DEMOCRACY AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE IN BRITAIN

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(Draft only: Not for quotation)

Introduction

Since 1997, Britain has undergone a major programme of constitutional reform, which has reshaped its legislative, electoral and legal institutions. A number of reasons – beyond mere partisan self-interest – could be given to explain the reforms: a desire to limit the authority wielded by the government of the day, to give territorial minorities the opportunities for greater self-expression, to strengthen the legally enforceable rights of individuals over the state, to improve the decision making capacity of the state and thus contribute to economic efficiency, and so on. Among the plethora of reasons that commentators and policy actors themselves have provided for the reforms is the belief that the reshaping of Britain’s core political institutions is a necessary step in improving the links between citizens and government. A representative statement of this position was provided by Tony Blair prior to gaining office:

“Changing the way we govern, and not just changing our government, is no longer an optional extra for Britain. So low is public esteem for politicians and the system we operate that there is now little authority for us to use unless and until we first succeed in regaining it.” (‘Democracy’s Second Age’, The Economist, 14th September 1996)

This paper explores the claim that institutional reform is a means of strengthening the relations between citizens and political authority. I begin by examining theoretical accounts of the role that institutional reform might play in (re)shaping the relations between citizens and government. In doing so, I suggest various typologies by which the reforms introduced in Britain\(^1\) might be understood. I then go on to consider some of the empirical evidence relating to the impact of constitutional design on citizen-

\(^1\) The discussion throughout is limited to England, Scotland and Wales; I don’t deal at all with the reforms in Northern Ireland.
government linkages. This evidence is largely cross-national, although I also report data collected in Britain by which we can begin to assess the effectiveness of the constitutional reforms in meeting the goal set out by the Labour leader.

Two cautionary notes are appropriate before embarking. The first is that, although constitutional reform is seen by the main policy actors as a necessary means of strengthening citizen-government links, it is not seen as a sufficient one (nor is it necessarily the dominant rationale for the reforms). Nonetheless, I think it fair to say that supporters of constitutional change have significant expectations – or at least hopes – that the reforms will help bring about such a positive outcome. The second cautionary note relates to the task of assessing institutional reform. We must be cautious when making judgements about the impact of the reforms, since these may not become apparent for a good while yet; the evidence we have thus provides a preliminary picture rather than any conclusive judgements.

The rationale for constitutional change

For a policy programme whose planning and implementation took up a substantial portion of the Labour government’s first legislative term between 1997-2001, the constitutional reforms have received little post-hoc explanation or justification from the government. Insofar as ministers have commented on the programme, they have tended to eschew overarching principles or theories in favour of the contribution individual reforms are held to make to specific defects of the British polity. Maybe such a piecemeal approach is to be expected, since the wide ranging nature of the reforms makes it difficult to capture their purpose under generic principles or headings. Various commentators have tried to fill the gap by providing labels for the reform programme, although these often involve imprecise terms, such as the reforms’ supposed strengthening of the system’s ‘checks and balances’ and the degree of ‘popular control’ over decision making. But note that these particular labels are not necessarily complementary, nor is it clear to what extent they are really provided for by the British reforms.

In seeking a more rigorous analysis of the reforms’ impact on the congruence between citizens and political institutions, two approaches suggest themselves. One approach is empirical: using suitable measures such as public attitudes and electoral participation, do certain types of constitutional arrangement (such as those introduced in Britain) systematically produce closer linkages between citizens and governments? I turn to such empirical analysis later on (pages 16-22). A second approach is more theoretical, examining what kind of democracy follows from different institutional arrangements, and focusing in particular on the relationship between citizens and governments. In the following sections, I consider two theoretical approaches to the role of constitutions in democratic systems. The first

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2 For a defence of this ‘incremental’, rather than ‘first principles’, approach, see Irvine, 1998.
(pages 3-10) considers constitutions in an abstract, or formal, manner, based on the principal-agent model derived from public choice theory. The second approach (pages 10-11) considers constitutions in a less stylised, more ‘real world’, setting. The most influential of these models of democracy is the distinction made by Arend Lijphart, between ‘majoritarian’ and ‘consensus’ democracies. These theoretical approaches provide a useful starting point for understanding and evaluating Britain’s constitutional reforms. But to provide a fuller understanding, I go on to introduce a further theoretical model, based on the role of political parties and the nature of citizen participation in the political process (pages 11-16).

**The theoretical approach to constitutions – ‘Formal’ public choice models**

In considering the role of constitutions, public choice theory provides us with a valuable analytical tool, in the shape of the principal-agent model. This model asks how, when power is delegated from citizens to their representatives, can the principals be sure that their agents will act in the collective interest, rather than seeking to pursue their individual goals?³ The key concern of the principal-agent model is that the delegated relationship inherent in representative democracy entails a potential “compliance problem” (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000: 121). The solution it identifies are appropriately designed institutions which, by virtue of a set of incentives and costs, help align the interests of the agent with those of the principal. Constitutions are thus defined as “a broad, long term contract between those ruled and the rulers than specify the conditions on which the agents may exercise power in order to enhance the interests of the principal” (Lane, 1996: 180). It is this concern with minimising agency loss that is relevant to my analysis. To the extent that democratic discontent among western democracies reflects citizens’ beliefs that their governments are unresponsive, the assumptions, methods and conclusions of principal-agent theory are highly apposite.⁴

How do institutions reduce agency loss, and what institutional forms are required for the interests of the principal to be reflected in the agent’s activities? Institutions are generally held to encourage socially optimal outcomes in two ways, via *ex ante* and *ex post* controls (Brennan and

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³ One solution, of course, would be to avoid any delegation by introducing a direct, rather than a representative, form of democracy. However, public choice accounts highlight the virtues of representation, on the basis that it enables issues to be aggregated and thus avoids spillover (Mueller, 1996: 101-2), ensures that voting produces determinate outcomes and provides for policy accountability, and thus more responsible policy (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000: 156-84).

