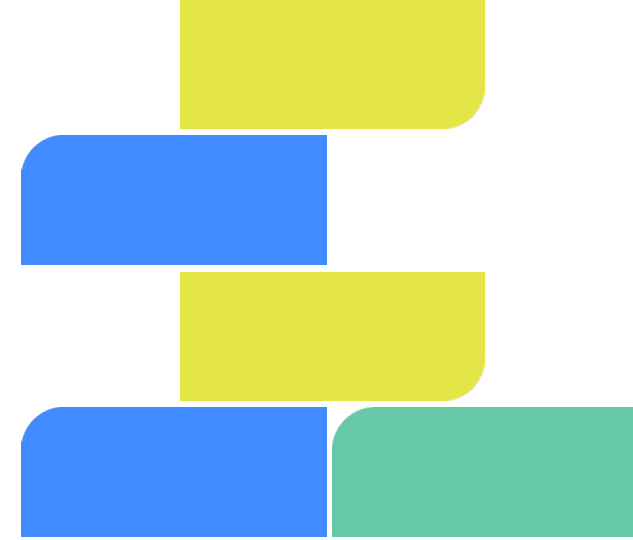


The Liberal Democrats



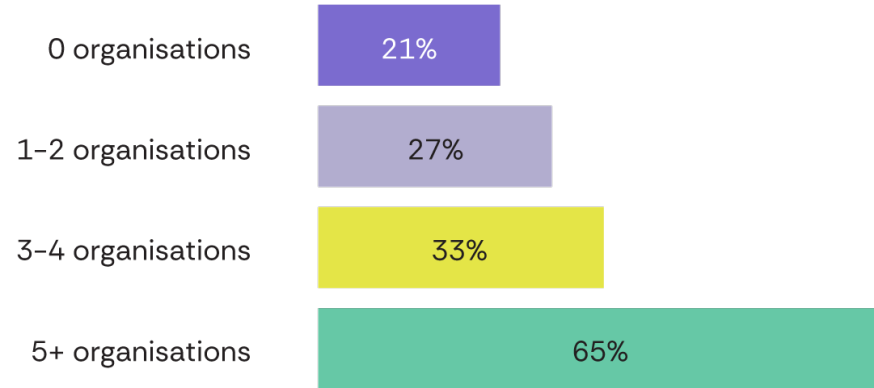
■ A great deal ■ A fair amount ■ Not much ■ Not at all

Source: More in Common for Power to Change (February 2025). Sample size = 2088

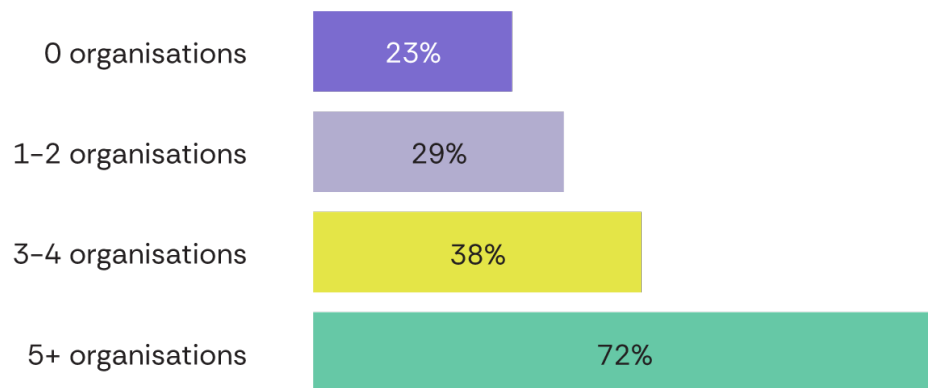


Greater organisational involvement is associated with greater trust

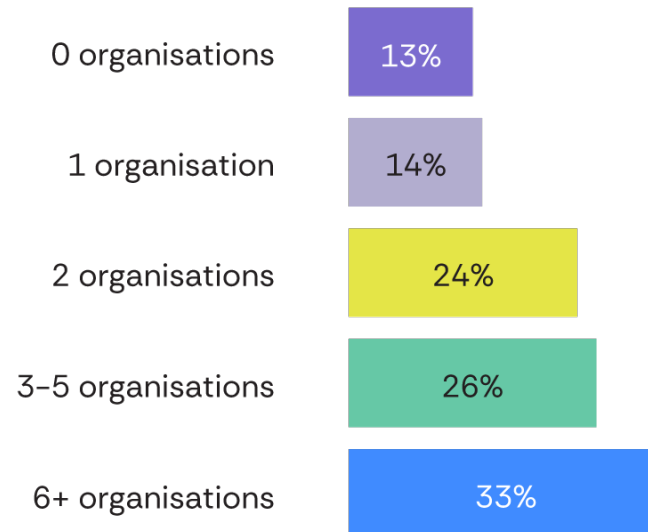
Total trust in British governments to prioritise nation's needs, by number of organisations involved with



