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**The Impact of Austerity on Political Participation in the UK**

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

Since 2010, the UK government has undertaken extensive cuts and reforms to spending in order to reduce the budget deficit. These cuts have manifested in significant reductions in welfare, local authority and justice system spending and a long-term freeze in public sector pay. The cuts have been linked with rising poverty, food bank use and serious health issues, including rising suicide rates.

Such extreme cuts are likely to affect how citizens view and interact with government, yet there is little evidence of sustained public political participation to either support or oppose austerity. Given the negative consequences for so many people, it is surprising that the response from the public has been so muted. Thus far, research on the connection between austerity and political participation has been limited. Much of the literature focuses on those who are participating in response to austerity, rather than the majority who are not.

Using a mixed methods approach, this thesis examines whether the theories of civic voluntarism, grievance or policy feedback could explain why austerity appears to have provoked relatively little political participation in the UK. Interview evidence shows that all these theories have a role to play in explaining the apparent lack of political activism in response to austerity. Political activism in response to austerity varied according to personal experience of cuts, attitudes to austerity and prior levels of participation. This thesis demonstrates that austerity has largely failed to provoke participation because people are either not affected by it personally, do not have the resources to participate or do not believe that participation would change anything. This topic has implications for economic policy, as well as literature on both political participation and austerity.

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# Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: KATE HARRISON

Title of thesis: The Impact of Austerity on Political Participation in the UK

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:-

Harrison, K. (2021) 'Can't, Won't and What's the Point? A Theory of the UK Public's Muted Response to Austerity', *Representation*, 57(2), p.159-174. doi: 10.1080/00344893.2020.1728367.

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Signature: ..... Date:.....

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

The experience of the United Kingdom, especially since 2010, underscores the conclusion that poverty is a political choice. Austerity could easily have spared the poor, if the political will had existed to do so. Resources were available to the Treasury at the last budget that could have transformed the situation of millions of people living in poverty, but the political choice was made to fund tax cuts for the wealthy instead.

*Philip Alston (2018, pp. 22–23)*

This unprecedented critique of the UK government's spending decisions by Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, tells a tale of two austerities. The first is that of those on the lowest incomes, who have suffered significantly under the spending cuts first implemented in 2010. In contrast, those on higher incomes have been comparatively protected. This research aims to, first, understand this picture in more depth, by comparing the experiences of austerity of people across the country. Secondly, it examines how austerity's personal impacts have affected political participation across the country.

Since the election of the coalition government in 2010, the UK has seen substantial cuts to government budgets, resulting in public services being reduced and even cancelled. Following the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent bank bailouts, the budget deficit had reached £147.3 billion (Knock, 2019). The coalition government introduced a programme of spending cuts to eliminate the budget deficit and to permanently reduce levels of spending in order to reduce debt over the long term (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). The coalition's goal was to cut £32 billion of spending each year (HM Treasury, 2010a). By 2018/19 day-to-day spending on public services had been cut by 14.3 per cent in real terms per capita (Crawford and Zaranko, 2019).

The spending cuts have been part of the UK government's programme of austerity, a term that evokes the 'blitz spirit' of the second world war (MacLeavy, 2011). Along with spending cuts, the government introduced a series of policy reforms, including substantial changes to benefits aimed at reducing welfare spending and encouraging claimants into the workplace. These reforms included a cap on benefits claims and the introduction of universal credit, which brought together a number of pre-existing benefits and increased the stringency of testing (Ormston and Curtice, 2015). Public sector pay was also frozen for three years (Cribb, 2017) and responsibility for many, now much reduced, budgets was devolved to local authorities (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016).

Evidence shows that people living in poverty and/or with disabilities have borne the brunt of the cuts. Changes to spending on social care and social security have had some of the most profound impacts on vulnerable citizens of any of the spending cuts (Briant, Watson and Philo, 2013; Duffy,

2013; Tucker, 2017). Reductions in spending on housing, health, libraries, and policing and criminal justice, among other budgets, have also disproportionately affected those on low incomes (Lambie-Mumford, Snell and Dowler, 2015; Elliot, 2016; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016; Speak Up for Justice, 2016; Marmot *et al.*, 2020).

Despite an initial flurry of protests and political action to resist the cuts (see e.g., Van Gelder, 2011; Rheingans and Hollands, 2012), there has been only very limited political participation in response to austerity and the Conservative Party have maintained popular support. Arguably, given the significant and sustained impact of the cuts, we might expect to have seen greater political resistance to the policy. Policy feedback theory, which holds that the content and delivery of public policies has a material impact on people's perceptions of citizenship and efficacy, tells us that policies can both provoke and depress political participation (Mettler and Soss, 2004; Béland, 2010; Campbell, 2012). Yet, austerity appears to have had no clear impact on participation beyond a small amount of initial activity, despite its ongoing repercussions for service users. As such, we must ask why it has failed to influence political participation.

This thesis therefore seeks to answer the question, 'why has austerity provoked limited political participation in England?' I take a mixed methods approach, using analysis of original interview data and secondary survey data to examine what impact austerity has had on people's day-to-day lives, what they think of austerity and whether it has affected their political participation.