⁴ It may be, of course, that the cause of the disaffection is unrelated to the responsiveness of governments or the level of control citizens believe they wield over decisions taken in their name. It may be, for example, that the root problem is the declining policy capacity of contemporary governments; ‘output-oriented legitimacy’, in Scharpf’s (1999) phrase (see below, pages 4-5). However, I assume here that at least part of the legitimacy problem is due to ‘input-oriented’ concerns, namely the extent to which citizens believe that governments are responsive to their concerns.
Hamlin, 2000: 68-84; Strøm, 1997). Ex ante control ensures congruence by providing for electoral competition, where the potential agents have an incentive to offer a platform that is collectively beneficial. Moreover, if elections are repeated, agents will have an incentive to offer credible commitments, since hollow promises will provoke a withdrawal of the mandate at a subsequent contest. By virtue of the screening mechanism, the provision of information by potential agents on the hustings can be used by voters to select those candidates or parties whose platform and/or characteristics (eg. truthfulness, working class roots, competence) they believe will best further their (the principal’s) interests. Ex ante controls are thus designed to allocate appropriate individuals or parties into positions of discretionary power; they correspond to the representative function of elections in which citizens send signals about their preferences (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000: 84; Manin et al, 1999; Strøm, 1997). Ex post control – or sanctions – depends on the ability of the principal to monitor the agent, and requires clear lines of responsibility in order that an agent can accurately be accorded praise or blame for their actions. Ex post controls are designed to restrict the agent’s discretionary power; they correspond to the accountability function of elections, in which voters make retrospective judgements about the agents’ activities.

These two forms of control are reflected in Mueller’s (1996) distinction between institutions that reveal individual preferences and those that act as a check on the agent. While Mueller recognise that institutions may play both roles (for example, he notes that referendums help reveal voters’ preferences as well as constraining governments5), he treats voting systems, the party system, federalism and parliamentary voting rules as preference revealing institutions, with rights regimes, the judiciary, bicameralism and referendums as constraining institutions. If an institution has strong constraining powers, such that it can block any policy decision made by the government, we may call it a ‘veto player’. In Tsebelis’ (1995) treatment of the subject, veto players may be both institutional (eg. presidential regimes, bicameral legislatures, the courts, popularly initiated referendums and requirements for super-majorities on certain issues) and partisan (the parties sharing power in an executive coalition).

A broadly similar categorisation of political institutions can be found in Scharpf’s (1999) analysis of the way that governments derive their legitimacy. Institutions provide governments with legitimacy either because they further government by the people (input-legitimisation) or government for the people (output-legitimisation). Input oriented institutions are only possible within a community marked by a high degree of shared collective

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5 Similarly, as just noted, elections may serve as both an expression of collective preferences (ex-ante control) and as a means of imposing sanctions on poorly performing governments (ex-post control). Federalism, too, may serve both preference-revealing and agent-constraining functions; the former by virtue of elections among a population sub-group, the latter if the regional tier enjoys representation and veto powers at the centre via a territorially defined second chamber (as in many federal states).
identity (which Scharpf equates with the nation state), while output oriented institutions may exist within a looser community marked only by a set of common interests (for example, the European Union). Under the input-oriented account, elections are the means by which the ‘popular will’ receives expression; the main concern is how far the voting rule ensures that the interests of all citizens are reflected in the result. Under the output-oriented account – in which legitimisation derives from the problem solving capacity of collective actors – the key issue is how to prevent agents from abusing public office while providing them with sufficient incentives to take effective decisions. Under this model, elections operate as (retrospective) means of ensuring accountability, a function bolstered by additional constitutional devices such as the separation of powers.

From these brief accounts of public choice-inspired theories, we obtain a set of distinctions about the way in which institutions affect the relationship between principals and agents. In Table 1, I summarise the public choice accounts of institutions in terms of their functions and the mechanisms by which they achieve these ends; I then note some of the general and specific institutional injunctions made by public choice theorists. These injunctions can be used to assess how far Britain’s constitutional reforms serve to strengthen the authority of the principal over the agent.

TABLE 1 HERE

Competitive relations between agents is a central mechanism in the public choice account, and can be provided for by elections (ex ante competition based on ‘voice’) or by multiple government units vying with one another for citizens (ex post competition based on ‘exit’) (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000: 224-5; Osterfeld, 1989). Elections must also allow for individual preferences to be expressed and conveyed effectively, with implications both for the ballot structure (single versus multiple preference options) and the object of electoral competition (elections restricted to a single agency versus multiple elections to a number of agencies). For expressed preferences to be real ones, citizens must know that the costs of any outcome they vote for align with the benefits, with implications for the territorial organisation of government (which must minimise externalities or spillovers). When it comes to constraining the agent, the principal must have access to accurate information if they are to effectively monitor the agent. Sanctioning requires that the responsibility for agency activities is clear to the principal, so that reward or blame can be administered accurately. Finally, should the contract between the principal and agent need to be enforced beyond the sanctioning device of elections, the allocation of checking authority to third parties, via a separation of powers, might be appropriate.

How far do principal-agent models suggest an ‘ideal’ set of political institutions? And in light of this, how far do the constitutional reforms introduced in Britain measure up to these injunctions? If the match between theory and practice is a close one then, in principle at least, the reforms may
be deemed appropriate in making government more responsive to citizens’ demands.

Public choice theorists have focused much of their attention on electoral competition, since the electoral link is, as Brennan and Hamlin (2000: 101-2) point out, potentially the only element in the contract made by citizens with their governments capable of preventing agency loss. One obvious injunction is that elections should be held frequently; too long a lapse between contests reduces the incentives for agents to act responsibly (Mueller, 1989). In addition, there should be separate elections for different parts of government, so that citizens can exercise control over agents for their particular actions. This means that local and national elections should not be held concurrently (Strøm, 1997), and that members of powerful public agencies – for example, central banks – be elected, perhaps indirectly by representatives in the legislature (Manin et al, 1999: 24-5).

On these criteria, the British reforms score fairly well; devolution has yielded greater electoral opportunities, allowing citizens in the devolved units to express preferences for, and impose sanctions on, distinct tiers of government. However, these electoral opportunities are denied to citizens in England – for which there is currently no tier of regional government6 – and the accountability of executive bodies, such as the Bank of England, is compromised by the government’s refusal to allow the legislature any say in the appointments it makes.

When electoral contests are held, what system should be used? The concern that elections should accurately convey voters’ true preferences might suggest a proportional voting rule. Multiple preference systems allow for more choices to be expressed by voters, and a legislative assembly elected as a ‘microcosm’ of the wider population is often held to be the most likely to ensure congruence between the interests of citizens and their representatives (Mueller, 1989, 1996). However, other accounts privilege majoritarian electoral systems – and a bipolar party system – for the control they offer over governments7:

“... it is not more choice that is necessarily desirable; it is more effective choice over the relevant thing. In electoral choice, the object of ultimate normative significance is the set of policy decisions the elected government makes. Choice on that matter counts normatively; arrangements that obscure such choice are presumptively undesirable” (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000: 207).

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6 Outside London. Note that the government recently introduced a Green Paper prefiguring the introduction of regional units in England, although these units are likely to have only weak powers.