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



Level of satisfaction with democracy, by number of organisations involved with

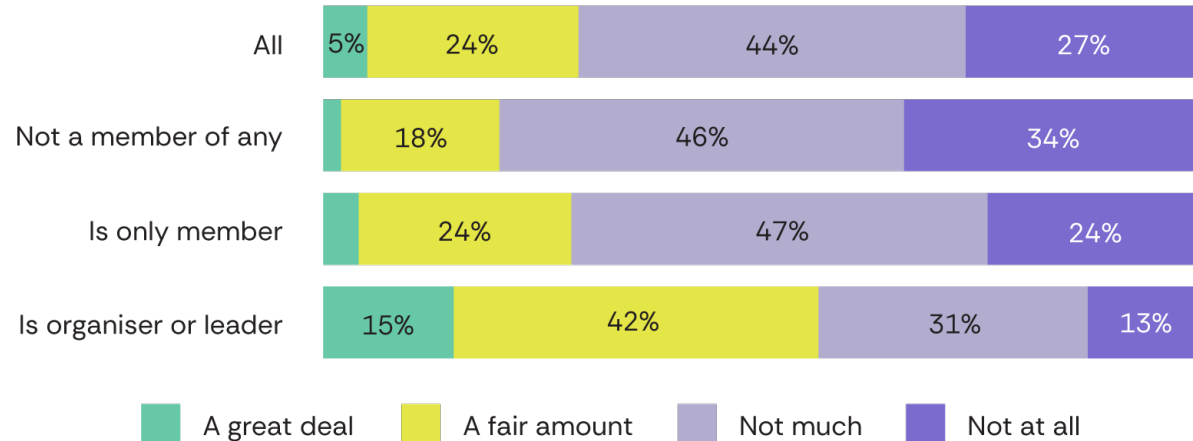


Note: Proportion ranking their satisfaction with democracy at 5 or 6, on a scale of 1-6.
Source: More in Common for Power to Change (February 2025). Sample size = 2088

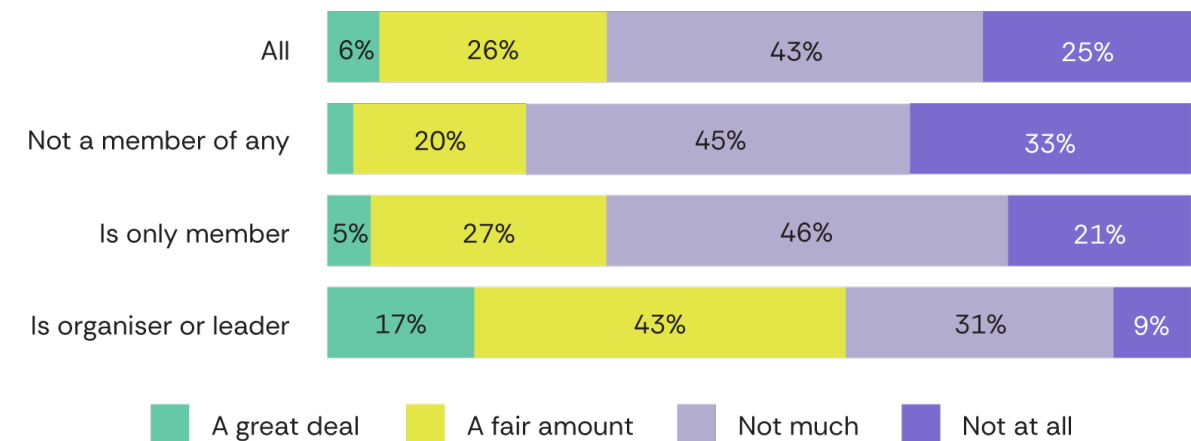
Active involvement (e.g. being an organiser or leader) is linked to significantly higher levels of trust



Total trust in British governments of any party to prioritise nation's needs, by level of involvement

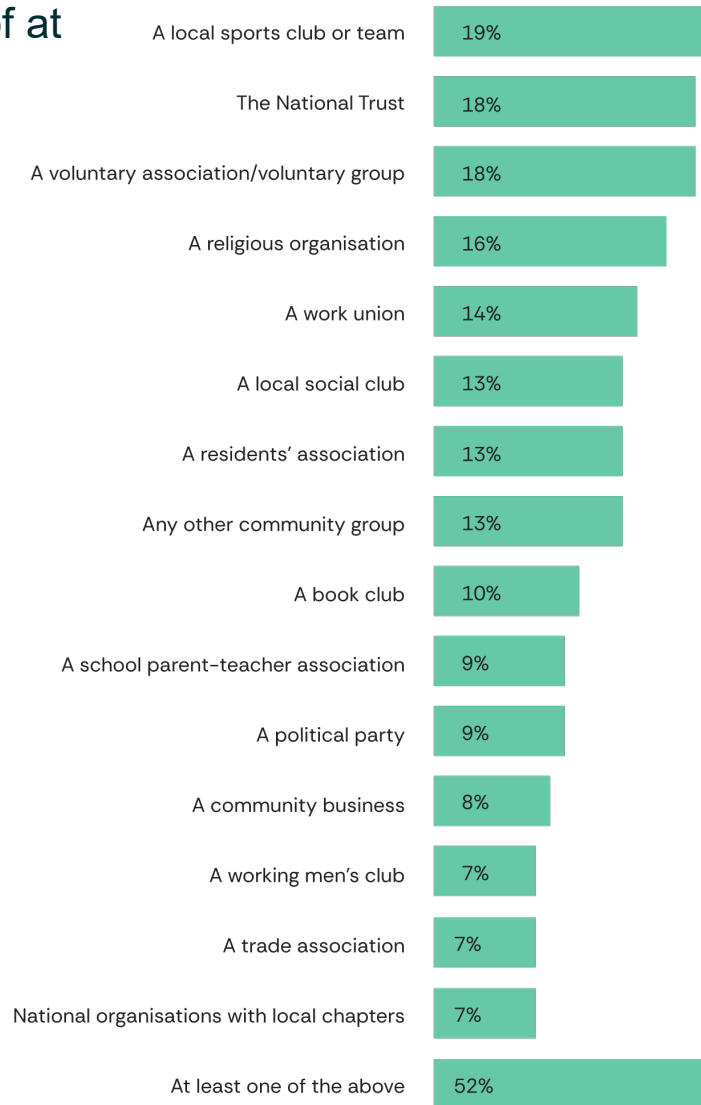


Total trust in British governments of any party to do the right thing for Britain even if no-one is looking, by level of involvement



We are a nation of clubs

Over half of UK adults are members of at least one associational organisation.