The UK offers a context in which it is possible to explore the impact of a wide-ranging economic policy that was a true choice for the government. Unlike many of the other European countries that implemented deep spending cuts early on, the UK was not forced to do so by the likes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). Many scholars argue that the UK's cuts were driven by ideological motivations (MacLeavy, 2011; Blyth, 2013; Hay, 2013), but it was, at the very least, a policy that was not compelled by external powers. Thus, the UK is an ideal case in which to explore how the public experienced and responded to austerity, and whether the decision to implement cuts was accepted by the public.

I argue that austerity has largely failed to provoke political participation for three primary reasons. The first is that a small proportion of the population have been seriously affected by spending cuts and this has undermined the resources they have available to them to participate in politics. These people have less money, time and/or poorer physical and mental health, which makes it more difficult to participate, particularly through protesting.

Secondly, a much greater proportion of people have been little affected by austerity and typically have much less awareness of the negative consequences for others. For these people, austerity is either seen positively as a sensible economic policy or is only a minor concern. As such, without a

significant grievance to communicate, there is no motivation to participate in response to austerity.

Finally, the government narrative around austerity as necessary and unavoidable means that many people across both groups have accepted that there is no viable alternative to spending cuts. The aim of political participation is therefore undermined, because if austerity is the only realistic option, then acting to express opposition or, indeed, support would not change anything.

## 1.1 Original contribution

This thesis makes a number of original contributions to the literature on austerity and political participation. The first is that this thesis provides detailed evidence on the personal impact of austerity on the public. While previous literature has provided a range of important insights into the lived experience of austerity (e.g., Fawcett Society, 2012; O'Hara, 2014; Hastings *et al.*, 2015; Mckenzie, 2015; Koch, 2018; Hall, 2019a; Cunningham, Lindsay and Roy, 2021), this research offers a valuable comparative approach. In speaking to a cross-section of the public, I compare the experiences of people from a range of backgrounds and personal circumstances which provides important context on the extent to which experiences vary. Furthermore, comparison with those less affected underscores the seriousness of the situation for those bearing the brunt of the cuts and highlights that we are not, after all, 'all in this together'. Readers who have lived under recent British austerity are thus able to see themselves reflected in this work, whatever their situation, and gain perspective on their own experiences of austerity.

Gathering data through open questions about participants' experience of public services also allows this research to identify the aspects of the cuts that have had the biggest impact on their lives. While much other literature focuses on specific policy areas, taking a general approach to understanding the impact on public services allowed the participants to guide the focus of the findings. Chapters 4 and 5 therefore contribute rich data on people's experiences of the services which matter most to them, while also providing an important insight into the bigger picture of austerity's effects.

Another key contribution of this research is that it demonstrates a link between government narrative around austerity and political participation. Much research has been done on austerity narratives (Painter, 2013; Stanley, 2013; Garthwaite, 2014; Seabrooke and Thomsen, 2016) and the role of narratives in political participation (Przeworski, 1985; Skocpol, 1995) but little has been done to apply the role of narratives in participation to austerity specifically. Given that the evidence shows that government narrative has influenced the way we think about austerity, by

exploring the role of narratives this research offers a key piece of the puzzle around austerity-related political participation.

This thesis also provides new evidence on who the public hold responsible for austerity. Opinion polls on who the public blame for spending cuts ended in 2015 (Dahlgreen, 2015), since then there is little data on how attitudes have changed. Data in this thesis are valuable because they suggest that attitudes to policies evolve over time, which may have consequences for attitudes to recent policies such as Brexit and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, where opinion polls previously asked respondents to choose between Labour or the Conservatives, my interview question left the options open, so participants could select any person or organisation that came to mind. The data are therefore more varied and potentially more accurate as participants were not asked to select from only two pre-defined options. The responses also provide striking new evidence on how Margaret Thatcher is associated with austerity, showing that a surprisingly high number of people held Thatcher partially responsible for the policy. This finding is a notable contribution to literature on Thatcher's legacy (Vinen, 2009; Evans, 2010; Hadley and Ho, 2010; Smith, 2019).

Perhaps the most fundamental contribution is the nuanced model of how different theories of participation together explain the public's response to austerity. As part of this, I test and extend Kern et al's (2015) theory of participation by applying grievance theory and civic voluntarism to the austerity context, adding the theory of policy feedback to explain the role of government narratives in how people understand austerity. Using triangulated methods, I identify key factors – grievances, resources and narratives – that contribute to the public's attitudes to austerity and political participation, and thereby explain why participation has been limited. Chapter 6 contributes a typology of political responses to austerity, identifying ideal types with which the population can be characterised to better understand their motivations in participating (or not). These data form a key part of one of the papers I have published from this research (Harrison, 2021b). The typology also provides valuable insights into political participation more generally, as it identifies individual level factors that affect whether and how a person is motivated to participate in politics in response to a particular policy.

## **1.2 Thesis structure**

In this section I outline the structure of my thesis and provide an overview of each chapter.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature and discusses the background to my research question, 'how does austerity in the UK affect political participation?' In doing so, I argue that austerity is likely to affect the political participation of people in the UK in different ways because of the asymmetric



impact austerity has had on individuals. For those who are most affected by austerity, cognitive mobilisation theory suggests that they are less able to participate in politics because they lack the resources, such as time and money, to do so. Meanwhile, as argued by grievance theory, those who are less affected are not mobilised because they do not have a grievance to communicate. Finally, all citizens are disincentivised from participating for two reasons: firstly, the language used by the government makes austerity seem inevitable and unavoidable; secondly, scholars have shown that overall levels of political participation are declining across many Western countries, so it is likely that austerity will only deepen this trend.