7 This supposed advantage of majoritarian arrangements is recognised by Mueller (1996: 101-74).
There is thus some disagreement among public choice theorists about which voting rule maximises the principal's control over the agent. We also find some disagreement when it comes to the decentralisation of political authority. Many public choice theorists recommend a federal system, on the basis that multiple centres of decision making help align the costs and benefits of government decisions, thus achieving an optimal allocation of public goods (Mueller, 1996: 77-100; Aranson, 1989: 123-31). Decentralised decision making also allows citizens dissatisfied with government in one unit to 'exit' to a more responsive unit elsewhere (Osterfeld, 1989). Moreover, decentralisation also provides a means of retaining diverse and discrete social groupings within a single polity (Goodin, 1996). However, when it comes to 'fiscal federalism' – the decentralisation of revenue collection and allocation – potential problems arise, since competition between regions may produce externalities that reduce the total amount of public goods available for distribution (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000: 223-9). It should be recognised, though, that this problem relates more to the quantity of output available to citizens, rather than how far this output equates to their demands.

The British reforms again appear broadly in line with these recommendations, insofar as some devolution has taken place. However, as noted above, power has only been decentralised to a minority of the population, with no tier of regional government in England. In addition, devolution has not produced a close alignment of costs and benefits, since the revenue raising powers of the Scottish Parliament and Greater London Assembly are limited, and in Wales non-existent. In other words, the provision of goods and services is still subject to externality, or 'spillover', problems. Moreover, the overlapping competences of the central and devolved tiers may impede voters in identifying responsibility for agency activities. The expression of realistic preferences (as well as the ex post ability to impose sanctions on the agent) may require a clearer demarcation of roles and powers between the tiers than is presently the case.

Turning to ex ante controls or constraints, I have noted that monitoring of the agent requires the principal to have access to detailed and accurate information. While this is a function as much of non-government actors – notably the media – as of governments, reforms to the agent can help. Notable examples are freedom of information regimes – which has now been introduced in Britain, albeit with a relatively restricted scope – and independent official sources of information and data, of which an autonomous agency responsible for official statistics – not yet introduced in Britain – would form an important part.

In the discussion thus far, the basic mechanism by which principals are deemed to exercise control over their agent is the competitive election. But as Brennan and Hamlin (2000: 224) note, "Electoral competition, even when optimally deployed, is unlikely to deliver perfect government; the elected will generally retain some discretionary power to depart from the wishes of the
electorate. It is here that the further quest for constitutional protection via the separation of powers begins". Separated powers can act as a constraining force either through a division of monopoly power (notably the tripartite distinction between executive, legislature and judiciary) or through competition between agents, for example through a scheme of fiscal federalism (ibid: 212-29). Separated powers are generally viewed by public choice theorists as beneficial institutions, since they reduce the amount of rent that can be extracted by the agent, a payoff made much easier if the agent enjoys monopoly power.\(^8\)

It is widely stated that Britain now enjoys a stronger separation of powers by virtue of the incorporation into domestic law of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). However, the Human Rights Act arguably fails to create a new set of legal constraints on the agent as much as shifting the location of the enforcement body from the European to the domestic level (thus supposedly making it easier for individual citizens to contest decisions made by the agent).\(^9\) Moreover, the continued inter-dependence of the executive and judiciary – notably though the position of the Lord Chancellor and his power over judicial appointments – dilutes the extent to which the agent is subject to genuine checks. Britain also lacks a codified constitution and dedicated Bill of Rights, which would provide for greater judicial controls over the discretion of the executive.

A clearer separation of powers is also suggested by other reforms, although these, too, may exert limited constraints on the agent. I have already noted the semi-autonomy given to the Bank of England over important issues of monetary policy. Should the authority of the Upper House be strengthened, it is possible that the bicameral division of power would provide an additional check on the executive. However such radical reform appears unlikely. True, the referendums held since 1997 – on devolution to Scotland, Wales, and London – enjoyed de facto binding status (since majorities voting in support of the government’s proposal were required for devolution to progress), and thus may be considered as powerful checks on the government. But in formal terms, referendums in Britain hold only advisory status and are, in any case, only rarely held.\(^10\) It is difficult to argue that they provide British citizens with a powerful means of control over the agent, other than preventing major changes to the rules of the political game.

\(^8\) Although the externality problem that potentially arises in territorial divisions of powers (see page 7) may also arise if power is separated functionally between the executive, legislature and judiciary, each of which acts as a check on the others (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000: 215-23).

\(^9\) Note also that the courts are only entitled to identify, and not to strike down, any legislation or decisions of the executive that are found to breach the ECHR, thus handing responsibility back to the executive/legislature.

\(^10\) Thus, the only referendums likely in the immediate future are on two further constitutional measures: electoral reform for the House of Commons and entry into the Single European Currency.
Summarising this section on public choice theories, I have identified a distinction between the role of constitutions as providing, first, a preference-revealing/input-oriented legitimising function, and second, an agent-constraining/output-oriented legitimising function. Applying this distinction to the British reforms, I suggest that only one of the reforms makes a clear contribution to the preference-revealing function, and thus to the input-legitimising criterion of government by the people. This is devolution, which allows citizens in Scotland, Wales and London the opportunity to elect a body to serve their particular interests. Moreover, note that in each case, the electoral rule allows for the expression of more complex preferences than in Westminster elections, by virtue of the two vote system of proportional representation. But even devolution is rather limited in the extent to which it counts as a ‘preference revealing’ reform. With the exception of the Scottish Parliament, the devolved bodies operate with tightly circumscribed powers, hindering the extent to which they can deliver what citizens want, and thereby reducing the incentive for citizens to indicate their true preferences. Add to this the fact that the proportion of citizens covered by a devolved legislature remains small, since Scotland, Wales and London account for just 29% of the British population. Even if devolution is extended to the English regions, the powers of the new bodies is likely to be even more limited than those available to Wales and London.

It could be argued that changes to the voting rule for elections outside the devolved tier – notably the European Parliament – provide for greater proportionality of representation and thus make it more likely that citizens will express ‘sincere’ rather than ‘tactical’ preferences. But the system used for European elections allows votes to be cast only for a party and not for a particular candidate (‘closed list’ voting), limiting the degree to which accurate preferences can be recorded. In addition, the most recent European Parliament election in 1999 attracted a turnout of just 23%, casting into doubt just how significant the contest itself really is.