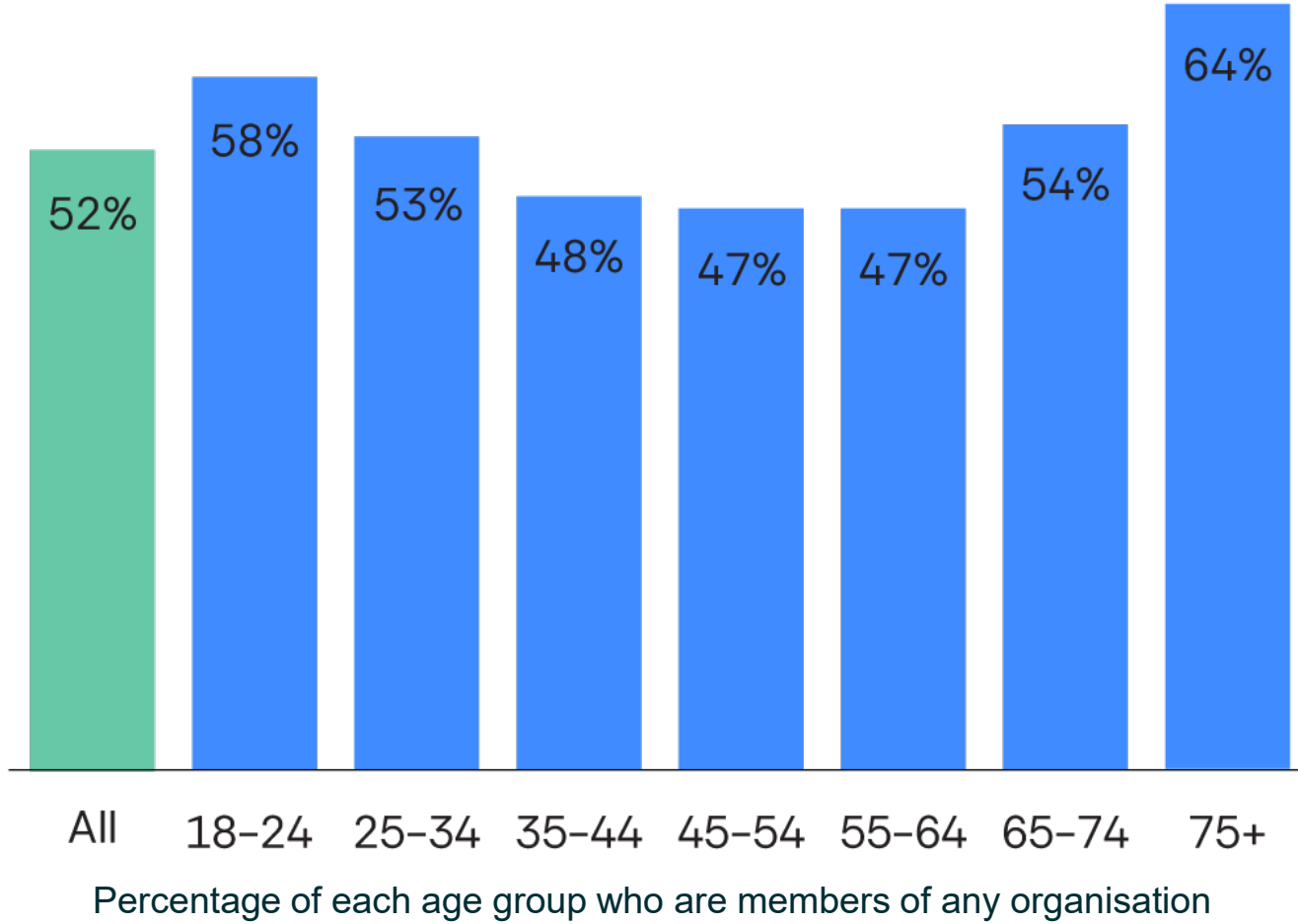
Percentage of public involved in each type of associational organisation