Chapter 3 on my methodology outlines the approach I have taken to conducting this mixed methods study and the specific nature of the methods I employ, including ethical considerations. It explains in more depth my choice of interviews for the qualitative aspect of this research, including a description of how I have conducted this research. It then describes how I conducted the quantitative element of my research and how it builds on the interview data.

The following five chapters explore in depth the findings from my data, under three key themes. The first two chapters examine how my interview participants have been personally affected by austerity, with a particular focus on the effects of benefits reforms and cuts to social care provision. Chapter 4 focuses on the impact of cuts to the health service, education, policing and criminal justice, and some local government services to explore variations in experiences of these more universal services. Chapter 5 then looks in more depth at the cuts that have affected a smaller proportion of the public, covering analysis of the effect of benefits reforms, cuts to social care and cuts to libraries.

Chapter 6 builds on this by looking at what people think about austerity and how their personal experiences influence their attitudes towards it. I examine the government narrative around austerity and how this has influenced the way people speak about austerity. On a broader level, I analyse what people understand by the word austerity and what their attitudes to the cuts are. As part of this, a key distinction that arose is the way people view austerity as a principle and how it has been applied in practice, which many participants distinguished between when sharing their opinion. Finally, I explore who participants felt was responsible for the cuts. A key contribution of this chapter is the typology I establish which groups participants by employment status and reliance on public services, knowledge of austerity, general levels of political participation and whether they participate in response to austerity. This typology is a useful way of identifying the key factors which influence attitudes towards the cuts.

I then continue analysis using this typology in Chapter 7, which focuses on political participation and how experiences and attitudes to cuts affect whether people are mobilised by austerity. I begin this chapter by addressing general levels of participation among the interviewees, before

breaking down the austerity-related political participation of the different typology groups. First, I describe the connection between resources and participation and show how austerity has discouraged the most vulnerable people from participating by undermining their resources. I then look again at government narratives around cuts and show the impact this has had in encouraging people across the participant groups to view participation as futile. Next, I review the evidence on distrust in politicians and demonstrate the role that austerity has played in undermining political trust. I then analyse the data from the pro-austerity group and show that their endorsement of cuts still does not translate into active expressions of support for austerity. Finally, I look at the activism of the actively anti-austerity group and explore why these participants make up only a small minority of the sample.

Chapter 8 then examines quantitative data from the British Election Study to triangulate the findings from the previous four chapters, with particular focus on political participation. I use descriptive statistics to examine geographical differences in local authority cuts and attitudes to austerity. I also explore the relationship between experience of cuts and attitudes to politicians and between cuts and political participation. Finally, I create a logistic regression model of turnout to assess the role of austerity in voting and compare these findings with those of the interview data.

Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the thesis, summarising the key arguments. It discusses areas for future research to build on the findings from this project and explores its implications for future policymaking. In particular, I review the findings in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and highlight important lessons that can be learned for future economic and social policy.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review<sup>1</sup>

In 2010 the UK coalition government introduced a programme of austerity, cutting spending substantially across nearly every government department (HM Treasury, 2010b). However, cuts have been unequally distributed across the country, deprived areas having typically seen the greatest spending cuts per person (Berry and White, 2014). This has had significant repercussions for local service users, including deterioration of public spaces, reduced leisure facilities and loss of support services (Hastings et al., 2015).

Such extreme cuts to public services are likely to have affected how citizens view and interact with government. The theory of policy feedback argues that policy can affect political participation because policies can channel or create opportunities for participation, as well as actively encourage or discourage it. Of particular note here, however, is that policies underpin the public's day-to-day experiences of government (Mettler and Soss, 2004). Discussing the work of Andrea Campbell, Daniel Béland argues that "public policies that explicitly affect the economic well-being of citizens have the greatest chance to increase their levels of political participation" (2010, p. 579).

Regarding austerity specifically, research has shown that austerity has impacted upon voting and protest behaviour across the continent (Bartels and Bermeo, 2014; Ponticelli and Voth, 2017). Kern et al (2015) assessed participation across Europe from 2002 to 2010 to examine how it changed around the time of the financial crisis. They concluded that the extreme shock of the crisis and high unemployment was responsible for a sudden peak in protest behaviour in 2009 and 2010. However, this mobilisation was short-lived.

In the UK, after initial protests in 2010/11, there has been a muted response despite rising poverty and substantial cuts to government services. Given the serious impact that austerity has had on the UK's most vulnerable citizens, it is important to understand why the public response has not been greater. Low and unequal participation is problematic because particular groups can become overrepresented in politics. In such cases, politicians are more likely to align policies with the needs and preferences of these individuals over those who participate less (Lijphart, 1997). This overrepresentation enables the most powerful members of society to preserve their position of privilege (Young, 2000).