When it comes to constraints on the agent, I have identified the role of various existing and potential future initiatives, although I have also noted that the effects of some of these initiatives (eg. a clearer separation of powers, a more liberal information regime) may be attenuated in practice. Another way of illustrating this is to consider whether the reforms have increased the number of veto points within the political system. On Tsebelis’s (1995) account, pre-reform Britain exhibited a single veto player, namely the party in government at any one point. The reforms have not increased the number of veto players, since Britain lacks a strong second chamber and has no provision for citizen initiated referendums.11

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11 It is arguable that the Human Rights Act creates a new veto player, in the shape of the courts. However, as I noted above (page 8), it is also arguable either that the Act merely domesticates a legal regime already previously in existence at the European level (so that, while the British political system might best be treated as containing two veto players, this would be as true prior to the Act as following it), or that the limited powers conferred on the
The conclusion I draw from this analysis of the principal-agent model is that Britain’s constitutional reforms augment the power of the principal over the agent, but not to the extent to which the potential for ‘agency loss’ is genuinely minimised. Thus, insofar as the concerns of the principal-agent model – namely the attempt to ensure the responsiveness of the agent to the principal – reflect one reason for citizen dissatisfaction with political authority in Britain, the conclusion would be that the reforms stand only a modest chance of resolving the core problem.

**The theoretical approach to constitutions – ‘Political’ models**

For the purposes of this paper, the principal-agent model provides a good theoretical base by which to analyse constitutions, since it focuses attention on the institutional mechanisms by which the interests of citizens are likely to be reflected in the actions of governments. But its assumptions and methods are rather stylised and abstract. It is also poorly equipped to adjudicate between alternative institutions when the basis for doing so involves normative, rather than purely positive, criteria. The most notable example of this is the disagreement among public choice theorists, noted above, as to the superiority of proportional or majoritarian voting rules. This means that public choice approaches can take us only so far in examining the efficacy of different constitutional arrangements. A supplement to such ‘formal’ analysis can be found in more ‘political’ models, in which greater attention is paid to the nature of specific political institutions and a wider range of judgements can be made about their merits. In the following sections, I examine a particularly important set of models held to characterise different forms of representative democracies, Arend Lijphart’s distinction between ‘consensus’ and ‘majoritarian’ democracies.12

The basic distinction between these two models arises most clearly in response to the question ‘Who shall do the governing?’ Under the majoritarian model, authority is exercised by a simple majority of the population, while under the consensus model, authority involves as many people as possible. The majoritarian model thus concentrates political power in a largely zero sum game, based on competitive and adversarial relations. The consensus model, by contrast, diffuses and limits power, whose exercise is marked by inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise (Lijphart, 1999: 2). The specific institutions and rules that define each country’s status as a

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12 These familiar terms can readily be found in the public choice literature, where relatively unfettered ‘majoritarian’ democracy is contrasted to the highly constrained ‘consensus’ democracy (eg. Lane, 1996: 180-3). The value of what I term ‘political’ treatments of these models – as in Lijphart’s exposition – is that they pay closer attention than do public choice treatments to the operationalisation of the specific institutions (legislatures, legal regimes etc) that fall within the models.
majoritarian or consensus model cluster into two dimensions, the 'Executive-Parties' and 'Federal-Unitary' dimensions (Table 2).

**TABLE 2 HERE**

For the purposes of comparative research, Lijphart’s analysis has the advantage of specifying relatively clearly the institutional variables that constitute the two different forms of democracy. It thus enables us to locate any particular country according to its position on both dimensions. At the time of Lijphart’s analysis in 1999, Britain was a strongly majoritarian system: to take the key variables on the two dimensions (that is, the variable that statistical analysis shows to most strongly define the dimension), British governments virtually always comprised only a single party, and its territorial division of power was strongly tilted in favour of the centre with little sub-national autonomy. As Norris (2001) points out, the effect of the constitutional reforms has been to propel Britain towards the consensus model on the federal-unitary dimension, due to devolution, stronger bicameralism, greater judicial oversight and central bank independence. But on the executive-parties dimension, Britain remains a majoritarian system, characterised by single party governments, executive dominance over the legislature, a two party system and majoritarian electoral system (see Figure 1, which shows that Britain’s position on a two dimensional grid has changed only vertically, not horizontally). Thus, the effect of the constitutional reform programme has been to introduce elements of the consensus model at the same time as retaining important majoritarian institutions.13

**FIGURE 1 HERE**

The distinction between majoritarian and consensus models of democracy has valuable analytical power, in helping us pinpoint the effect of constitutional change on a country’s political system. But the models also have more substantive implications, since they are claimed, by Lijphart, to reflect and explain different cross-national patterns of political, social and economic outcomes. This is an important claim, because it carries us beyond the theoretical treatment of constitutions to the empirical question of whether certain institutional arrangements systematically generate closer linkages between citizens and their government than others. I turn shortly (pages 16-20) to some of the answers yielded by empirical analysis. Before then, I want to extend slightly further the theoretical implications of constitutional reform for modern democratic systems. In particular, I want to consider the potential impact of institutional change for the representative model of democracy, by focusing on the role of political parties and the nature of citizen participation. These two features, I suggest, are potentially

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13 The constitutional reforms have brought Britain into line with many of its former colonies – such as Australia – which, as Lijphart (1999b: 314-5) notes, have often adopted consensual institutions on the federal-unitary dimension, while retaining majoritarian institutions on the executive-parties dimension.
central to our appreciation of what impact Britain’s constitutional reform programme will have.

Political parties are the core actors in modern representative democracies. Yet many commentators argue that the parties’ dominance is one reason why the political system is insufficiently responsive to citizens’ demands, and thus why levels of popular dissatisfaction and alienation have increased (Bogdanor, 1997). If this account is at least half accurate, one means by which the constitutional reform programme might strengthen citizen-government linkages would be via changes to the party system. It could do this in a number of ways (Table 3). The first would be to retain the existing number of parties, but to increase their responsiveness by more tightly regulating the way they raise and spend money (on the grounds that a liberal approach to party financing encourages agency loss). This would be the most minimal approach to party system reform, since it would affect neither the number of intermediary actors, nor their internal decision processes. A more significant change would be to reform the internal operation of the parties, by introducing greater citizen involvement in policy making and the selection of candidates and party leaders. If it is thought that the number of elective parties (ie. the number of parties offering themselves at election) unduly restricts voter choice (notably if important strands of public opinion go unrepresented by a party), efforts could be made to increase the number of parties, for example by introducing a more proportional electoral system.

TABLE 3 HERE

While these reforms would alter the party system, they would do little to undermine the role of the parties as the dominant actors in political competition. However, this pivotal role might be undermined as the result of other reforms. These reforms are thus labelled ‘extra-party’ in Table 3, not because they necessarily weaken the hold of the parties, but because –

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14 However, should regulation extend to the state funding of the parties, this would represent a more significant reform. State funding contains the potential for the established parties to form ‘cartels’ by preventing the entry of new parties. Moreover, it would arguably make the parties less responsive to their members since party elites would no longer be as dependent on the financial contributions that members bring.