Source: More in Common for Power to Change (February 2025). Sample size = 2088

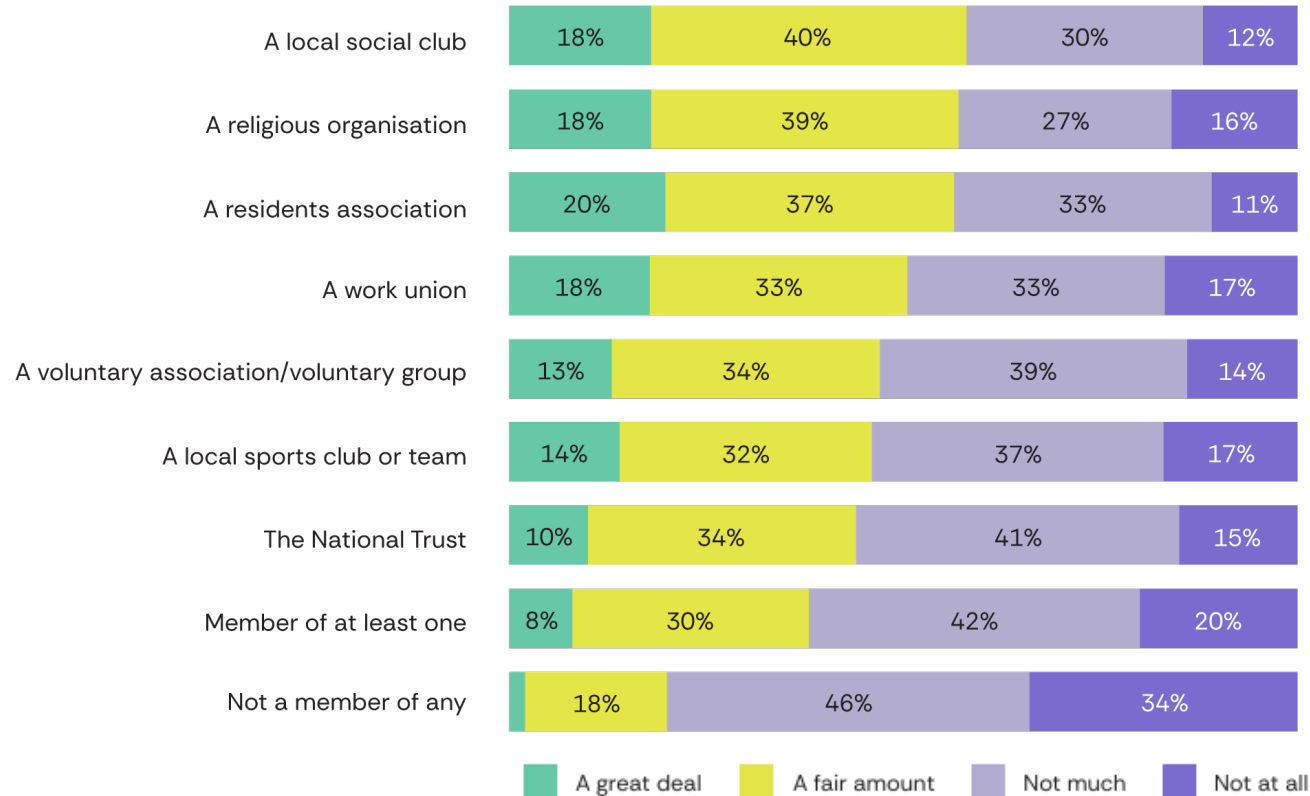


Membership levels differ by age

Younger and older people are more likely to be members of an organisation.