Existing literature predominantly focuses on southern Europe and less conventional political participation such as protesting. Despite extensive literature on what drives or undermines

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is very closely based on my paper 'Can't, Won't and What's the Point? A Theory of the UK Public's Muted Response to Austerity' (Harrison, 2021a).

participation, Kern et al's (2015) research highlights a key gap in theoretical explanations of how this is linked to the financial crisis. In reviewing whether civic voluntarism or grievance theory were better able to explain rates of political participation, they found that grievance theory alone cannot fully account for sustained 'grievances', so the theories are most useful in combination.

This chapter builds on the work of Kern et al (2015) by proposing a set of mechanisms to explain the complex relationship between economic shocks and political participation, explicitly linking this with austerity. It draws on theories of political participation and research into austerity to connect four explanations for the limited political activism in the UK following the introduction of austerity. None of these theories alone sufficiently explain the complex relationship between austerity and political participation, so I argue that it is likely that all are needed to provide a full picture.

The first explanation uses civic voluntarism to suggest that citizens most badly affected by austerity lack the time and money to participate. These individuals are typically from disadvantaged backgrounds and their resources have been further depleted by cuts, reducing their ability to participate. Yet this cannot explain the lack of mobilisation among the majority who have greater resources. Building on grievance theory, the second explanation suggests that the majority are not mobilised to act because they have been relatively little affected by austerity, meaning their own interests are not threatened.

However, there are also factors which are likely to affect the population as a whole. The first of these, drawing on policy feedback theory, is that the language the government used about austerity was effective in persuading the public that austerity is necessary, suggesting that it is pointless to try to change the policy. The final theory is that austerity was not sufficiently mobilising to counteract the trend of declining participation in recent decades. This draws on extensive recent work on political participation that attempts to explain this trend. I propose that these theories together provide a nuanced model of participation in response to austerity.

The UK has been chosen as the subject of this research because it is unique in its choice to cut as quickly and extensively as it did. The initial rate of spending cuts was only matched by countries such as Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain who, unlike the UK, were afforded little option by the European Central Bank and the IMF (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). A primary difference between these countries is that the UK has its own currency and central bank, meaning that it was able to maintain lower bond yields and exercise more control over its exchange rate than its European neighbours (Blyth, 2013). The fact that the government then pursued a programme of austerity at the rate it did was therefore for very different reasons to the so-called 'PIGS'. The UK government also chose to blame the need for cuts on the previous Labour government's 'profligate' spending, deflecting attention from the role of the banks. As a result, the coalition

capitalised on the opportunity to create significant cut backs in the welfare state (Farnsworth and Irving, 2012). The narratives employed by the government, focusing on Labour's spending and welfare 'scroungers' (Hay, 2013; Garthwaite, 2014), make for a particularly interesting case when considering how attitudes to austerity have influenced political participation.

## **2.1 Implementation and impact of austerity**

Following the financial crisis of 2007, to prevent the collapse of the banking sector, the UK Labour government implemented bank support schemes, costing £955 billion by the end of 2009 (National Audit Office, 2010). The bailout contributed to raising the budget deficit to £155 billion by the 2009/10 financial year, compared to £38 billion prior to the financial crisis in 2006/7 (Oliveira, 2018). Following the 2010 general election, the new coalition government chose to implement substantial, wide-ranging cuts to public spending. The policy of austerity was employed with the aim of eliminating the deficit by 2015, through £32 billion of spending cuts each year (HM Treasury, 2010a). The motivation behind the cuts was to free up capital so that it would be available to the private sector and create a level of deflation to encourage greater competitiveness and thus business growth (Blyth, 2013).

Such extensive cuts meant that most government departments were subject to budget reductions. Local authorities, responsible for social care, housing and public transport, among many other services, were required to deliver significant cuts. Between 2009/10 and 2014/15 local authority budgets were cut by 23.4 per cent (Innes and Tetlow, 2015). As cuts continued, councils were faced with what Lowndes and Gardner (2016) call 'super-austerity': cuts upon cuts, compounding the problems they faced. Welfare spending saw a net cut of nearly £17 billion between 2010/11 and 2015/16, despite pension spending rising in this period (Hood and Phillips, 2015). These cuts were part of wider welfare reforms including the introduction of universal credit and a cap on benefits claims (Ormston and Curtice, 2015). Public sector pay was also frozen between 2011 and 2013 and subsequently rose by only one per cent each year (Cribb, 2017).

Austerity was implemented with the intention of meeting certain fiscal targets, including eliminating the budget deficit. Yet the success of spending cuts in achieving these targets has been limited. The target to achieve a balanced budget by 2015 was not met and was then repeatedly delayed (Ashworth-Hayes, 2015).

The Ministry of Justice has seen the greatest cuts of any government department. Judges have criticised the government for inadequate funding of the justice system, with criminal barristers subject to repeated fee cuts (Bowcott, 2018). Legal aid has been cut substantially, including a 99

per cent reduction in the number of disabled people granted legal aid in cases relating to welfare benefits between 2011/12 and 2016/17 (Stewart, 2018).

Cuts have also been coupled with growing demand for services. 18 per cent growth in the number of adults with long-term needs and a six per cent fall in spending between 2009 and 2016 has squeezed the social care budget (Andrews *et al.*, 2017). Public health has continued to see significant cuts despite councils struggling to meet demand. The Local Government Association argues that public health cuts are also harmful to the National Health Service (NHS) and adult social care which benefit from effective public health prevention services (Seccombe, 2017).