15 Greater citizen participation could be achieved either through the involvement of non-members of parties (eg. in the case of primary contests in the United States) or by a wider selection of party members than is usually the case. Most intra-party initiatives tend to extend ‘voice’ to party members rather than non-members (Scarrow et al, 2000). While Britain has recently seen provision for greater intra-party democracy (ibid), these measures have generally been taken by the parties themselves – usually to enhance their legitimacy or to dilute the impact of extreme activists – rather than by the government. In this sense, these measures can only loosely be considered part of the constitutional reform programme.

16 Moreover, if the electoral system allowed for multiple preferences to be cast across parties (‘panachage’), as with the Single Transferable Vote or fully open list systems, the effect might be to strengthen the position of individual candidates at the expense of party discipline. It is for precisely this reason that some commentators hostile to the role of parties in Britain have recommended the introduction of STV for elections to the House of Commons (Bogdanor, 1981: 232-59; 1997: 198-202).
either in the logic of their design or the way they might operate in practice – they contain the potential for such an effect. The first of these reforms is the creation of directly elected mayors at the local level. The election of an individual means that, while the bulk of successful candidates would derive from within a party, personalities and personal qualities would also play a role in determining the outcome. This would give the winner a legitimacy that they could use to pursue policy activities outside the confines of the party group. It is a combination of personal legitimacy and individual leadership that has led commentators in the United States to label the mayoral position as an ‘executive’ model of democracy (Svara, 1990).

The second reform that potentially contains an ‘extra-party’ element is devolution. It is a commonplace in the literature that the opportunities for direct citizen participation in decision making are greater at the local level than the national one. On this logic, devolution to smaller political units (London’s population is just over 7 million or 14% of Britain’s total, Scotland’s just over 5 million or 10%) should make such participation easier, without providing the ideal conditions found among far smaller populations, notably local communities. Both the Scottish Parliament and Greater London Assembly have taken advantage of this to build into their decision making processes direct consultation with individual citizens and civic groups. Thus, while the dominant actors within the two assemblies are the parties, their role is potentially complemented (and perhaps even challenged in future?) by the involvement of non-party mediated actors.

The final reform listed in Table 3 poses a more obvious challenge to the position of the parties, since it provides for individuals to vote directly on specific policy issues, either in a referendum or through other participatory arrangements such as citizens’ juries. Note, however, that referendums do not necessarily weaken the parties’ position, and may in fact enhance it if the parties retain control over the conduct of the process and the campaigns (Budge, 1996; Strøm, 2000: 186-8).

The constitutional reform programme therefore holds potential implications for the party system in Britain, and thus the extent to which the relationship between citizens and governments is mediated through strong political parties, weaker parties, or potentially not mediated by parties at all. In summary, I suggest that the reforms may work to retain the basic nature of party based political competition (an inter-party model), effect a marginal shift in the role of parties (an intra-party model), or produce a more fundamental challenge to the parties (an extra-party model). Thus, if

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17 Clearly, parties will not simply wither away as a result of the constitutional reforms; political competition in Britain will remain dominated by the parties. When I refer to the parties losing their mediating role, I am thinking of specific policy issues that might be decided by direct consultation with citizens (eg. via a referendum) in a way that marginalises the role of the parties.

18 I should note here one alternative formulation; that the reforms weaken the partisan strength of the parties. This possibility has been suggested by Peter Mair (2000), who holds
indeed citizens’ discontent with their political institutions is partly explained by the party mediated nature of democracy in Britain, then the constitutional reforms may have implications for citizen-government linkages via the changes they induce in the party system. Alternatively, however, it may be that citizens’ grievances derive from another source, namely a lack of opportunities to express their preferences on collective issues, rather than the mediated nature of the choices they are presented with. This brings me to the second feature which I argue is central to understanding the way the constitutional reforms might work: the extent of citizen participation.

Just as constitutional design can shape the party system, so it holds potential implications for the extent and nature of citizen participation, via the “political opportunity structures” it creates (Herbert Kitschelt, quoted in Weale, 1999: 86). Constitutional reform can vary the extent of citizen participation either by providing for more elections to a constant number of bodies (eg. by reducing the maximum electoral term of legislatures) or by extending the number of bodies subject to direct election. The reforms in Britain have clearly provided for the latter, by allowing citizens in Scotland, Wales and London to elect their own assemblies. However, they have fallen short of extending the electoral principle to such executive agencies as the Bank of England. Constitutional reform also holds implications for the nature of elections as well as their frequency, in particular by allowing for a greater set of preferences to be expressed within the ballot. The use of proportional representation systems for the devolved assemblies has provided citizens with greater electoral choice than possible under single member plurality arrangements.

There are, then, two key dimensions to the analysis of the constitutional reforms in Britain: the nature of the party system and the extent of citizen participation. These dimensions define how far collective decisions are taken by actors (the parties) operating on behalf of citizens, and what opportunities citizens have to express their preferences on policy issues. To the extent that the constitutional reforms retain the primacy of the parties as mediating institutions – varying only the extent of citizen participation – the political system will remain a representative one. But to the extent that the parties’ mediating role comes under challenge, the conditions exist for new forms of democracy, notably the ‘executive’ or ‘participatory’ models. This suggests a basic distinction in the way that Britain’s constitutional reforms might work, that the reforms are intended to produce a “partyless democracy” via the creation of multiple checks and balances (veto points) in the system, and the encouragement of power sharing across parties rather than power hoarding between them. Mair believes that the result of these initiatives will be to weaken the hold of partisan, or strong, party government. Mair’s treatment of the British reforms reflects a wider argument that the potential for partisan party behaviour declines as the number of veto players within the political system increases (Schmidt, 2002).

19 A more subtle change would be to change the electoral cycles of assemblies, so that contests are not held coterminously (which might encourage ‘blanket voting’ for a single party across assemblies) but separately (which might encourage more differential patterns of voting, according to the circumstances of each particular body).
encapsulated in the question: Is the solution for citizen dissatisfaction with existing political systems more democracy, or different forms of democracy? Another way of putting it would be: Should we be looking at reforms within the representative model, or reforms to the representative model (notably by adopting elements of the participatory model)?

In Figure 2, I map out a typology for the constitutional reforms, based on my two key variables: the extent of citizen participation and the extent of party mediation. The bottom left box consists of reforms which are assumed to retain at least a high element of party control, while placing some limits on citizen participation. The two democratic models associated with these features are the representative model and the executive model. The top right box involves greater citizen participation and weaker party mediation, and includes the referendum and other participatory initiatives. The democratic model associated with these features is the participatory one.