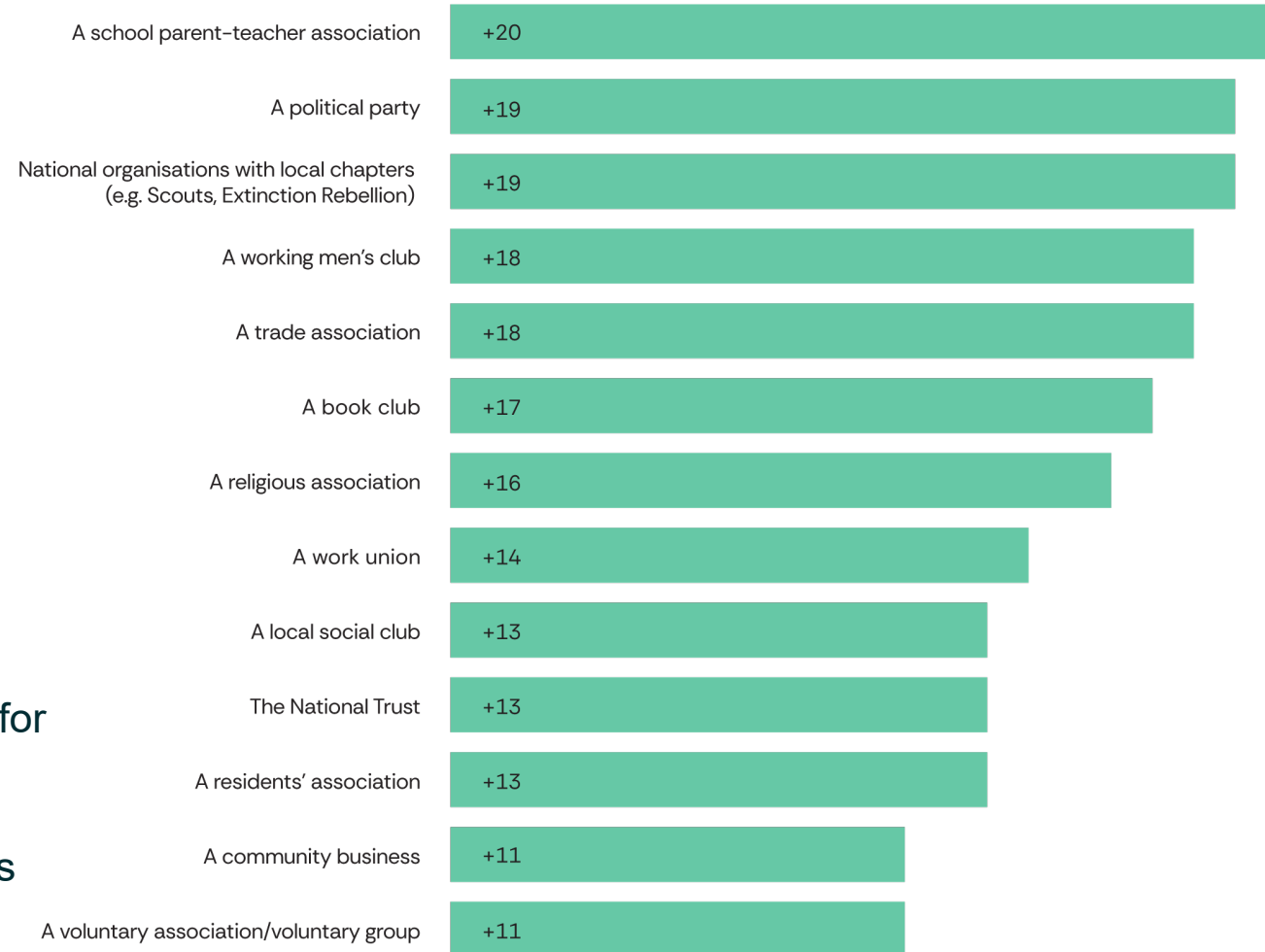


Level of trust in politics depends on the type of organisation



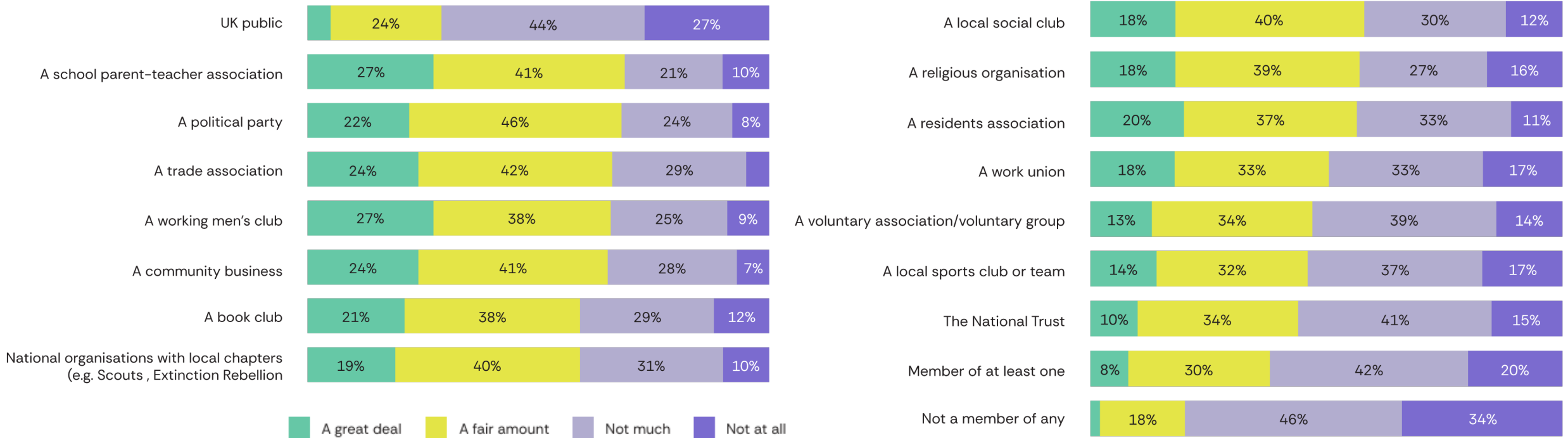
How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?