Despite government narratives suggesting a need for everyone to tighten their belts, the impact of the cuts has been felt asymmetrically. By 2014, local authorities in the top 10 per cent most deprived areas had seen an average budget cut of £228.23 per person, compared to just £44.91 per person in the 10 per cent least deprived local authority areas (Berry and White, 2014). Labour controlled local authorities have also seen much greater cuts than those controlled by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties (*ibid.*).

There are significant geographic differences in the way spending cuts have been implemented. Spending on adult social care fell by 18 per cent in the North East and London between 2009/10 and 2015/6 compared to just two per cent in the South West, contrary to social care needs. Reductions in central government grants have more significantly affected those with high social care spending, as these areas are less able to generate revenue through council tax (Simpson, 2017).

The personal impact of these cuts on service users has been considerable and, again, unevenly distributed across the population. Children have been disproportionately affected by spending cuts. The proportion of children living in relative poverty rose consistently between 2011 and 2017 and is forecast to sharply increase until 2022 (McGuinness, 2018). Austerity has also had a strongly gendered impact, with women disproportionately affected by cuts to welfare, education, local government and social care, among others, as both service users and employees (Hall, 2019b).

Service users have also seen declining provision of local services such as refuse collection and environmental maintenance. For some, this has caused issues of litter, fly-tipping and graffiti making local neighbourhoods unpleasant and even dangerous. Hazardous environments can prevent children from playing outside, restricting exercise and development. Reduced access to libraries, public transport and other council services also affects vulnerable groups who need support in accessing digital services, such as claiming benefits (Hastings *et al.*, 2015).

Spending cuts and welfare reforms have caused serious issues for some people in affording food. Reductions in welfare support, such as the benefits cap and two-child limit to tax credits and universal credit, disproportionately affect families with children and people with disabilities or ill-health. These people are then more likely to use food banks (Loopstra, Lambie-Mumford and Patrick, 2018). The number of times children received food from Trussell Trust food banks rose staggeringly from 46,000 in 2011/12 to 397,000 in 2014/15. The Trussell Trust has seen the number of food bank referrals more than double following the rollout of Universal Credit (Jitendra, Thorogood and Hadfield-Spoor, 2017).

The British Medical Association (BMA) has asserted that “robust action is needed to mitigate the adverse impacts of austerity” because of its implications for health outcomes (BMA board of science, 2016, p. 1). Growing financial insecurity, reductions and sanctions on welfare benefits, fuel poverty and food insecurity are likely to have impacted on health, including widening health inequalities. Winter mortality, deterioration or relapse of long-term health conditions, infant mortality and mental health problems (including suicide) have all increased (BMA board of science, 2016; Cummins, 2018; Mills, 2018). Other budget cuts have also affected health and wellbeing. According to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (2015), cuts to the police have reduced their ability to respond to cases of violence, including domestic abuse, and assist people with mental health problems. Closure of libraries, women’s refuges and Sure Start centres has undermined service users’ health and wellbeing (Unison, 2015).

## **2.2 Public political engagement with austerity**

Given the serious impact that cuts have had, it seems likely that austerity would have affected how citizens view and interact with government. However, research into the relationship between austerity and political participation has so far been limited, particularly into austerity in the UK. The literature so far has demonstrated a connection between austerity and political participation. Bartels and Bermeo (2014) found that following the recession, voters punished incumbent governments across Europe in elections. A data analysis of 26 European countries between 1919 and 2008 by Ponticelli and Voth (2017) also found a strong positive correlation between the magnitude of spending cuts and social unrest, including demonstrations, riots, strikes, assassinations and attempted revolutions. However, evidence from Eastern Europe suggests that a higher risk of poverty and deprivation combined with higher unemployment under austerity has suppressed both conventional and unconventional forms of participation (Kovacic and Dolenc, 2018).

Within the UK, there is some evidence of organised political activism in response to austerity. Cuts to housing benefits and accommodation for the homeless mobilised a group of young mothers to

create the Focus E15 campaign for suitable local social housing (Focus E15 Campaign, no date). The collectives UK Uncut, formed in response to austerity, and Sisters Uncut, focusing on cuts to domestic violence services, use direct action to campaign against cuts and promote alternatives to austerity (UK Uncut, no date; Sisters Uncut, 2018).

On a larger scale, the UK did see protests in response to austerity, of which the most significant were the Occupy movement and student protests. Occupy London arose in 2011 in connection with Occupy Wall Street (Van Gelder, 2011). Protesters occupied the grounds of St Paul's cathedral, in protest against spending cuts and bailouts of the banks following the financial crisis (Occupy London, 2011). Earlier, in 2010, there were student protests against spending cuts to further education and rising tuition fees, including demonstrations in central London, mass walk-outs and occupation of university campuses (Rheingans and Hollands, 2012). 2011 also saw rioting, initially starting in London but spreading across the UK. Thousands were involved in looting which resulted in over 3,000 arrests and £35 million of property damage. Research suggests the riots were largely motivated by anger at the police following the death of Mark Duggan, although there is evidence that spending cuts were a factor (Kawalerowicz and Biggs, 2015).