FIGURE 2 HERE

The positioning of each of the constitutional reforms is subject to some variation depending on the way the reform is designed and implemented. This is shown by the presence of arrows, which are either horizontal (indicating potential variations in the degree of party mediation) or vertical (indicating potential variations in the degree of citizen participation). Beginning from the bottom left box, there are no arrows for the party regulation reform, indicating that this measure has no real impact on the extent of party control or citizen voice. All the other reforms, however, contain potential implications for these two variables. Electoral reform may increase citizens’ opportunities to express a wider set of preferences (vertical arrows in Fig 2). Devolution may increase the opportunities for citizens to participate more directly in decision making; in doing so, it may also weaken the control wielded by the parties over the policy process (vertical and horizontal arrows). Directly elected mayors may either entrench the role of parties in the local electoral process, or weaken it if individual candidates are given a personal, rather than party/collective, mandate (horizontal arrows).

Note that most of the ‘action’ takes place in the bottom left box, that is, the box associated most strongly with the representative model of democracy. While the reforms in this box have possible implications for the degree of citizen participation and party control, they don’t fundamentally upset the applecart of the representative process, based on competitive elections and parties. Only when we move to the top right box is the representative model potentially replaced by the participatory one. But the use of referendums and participatory initiatives in Britain are only loosely part of the constitutional reform package. The first is best treated as a tool for

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constitutional change, while the latter is being pursued by central and local government in piecemeal fashion as self-interest dictates. These measures are listed because they offer the clearest challenge to the representative model. The core of the constitutional reform programme involves political change within the representative model (the executive model is a variant of representative democracy, based on individual leadership, rather than collective agency, at the local level). This should be no surprise; insofar as institutional change helps bolster the legitimacy of the political process, elites will look to reforms that maintain the existing rules of the game (which have, after all, brought them to office), rather than switching to new rules (under which their fate would be much less certain).

The empirical analysis of constitutions

The analysis so far has explored what implications constitutional reform might have for the nature of democracy in Britain. The theoretical models I have considered are important because they suggest why different institutional arrangements might affect the linkages between citizens and governments. But the models do not say anything about the state of these linkages in practice, for which we need to turn to empirical analysis. This approach will enable me to examine whether certain institutional arrangements generate closer citizen-government linkages than others. I begin by considering various cross-national studies, before reporting on some data collected in Britain.

One of the clearest claims of institutional effects is provided by Lijphart’s (1999) analysis of constitutions. Although Lijphart evaluates the impact of his ‘majoritarian’ and ‘consensus’ models of democracy for a range of outcomes, I limit myself to those features Lijphart describes as defining the ‘quality of democracy’: electoral participation, attitudes to political authority and the degree of government responsiveness to citizen demands. Lijphart shows that on these criteria, consensus democracies perform better than majoritarian ones. Thus, average rates of participation in national elections are shown to be seven percentage points higher in consensus democracies than in majoritarian ones. In addition, citizens in consensus democracies are, on average, seventeen percentage points more satisfied with the way democracy works in their country than their counterparts in majoritarian systems. On measures of ideological proximity, governments in consensus systems are, on average, closer to voters than they are in majoritarian ones (proximity being measured by the relative positions of the government and median voter on a left-right scale). Lijphart’s conclusion is unequivocal: when it comes to the quality of democracy, consensus systems outperform majoritarian ones. Note, however, that the differing performance of the two models is entirely due to variations within the executive-parties dimension;

21 Each of the three non-local referendums held in Britain since 1997 have related to constitutional reform issues, namely devolution to Scotland, Wales and London, as do the two referendums supposedly in the pipeline: membership of the European single currency and electoral reform for the House of Commons.
democratic performance is not significantly affected by variations on the federal-unitary dimension.

While Lijphart’s findings are clear, if controversial, the explanation for his findings are less conclusive. Why should it be, for example, that citizens living under consensus arrangements (notably coalition governments and proportional electoral systems) display more positive attitudes towards the political system than citizens in majoritarian systems? One rationale for this finding lies in the distinction Lijphart makes at the outset of his analysis, between government for the majority (majoritarian model), and government for as many citizens as possible (consensus model). Representative democracy involves political competition which, in turn, creates ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. All other things being equal, winners (i.e. citizens whose favoured party exercises policy making power) should exhibit more positive attitudes towards the political system than losers (i.e. citizens whose favoured party does not wield policy making power). But winning and losing mean different things under different institutional arrangements. In particular, majoritarian arrangements strongly favour electoral winners, since the zero sum nature of the political game denies the losers much of a stake in decision making. In consensus systems, by contrast, political minorities are given a greater voice in the policy process, notably through participation in coalition governments and/or through influential parliamentary committees (Huber and Powell, 1994). Thus, we should find that the more consensual the system, the more positive the political attitudes among the losers, in comparison to majoritarian systems, where winners should exhibit very positive attitudes and losers much more negative attitudes (Anderson and Guillory, 1997). Cross-national variations in political support are thus a factor, within each country, of the preponderance of winners over losers and the extent to which institutions provide the losers with at least some political voice.

Empirically, these hypotheses hold water. Using satisfaction with democracy as a measure of citizens’ attitudes towards political institutions, Anderson and Guillory (1997) found that, across eleven west European countries in 1990, the gap in satisfaction between political winners and losers was lower in consensual systems than in majoritarian systems. The authors conclude that the task for institutional design is not so much to introduce majoritarian or consensus-type arrangements wholesale, as to determine “... whether it is more important to reward winners with the power to implement their ideas or to compensate losers with some kind of formal influence on policy decisions” (ibid: 79). On this account, an ideal arrangement might be that which allowed political minorities some access to decision making power, while ensuring that winners retain the basic capacity to introduce the bulk of their electoral programme.

This analysis of winners and losers has suggested one refinement to Lijphart’s original thesis that consensus models outperform majoritarian ones in terms of the ‘quality of democracy’. A second refinement arises if we
break down Lijphart’s aggregated models into sets of specific institutions (for the benefits of such an “atomistic” approach, see Lane and Ersson, 2002: 248). The question here is whether for a set of institutions – such as the electoral system, territorial division of power, type of legislature – taken individually, consensus arrangements produce more favourable outcomes than majoritarian ones?

The cross-national analysis conducted by Pippa Norris (1999) tests whether political support is greatest under arrangements that give political minorities a stake in policy making. According to Norris, support should be higher in (a) parliamentary than presidential systems; (b) two party and moderate multiparty systems than fragmented party systems; (c) federal than unitary systems; and (d) proportional than majoritarian electoral systems. These hypotheses are tested across 43 countries with World Values Survey data from 1990-93. Norris finds that, in line with expectations, political support is higher in parliamentary systems than in presidential ones and in relatively cohesive party systems than in fragmented ones. However, contrary to expectations, political support is found to be lower in systems with proportional than majoritarian electoral systems, and in federal countries than in unitary ones.