Level of satisfaction with democracy depends on the type of organisation



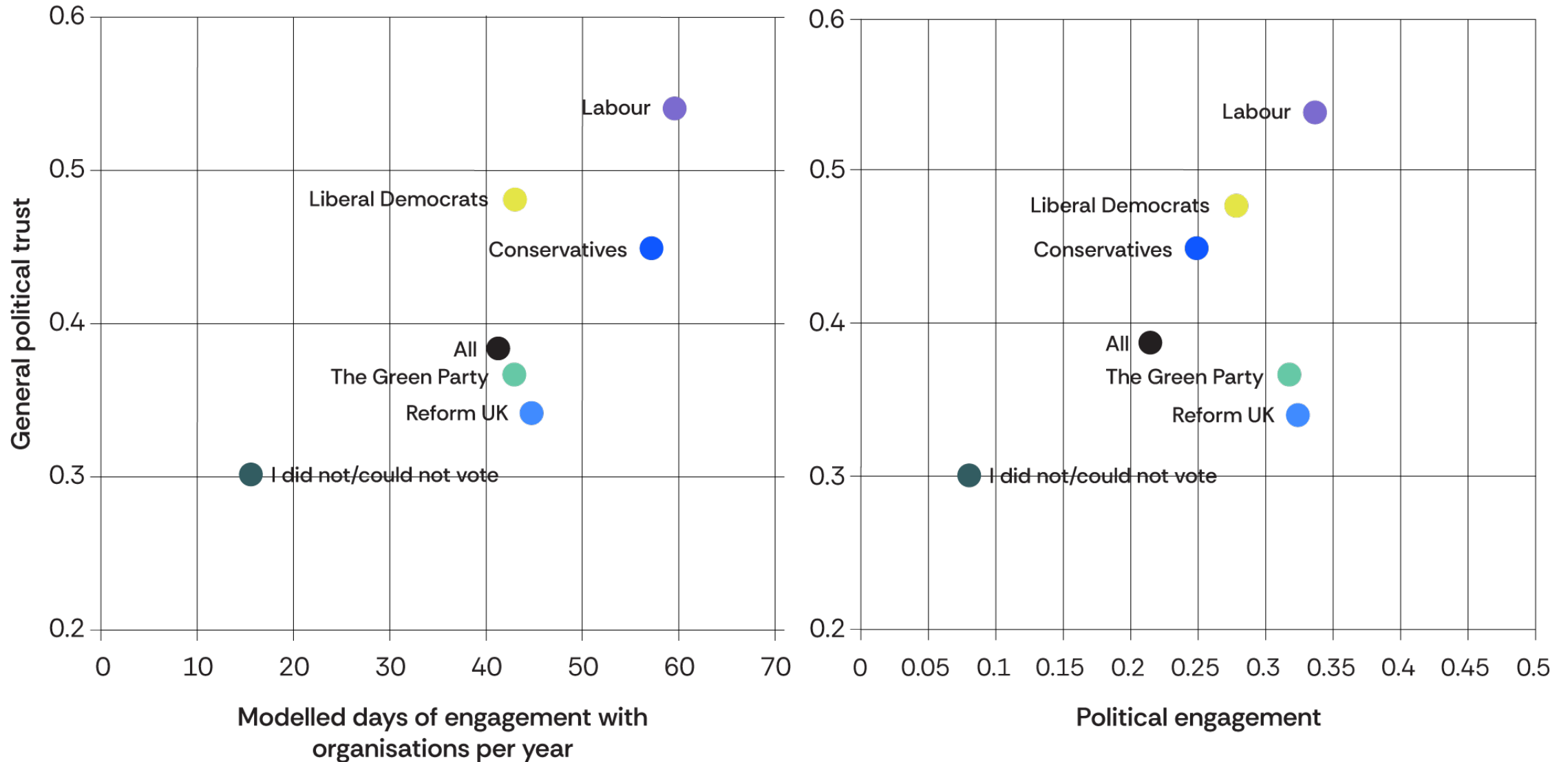
Percentage increase in satisfaction with democracy for members of specific organisations, compared to people who are not members of those organisations

Smaller, more active groups (e.g. parent associations) tend to have greater impact on trust than larger, more passive ones (e.g. sports clubs)