Much of this political activism occurred around the introduction of austerity in 2010 but there has been little evidence of austerity-related political participation since. Voters have not ostensibly punished the Conservative party for austerity policies, as they were re-elected into government in 2015, 2017 and 2019, albeit as a minority government in 2017. The response to austerity through other means of participation has been generally muted in recent years. Given that the consequences of austerity are becoming increasingly evident and damaging, this is surprising.

Some researchers have suggested that the UK's vote to leave the European Union (EU) may have been in part prompted by the hardship created under austerity (Dorling, 2016; Gietel-Basten, 2016; Fetzer, 2019). Such a connection is plausible, given that some argue that it is typically poorer, working class and disadvantaged individuals who voted to leave the EU, a group which has considerable overlap with those who have been most negatively affected by austerity (Becker, Fetzer and Novy, 2017). However, the view that support for Brexit is restricted to those in deprived areas does not account for the support for leaving the EU among wealthier individuals, particularly the so-called 'petit bourgeoisie' (Clarke and Newman, 2017).

Further research is needed into a possible connection between austerity and Brexit. As such, it is not within the scope of this thesis to address this question, however it must be acknowledged that Brexit is possibly an avenue through which frustration at austerity has been expressed. This strengthens the argument that austerity has resulted in limited political participation because if, as some suggest, the vote to leave was a protest against austerity, voting to leave the EU is an



indirect and non-specific way of expressing such opposition. This may indicate that many people feel unable to express their feelings towards austerity through more direct avenues, including elections and less traditional forms of participation. This thesis, therefore, examines why that is the case.

## **2.3 Why are people not doing more?**

Given the serious consequences of this policy, it is worth asking why there hasn't been a stronger response from the public. I propose four possible explanations, which I explore in depth below. The first two relate to subsets of society, the latter two to the wider context.

Typically, those on lower incomes and from marginalised groups have been most affected by austerity and are likely to have seen a material decline in their incomes and support networks as a result of austerity. The first explanation therefore draws on the theory of civic voluntarism to argue that those who are most affected lack the resources to participate in politics.

The second theory, based on grievance theory, is that austerity has had comparatively little impact on the majority of the population, so are not mobilised by it. A third is that the narrative employed by the government about austerity has persuaded many people that austerity is necessary and unavoidable. This explanation draws on the theory of policy feedback, which argues that the way a policy is implemented affects how citizens see the policy and themselves in relation to it. In the case of austerity, the apparent inevitability of the policy renders austerity the only acceptable solution and political activism futile. Finally, austerity was implemented amid an overall decline in political participation. Rather than provoking revolt, any public rejection of austerity may have been enacted through continued disengagement from politics.

### **2.3.1 Lack of resources to participate**

The first driver of public inaction concerns citizens most adversely affected by austerity, who, as discussed above, are typically from disadvantaged and minority groups. The theory of civic voluntarism claims that disadvantaged individuals lack the necessary resources to participate in politics. Austerity undermines practical resources, such as money, and psychological resources, such as resilience and autonomy. Under austerity, marginalised individuals have even less time and money than they did previously due to cuts to benefits, public sector jobs and support services. Austerity has also left many feeling powerless about key aspects of their lives, including finding work and financial stability (Mckenzie, 2015), affording adequate food (Douglas *et al.*, 2015) and mental health issues and suicide, particularly for benefit claimants (McGrath, Griffin

and Mundy, 2015). These reductions in resources are therefore likely to undermine capacity to participate in politics.

Those most affected by austerity are also least likely to engage in political participation. Demographic groups are unevenly represented across all forms of political participation within Western democracies. Citizens with above average wealth, income and education are more likely to participate in politics through both conventional and unconventional acts such as voting or joining demonstrations (Lijphart, 1997). People of a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to know others who participate in politics, increasing awareness and providing encouragement to participate (Verba and Nie, 1972).

A clear example of austerity suppressing political participation among minority groups can be seen in research on race. For people of colour, particularly women, austerity represents a “sharpening and prolongation of [...] ordinary and everyday experiences of inequality” (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017, p. 40). Before the financial crisis, poverty stood at 40 per cent for ethnic minorities in Britain, twice that of the white population (ibid), and has subsequently increased for many minority groups, along with rising deprivation (Fisher and Nandi, 2015). Women from ethnic minorities are more likely to work in the public sector than men or white women, meaning that cuts have disproportionately affected their jobs, pay and conditions (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017).

Since the onset of austerity, there is evidence of a decline in the participation of minority groups, as predicted by civic voluntarism. Bassel and Emejulu (2017) found that, among minority women in the UK and France, austerity hindered political activism and volunteering. Their reduced participation was caused in part by the mental and physical fatigue from job insecurity and reduced access to childcare. It is well established that time and money, resources under increased pressure under austerity, are crucial for many forms of participation such as campaign work, writing letters to politicians or attending political meetings (Schlozman, Burns and Verba, 1994; Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Perea, 2002). Reduced funding for activist organisations and rising transport costs to attend meetings and events also affected the participation of minority women. Yet for some, the high stakes of growing precarity, loss of public services and loss of activist organisations has been a mobilising force to create new informal, grassroots groups (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017).