One explanation Norris gives for these divergent findings is that majoritarian and unitary systems tend to concentrate power (the former by virtue of single party executives), which serves to increase the accountability of governments to voters, in turn producing a more positive response from citizens (this also explains the positive role of bipolar, or moderately pluralist, party systems, which translate electoral choices into government outcomes more effectively than do fragmented party systems). Thus, contra Lijphart, Norris suggests that a political system needs to retain at least some majoritarian features if it is to maximise support from its citizens.

A recent piece of research that extends Norris’s analysis of individual institutions suggests that arguments for or against the consensus or majoritarian model of democracy are driven by the quality that the proponent is seeking to maximise; either inclusiveness and representation, or clarity and accountability (Listhaug et al, 2002). Listhaug and his colleagues thus adopt a more fine-grained definition of political support, distinguishing between measures that tap representational concerns and measures that tap accountability concerns. They then examine whether the former are higher in consensus democracies, and the latter higher in majoritarian systems.\footnote{This hypothesis suggests that citizens’ attitudes will go with the grain of their country’s political institutions. In other words, citizens in a majoritarian system, such as Britain prior to 1997, will privilege majoritarian criteria (accountability) over consensus ones (representation). This ignores the fact that citizen dissatisfaction with their country’s political system might arise because of grievances with the perceived effect of its institutions. If this is so, British citizens, discontented with their majoritarian system, might prefer representational criteria.}
Two sets of survey questions are used to capture the distinction between representational and accountability concerns. The first asks whether the respondent feels political parties and elected representatives care what ordinary people feel. These questions measure ‘system efficacy’, and capture how responsive the system is to inputs from citizens, qualities presumed to align closely with representational concerns. The second asks for views on whether who holds power makes a difference. This measures ‘output support’, and is presumed to align more closely with accountability concerns. The hypothesis is that system efficacy should be higher in representational/consensus systems (characterised by parliamentarism and proportional electoral systems), while output support should be higher in accountable/majoritarian systems (characterised by presidential and majoritarian electoral systems).

Findings are generated from data collected across 23 countries between 1996 and 2000. Bivariate analysis shows that system efficacy does not vary by type of democracy, while output support is actually higher in representational systems than accountable ones. When it comes to multivariate modelling, the relationship between institutional design and citizen attitudes fails to achieve statistical significance; instead, background variables – such as evaluations of the economy – perform strongly. This analysis cautions us that empirical data may not possess the clarity to enable confident adjudications between competing political systems. It suggests that the design of political institutions may not always play a strong role in shaping citizens’ attitudes to government, particularly when other – controlling – factors are entered into the equation (see Lane and Ersson, 2002: 249). But the results may, as already noted (footnote 22), be explained by the fact that citizens may react against their country’s institutions, rather than going with their grain (although see footnote 23, which refers to a more neutral survey measure).

What does this body of empirical analysis suggest for Britain’s constitutional reforms? In particular, is there any evidence that the kind of reforms either enacted already or in the pipeline stand a good chance of strengthening citizens’ allegiances to the political system? In Lijphart’s analysis, as I noted above (page 18), the superior performance of the consensus model is wholly due to institutional configurations on the executive-parties dimension, not the federal-unitary one. On these terms, then, we should not expect Britain’s constitutional reforms to make much difference to levels of political support; maybe the only change will be to boost support among the political minority (losers) and reduce support among the majority (winners). On the other hand, the research by Anderson and Guillory and Norris suggests some benefits of a ‘mixed’ constitution, in which the winners retain an incentive to gain power while the losers are compensated with a stake in the policy process. If these findings are valid, Britain’s new mixed system – combining

23 There is also no statistically significant relationship between institutional features and responses to a third survey question that asks about satisfaction with the way democracy works in the respondent’s country.
mild decentralisation and checks on government alongside continued plurality rule at Westminster – has the potential for a positive effect.

**Empirical evidence from Britain**

How far are the results from cross-national research duplicated by Britain’s experience, albeit short term, of constitutional change? Past research in Britain gives some reason to believe that constitutional change does contain the potential for improving public confidence and trust in government. Throughout the 1990s, people with lower levels of political trust were, for the most part, more likely to favour constitutional reform than those with higher levels of trust (Curtice and Jowell, 1995, 1997). It is thus plausible to surmise that the low trust group might have been ‘re-engaged’ by the constitutional reforms.

To assess whether, in the short term at least, the reforms have had such a beneficial impact, I conduct two pieces of analysis. First, I employ a longitudinal approach, by comparing the relationship between political trust and attitudes towards constitutional change in 1996 (pre-reform) and 2000 (post-reform). If the changes have had a positive impact, we would expect to find that trust and efficacy have risen more among those favouring the reforms than among those who are less favourable.

The particular reform I draw on to examine this hypothesis is freedom of information. The source is the 2000 British Social Attitudes survey, which asked for people’s views about whether the government should have “the right to keep its defence plans secret” or whether they think “the public has a right to know what they are”. Contrary to the hopes of constitutional reformers, and as Table 4 shows, the proportion of those expressing medium or high levels of political trust among supporters of open information regimes has fallen by almost as much as the proportion among those supporting government secrecy, and levels of efficacy have actually fallen more. These findings apply not only in relation to freedom of information; the same pattern exists when we examine views about Scottish devolution. Thus,

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24 As is the case in Australia. Using data from the 2001 Australian Election Study, I have examined whether those exhibiting lower levels of political trust and lower satisfaction with the way Australian democracy works are more likely to support constitutional change. This is, indeed, the case. Thus, just 15% of those who believe government can be trusted “to do the right thing” believe the federal government should have less power compared to the states. The figure among those who believe that people in government are “interested in looking after themselves” is almost double, at 28%. Similarly, when it comes to the issue of the republic, those distrustful of government are more likely to favour ridding Australia of the monarchy than people who trust government, although the relationship is weaker. Very similar figures obtain if we use satisfaction with democracy as the attitudinal measure. The correlations for the two relationships are significant at least at the p<0.05 level.

25 This particular question does not address the government’s freedom of information legislation directly (as it posits a greater freedom than that legislation has introduced). But we might reasonably assume that the 45 per cent who say that public has the right to know such plans comprises those who would be most committed to the principle of freedom of information.
despite the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, levels of trust and efficacy fell by more or less the same amount between 1996 and 2000 among those who favour devolution as they did among those who do not think Scotland should have any kind of parliament at all.