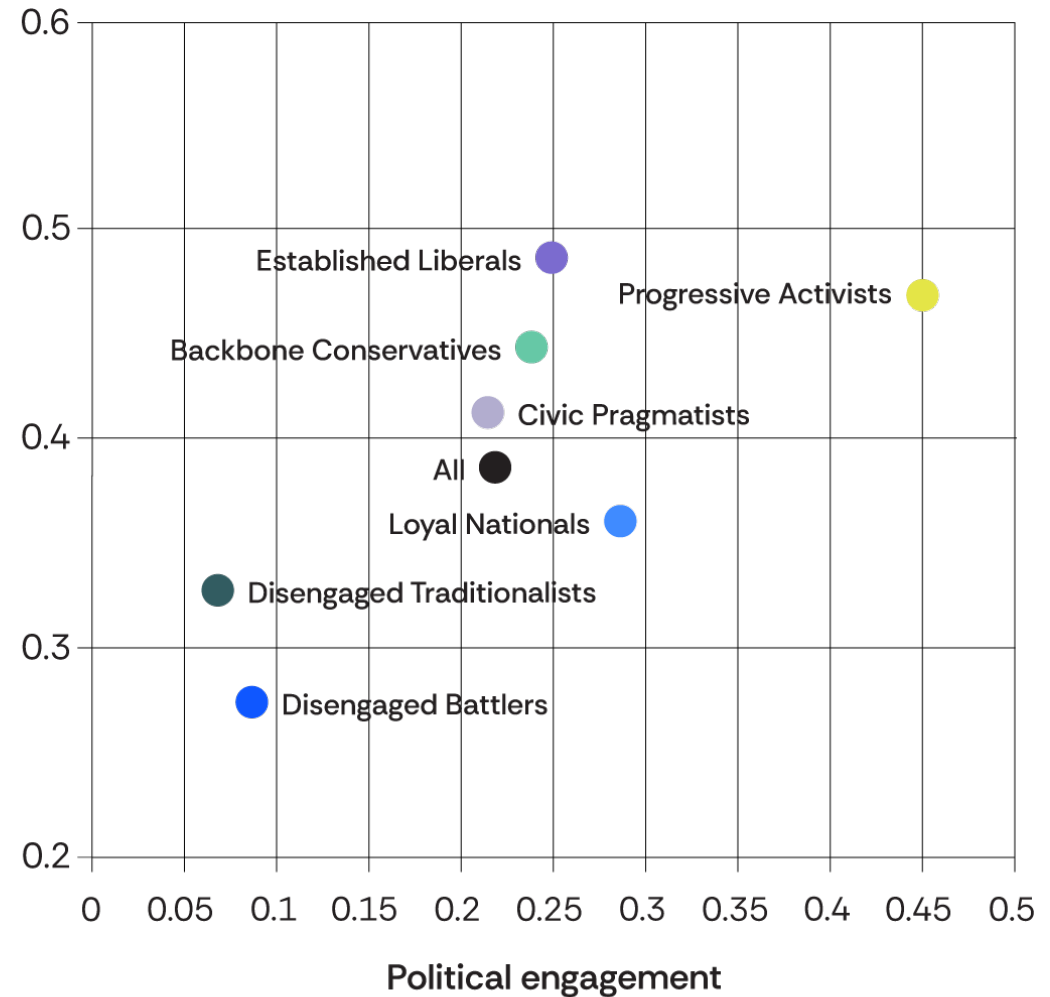
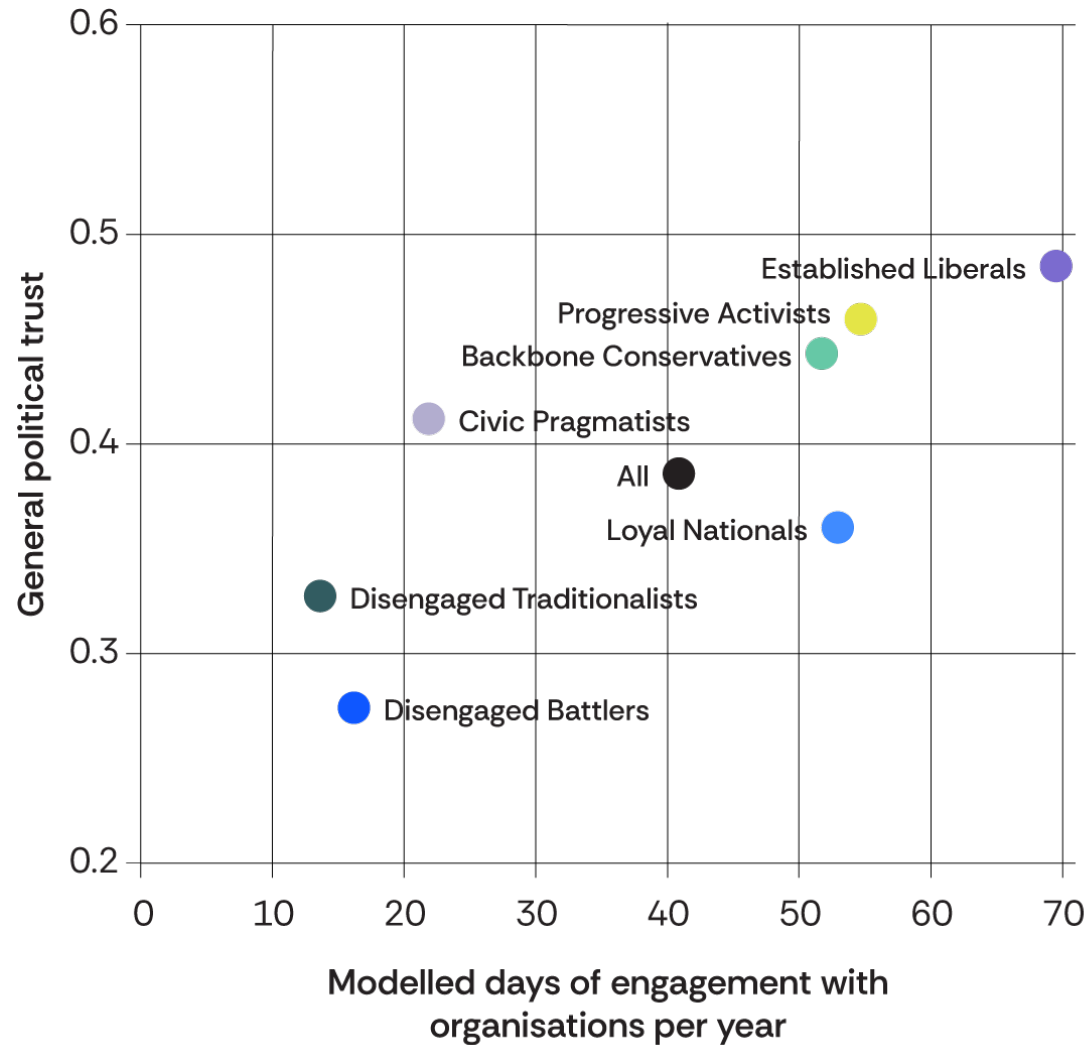


How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?

The voters of the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats display higher political trust and engagement with organisations