The reasons why disadvantaged or minority groups are less likely to participate is multifaceted. It is often suggested that apathy causes non-participation, particularly in young people. However, this is contradicted by the disproportionate presence of youth in protests following the financial crisis, such as the Occupy movement, student protests and London riots (Mcdowell, 2012). While young people are less likely to vote, they are more likely to attend demonstrations (Melo and Stockemer, 2014). Rather than indifference, young people more often feel politicians do not

address the issues they care about and that they are powerless to engender change. Many therefore believe that participating in politics would not achieve anything (House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, 2014).

Austerity has also reduced opportunities for developing and maintaining the intellectual and psychological resources that are also needed for participation. For example, education across age groups has been adversely affected by austerity. Despite early protections from budget cuts, schools are now subject to a freeze in spending per pupil, resulting in a real-terms cut of around eight per cent by 2019/20 (Belfield and Sibieta, 2017). Schools are increasingly dependent upon donations and fundraising, exacerbating patterns of deprivation as the wealthier 50 per cent of areas attract more than double the donations of time and money (Body and Hogg, 2018).

Withdrawal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance and closure of Connexions, an advice service for 13 to 19 year olds, has reduced the support available for children and young adults (Ridge, 2013). The number of part-time students has reduced by 47 per cent since the reduction in government funding for higher education and tripling of university fees. This decline has particularly affected mature students with caring responsibilities who are more likely to undertake part-time study but are unable to take on the burden of debt. Lack of access to higher education can have long-term consequences as it reduces the opportunities and development of both adults and their children (McGrath, Griffin and Mundy, 2015). Education inherently alters the resources available to people to participate by developing their understanding and critical thinking about politics and society as well as improving communication skills (Dalton, 2017). Education is consistently associated with political engagement across a range of political activities (Stoker, 2017), indicating that poor educational opportunities may also reduce future political participation.

However, there is not just an issue of equipping people with the skills to engage, but also of making politics accessible to all. Since 2010, many day services for adults with learning disabilities have closed across the country (Unison, 2015). People with learning disabilities are significantly less likely to participate than the wider population – only one third voted in the 2010 general election (Every Vote Counts, no date). Their lower participation has been attributed to practical barriers in combination with cultural exclusion resulting from a lack of appropriately targeted communication (House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, 2014). The loss of services for these individuals under austerity can exacerbate this exclusion, suppressing their voices when they are already at a disadvantage with regards to political participation.

The internet could help to mitigate some inequalities by improving access to information and opportunities for participation (Shah *et al.*, 2002). Yet there is a 'digital divide' where certain disadvantaged groups are more likely to have limited or no access to the internet. This gap occurs

in resources, such as access to a computer, and in the skills needed to utilise these resources. Age is a key factor, as is education and disability (Hindman, 2009). In 2017 in the UK, 14.9 per cent of the population did not use the internet, of which nearly half had an annual income below £11,500 (Good Things Foundation, 2017). Any new online opportunities for political participation are therefore not equally accessible, perpetuating the pre-existing inequalities of more traditional forms of participation. Issues with internet access have been exacerbated by austerity. Library closures, combined with fewer staff available to assist customers in the remaining libraries, have reduced access to computers for many (House of Commons Culture Media and Sport Committee, 2012).

### **2.3.2 Unequal impact of austerity**

The impact of austerity has been disproportionately negative for disadvantaged citizens. Certain cuts, including to the NHS and road maintenance, are less discriminatory, affecting the majority of citizens to at least some extent. Yet, the impact of these cuts for those with good health and higher incomes has been significantly lower. Research shows that people in poverty have borne 39 per cent of all cuts, while the burden of cuts on disabled people is 19 times greater than other citizens (Duffy, 2013). This suggests that, although cuts are likely to have affected everyone to some degree, the impact of austerity on the UK's most disadvantaged citizens is incomparable to the impact on the healthy and wealthy. Civic voluntarism would predict political participation among those who have more resources available, so cannot explain their lack of action in response to austerity. That many remain relatively little affected by spending cuts may better explain this inaction.

Grievance theory predicts that when citizens feel deprived they are mobilised to participate to communicate their grievances to those in power (Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). Grievance theory would thus predict growth in participation among those adversely affected by austerity policies, but not those who are unaffected. The majority of the public, who are less dependent upon the state, may not be aware of the consequences of the cuts for those most in need and see few consequences for themselves. Such people are thus not mobilised to act. When combined with civic voluntarism, the theories together predict low participation in response to austerity overall because those with grievances to communicate lack the resources to do so.

Research in Europe indicates that austerity policies have relatively little effect on political participation among those least affected. In response to the introduction of a harsh austerity policy, including significant cuts to public sector salaries, public investment, pensions and social benefits, Spain saw a wave of demonstrations and strikes. Yet, these actions were disproportionately undertaken by those most affected by it – public sector employees and subsidy

recipients. Overall levels of political engagement, in fact, declined following the introduction of austerity (Muñoz, Anduiza and Rico, 2014).

### **2.3.3 Narrative of austerity as necessary and unavoidable**

However, there are also factors that influence the public more generally. First, the government has communicated the policy of spending cuts in such a way that there appears to be no alternative. When the UK's 2010 coalition government took office they described deficit reduction as 'the most urgent issue facing Britain' (Cabinet Office, 2010). In order to persuade the public that austerity was an effective policy, the coalition government presented cuts as necessary, unavoidable, morally right and fair. They utilised narratives of 'Labour's debt', household budgeting, blitz spirit and benefit 'scroungers' to suggest the government had no choice but to cut spending. This could lead the public to either accept spending cuts as the most appropriate policy or, for those who remain opposed to it, feel that political activism is unlikely to bring about change.