**TABLE 4 HERE**

The second approach I use in examining the impact of constitutional change is territorial: to compare what has happened in a part of Britain that has experienced high profile constitutional change with another part that has not. The most obvious example is devolution; while significant powers have been decentralised to Scotland, no such devolution has taken place in England outside London. If devolution has restored confidence in how Britain is governed\(^2\), we should find more favourable trends in trust and efficacy in Scotland than in England. But, as Table 5 shows, the downward trend in both trust and efficacy has been almost identical in Scotland and England over the course of the last three years.

**TABLE 5 HERE**

It appears, then, that Britain’s constitutional reforms have done little or nothing so far to increase people’s confidence in how they are governed. It is not simply the case that this reflects public disquiet about the timidity of the reforms, in particular the failure to introduce electoral reform for the House of Commons. If the current low level of trust and efficacy reflected a feeling that reform has not been sufficiently extensive, we should find that trust and efficacy has fallen more amongst the one-third or so who favour changing the electoral system than amongst those who want to retain the existing system. However, if anything, the opposite is the case. Thus, the proportion of those exhibiting a relatively high level of trust in government fell by just three points between 1996 and 2000 among those in favour of electoral reform, but by eight points amongst those wanting to keep the existing system.

In the typology I set out earlier (Figure 2), I made a distinction between reforms that operate squarely within the representative model of democracy, by maintaining the dominant role of political parties via periodic elections, and those that adopt the concerns of more participatory models, in which the opportunities for ‘voice’ are greater and the extent of party mediation reduced. Might it be that the seeming failure of the reforms can be explained by their caution in maintaining the existing representative framework of decision making? After all, no less than 55% of the British Social Attitudes survey disagreed – and only 21% agreed – when faced with the proposition that “even if I had the chance I would not be interested in having more say in government decisions”. Moreover, as many as 40% disagreed – although

\(^2\) It is reasonable to measure the impact of Scottish devolution on attitudes towards the government of Britain, since many commentators argued that the effect of devolution to the nations and regions would be to improve attitudes towards the union state as a whole.
43% agreed – that, “between elections, the government should get on with running the country rather than bothering about public opinion”.

To examine the hypothesis more systematically, the survey respondents were asked questions contrasting the merits of decision making by locally elected councillors or, alternatively, by citizens juries. The citizens jury is a participatory method of policy making introduced in recent years by various local councils, involving a small group of residents, sometimes selected at random, who are asked to consider, and then vote on, what decision they would make on the policy issue in question. In order to tap attitudes towards representative versus participatory approaches to decision making, the survey respondents were asked how much they would trust local councillors to come to the “best view” about a proposed “major new building development in their neighbourhood”, and how much they would trust “a jury of twelve ordinary local people chosen at random”. The jury emerged clearly as the more trusted device; nearly two-thirds said that they would trust this group to come to the best view “just about always” or “most of the time”, whereas only one-third said the same of their local councillors.

But, to continue the method used above, we need to explore how the respondents’ views on these two approaches varied according to their trust in government and level of political efficacy. There is some evidence to suggest that differences do exist (Table 6). Thus, among those who trust governments “to put the interests of the nation first” at least most of the time, nearly half (48%) also trust local councillors to come to the best view about a planning development at least “most of the time”, virtually double the comparable figure among those who do not trust governments (only 27% of whom would trust local councillors in this way). But when it comes to the merits of the participatory mechanism which the citizens jury embodies, the differences between the two groups disappear; in fact those who trust the national government are more likely to trust the decisions taken by a citizens’ jury than those who distrust national government (we find a similar pattern if we compare the attitudes of those with low and high levels of system efficacy). The key finding, however, is that those with low trust in government appear far more receptive to the participatory mechanism than the representative one. This suggests – no more – that institutional change may need to go beyond new representative devices, and introduce more participatory elements, for many citizens to trust those taking decisions in their name.27

27 For a more systematic argument that direct democracy has a positive effect on citizens’ attitudes towards collective institutions (in this case, the civic obligation of paying taxes), see Frey, 1997.

Conclusion
This paper has suggested two ways by which to evaluate the claim that constitutional reform, of the kind introduced in Britain since 1997, can rejuvenate the links between citizens and their governments. The first is to adopt a theoretical approach, whose benefit lies in explaining why particular institutional configurations should perform better than others. Constitutional change is capable of reconnecting voters and governments if it accords voters greater control over government (principal-agent model), if it distributes political power widely instead of concentrating it (Lijphart’s majoritarian-consensus distinction) or if it reduces the dominance of political parties as mediating actors and introduces greater ‘political opportunity structures’ (my typology). While each of these theoretical models reaches different conclusions, their common implication is that Britain prior to 1997 required substantial political reform if citizen-government congruence was to be restored. The first two models suggest that the constitutional reforms introduced by the Labour government go some way to achieving this goal, although further change is needed, either to minimise the risk of agency loss (principal-agent model) or to shift further in the direction of consensus democracy (Lijphart’s typology). How far the constitutional reforms effect a shift on the representative-participatory typology, and what the impact of such a shift is, are issues on which I plan further research.

The second approach to my research question is empirical. Here, drawing on a selection of cross-national research, I suggested that the data provides only limited succour to neat theoretical models. In particular, while some institutions of consensus democracy are associated with stronger citizen-government linkages, other consensus institutions (such as federalism and proportional electoral systems) may perform worse than their majoritarian counterparts. These results are highly dependent on the research design, in particular on the criteria used to capture the nature of these linkages (the dependent variables) and the operationalisation of the explanatory institutions (independent variables). And it may be that institutional effects are simply too weak to wield much explanatory power. But my review of cross-national research yields cautious support for ‘mixed’ constitutions that combine representative institutions with accountable ones, suggesting that the British reforms may be along the right lines.

Of course, the picture generated from cross-national data may not be reflected in reforms enacted in any one country; indeed, the initial evidence from Britain is not positive. However, the British data is only suggestive and not categorical; a longer time frame as well as more sophisticated multivariate modelling is required to establish a clearer picture of the impact institutional reform has had. But should public attitudes among British citizens fail to recover, the evidence reviewed has hinted at one possible reason: the need to move beyond established representative institutions to encompass more participatory mechanisms. Again, however, this is no more than a tentative finding, based as it is on a single survey question at a single timepoint.
Thus, both theoretical and empirical methods are necessary to understand the impact of institutional change on citizen behaviour and attitudes. We should not expect any neat outcomes, however: one theoretical model may disagree with another, empirical data may collide and theoretical insight may fail to be matched by empirical reality. In short, the task of evaluating the impact of institutional change will invariably be messy and caveat ridden. That the results are generally not clear cut is, presumably, one reason for the variations between institutions, rather than their similarity, that we find across developed democracies.
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