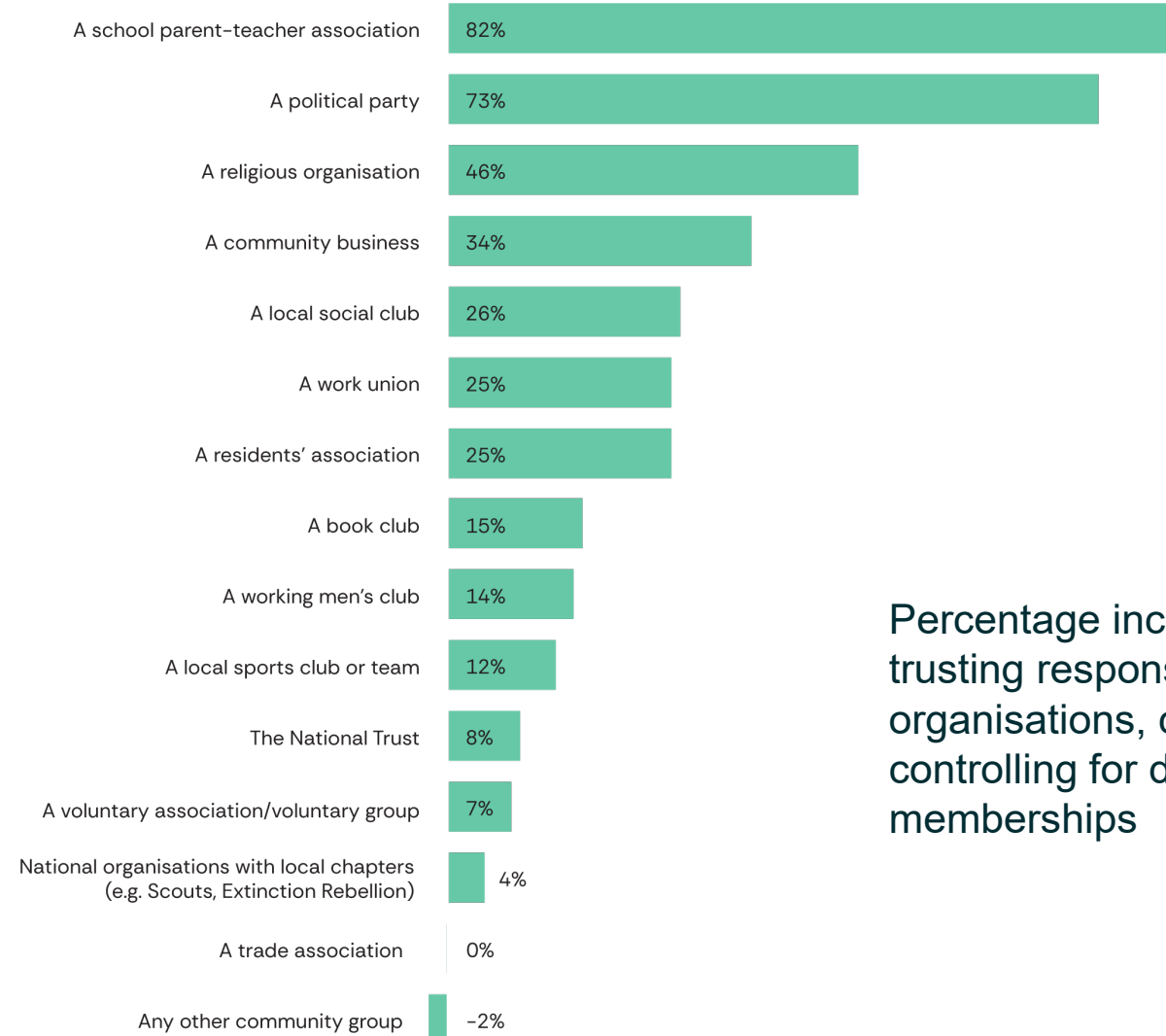
The most engaged of the 'Seven Segments' (More in Common) display higher political trust and engagement with organisations



For more information on More in Common's 'Seven Segments' visit: <https://www.britainschoice.uk/segments/>

Source: More in Common for Power to Change (February 2025). Sample size = 2088

Engagement is statistically significantly associated with higher levels of political trust



Percentage increase in likelihood of giving a more trusting response among members of associational organisations, compared to non-members, after controlling for demographics and other group memberships

Focus groups

Four focus groups were conducted in March 2025 with community business leaders, and both leaders and members of associational organisations.

The focus groups found that within associational organisations there are clear markers for political behaviour, which can act as a stepping stone to increasing trust.

Associational organisations can provide opportunities for citizens to reconnect to politics

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 yeah, I think [there is] definite connection now.

- Man, member of local sports club in East England



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Associational organisations hold an alternative conception of 'local politics'

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 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



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Associational organisations have internal effects (e.g. decision making and feeling heard) that help close the void

People don't think they have a voice [...] But when they can see small pieces of work that we do - someone said, 'It'd be really good to play pool. We haven't got a pool table.'

So 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?

It's that response to simple things. Gradually, we can hook people in the long term into the external conversations that really matter to them, their future, their children's future.

- Woman, community business leader in East England



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Associational organisations have internal effects (e.g. listening skills) that help close the void

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.

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 follow it up.

- Woman, leader of work union in the South East



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Organisations enable respectful, in-person connection, with spaces often set up to combat the divisive nature of social media

One of the 'we're getting something right' moments is when the guy I just mentioned, [community member], said he likes coming here because there's no barriers to being in our space.

[community member] said it's the only place where you 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.

So we have house rules around disagreeing respectfully, but we encourage people to share views, but also to listen.

- Man, community business leader in the Midlands



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Recommendations

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What you need to know

- Membership of at least one associational organisation is linked to higher trust in democratic institutions, regardless of political affiliation.
- A focus on delivery alone won't fix political dissatisfaction. Government must reconnect politics with associational life.
- There is an opportunity for political parties to engage voters through associational organisations.
- Associational organisations should embrace their democratic role creating space for participation, dialogue, and connection.



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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



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For political parties

1. Shift to a shared - rather than transactional - approach to politics
2. Commit party budgets to get behind community organising

For associational organisations

1. Introduce projects to boost associational organisations' roles as democratic training grounds
2. Provide spaces for positive disagreement
3. Ensure local projects bridge across lines of difference



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Thank you

A technical appendix detailing research methods and definitions is contained in the full report

Download the full report now at:

www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Closing-the-Void_2025.pdf



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