This argument draws on the theory of policy feedback which claims that policies change both the capacities of the state and those affected by policies. In particular, the narrative that governments choose influences how people understand policies and, consequently, their own identities, goals and capabilities in relation to them (Skocpol, 1995). For example, as argued by Adam Przeworski, if political parties appeal to voters as workers, they are more likely to think of themselves as workers, which puts a particular lens on their values and opinions (Przeworski, 1985). Policies can therefore influence the way citizens see their social status, their rights and thus whether and how they feel empowered to participate in politics.

Through careful narrative choices, the government has suggested that they have no choice but to cut spending. The discourse of austerity evokes the 'blitz spirit' of the war period. From the 1940s to the mid-1950s, the government implemented strict controls on consumer goods, including imports, production, distribution and prices. Government resources were focused on funding the war effort and, later, on economic recovery following the Second World War (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000). This wartime austerity has now become romanticised by many, nostalgically remembered as a time when everyone did their share for the war effort (MacLeavy, 2011). Using language such as "sticking together as a country" and "our children and grandchildren will thank us" (Cameron, 2009) the government sought to gain the support of citizens by evoking this time.

Additionally, this dialogue shifted emphasis away from the role of the banks in the financial crisis, towards the apparent profligate spending on the welfare state and public sector of the previous Labour government (Clarke and Newman, 2012). A mantra of 'Labour's debt' was heavily utilised by the Coalition government. This claim received some opposition from the public (Hay, 2013),

but that Labour was to blame was broadly accepted by the public until late 2015 (Dahlgreen, 2015). This shift of responsibility from the financial sector to the state for the financial crisis and subsequent debt was reaffirmed internationally, with bodies such as the IMF and ECB making governments responsible for resolving the crisis through economic policies (Konzelmann, 2014).

To emphasise the necessity of cuts, they made claims such as “we are not doing this because we want to, driven by theory or ideology. We are doing this because we have to” (Cameron, 2010). This assertion is questionable, as many scholars argue that austerity is an ideological choice over alternatives such as Keynesian fiscal stimulus (MacLeavy, 2011; Blyth, 2013; Hay, 2013). Of course, such alternatives may not counteract growing government debt, but there is also no consensus that government debt is fundamentally problematic or that it cannot be reduced through other means (Portes, 2013; Krugman, 2015). The *choice* of austerity is partly dependent upon the discourse surrounding the policy. As Colin Hay (2013) argues, describing the financial crisis as a ‘crisis of debt’ justifies austerity as a solution, which a ‘crisis of growth’ would not.

To enable the public to understand the issue of public debt, the coalition government often framed austerity in terms of household budgeting. This way of explaining economic issues was often used by Margaret Thatcher (Stronach, Clarke and Frankham, 2013), however it has seen a revival in political language since 2010 (Seabrooke and Thomsen, 2016). For example, in the Liberal Democrat party conference speech in 2010, then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (2010) drew an explicit comparison between national and household debt:

The problems are there. They are real. And we have to solve them. It's the same as a family with earnings of £26,000 a year who are spending £32,000 a year. Even though they're already £40,000 in debt. Imagine if that was you. You'd be crippled by the interest payments. You'd set yourself a budget. And you'd try to spend less. That is what this government is doing.

The coalition government routinely spoke of the need to “balance the books” and not “asking our children to pay back” the country’s debts (Clegg, 2011), as well as the need to “show the world that we can live within our means” (Osborne, 2010).

Politicians’ use of household budgeting as an analogy for the economy received criticism at the time (Stanley, 2013). One criticism was that the analogy does not acknowledge the differences between household and state budgeting, such as that countries like the UK with their own currencies are able to print money and adjust the value of their currency (Konzelmann, 2014). Nonetheless, the analogy held intuitive appeal for many of the public. Stanley (2013)’s research found that:

The ambiguous nature of ‘the UK’s debt’ allowed the middle-income participants to weave between different levels – personal, the state – with relative ease, seamlessly applying lessons from one and applying them to the other in a process of sense-making.

In 2010, George Osborne claimed, “We’re all in this together means cutting wasteful spending while protecting the quality of the key frontline public services we all depend on” (Osborne, 2010). These allusions to being ‘in it together’ were, however, misleading. The government spending cuts targeted welfare benefits, with the exception of state pensions which were given specific protections. These cuts resulted in a gross reduction of £24.7 billion to welfare spending (Hood and Phillips, 2015), as well as the introduction of universal credit and a cap on benefits claims (Ormston and Curtice, 2015). Universal credit increased the stringency of benefits testing and the process has been described as “complicated, difficult, demeaning, impersonal and punitive” (Cheetham *et al.*, 2019, p. 3). In order to justify such extensive welfare cuts, the government utilised a narrative of ‘benefits scroungers’ and ‘sick note Britain’ (Garthwaite, 2014). This language enabled the government to argue that the reforms were necessary to reduce benefit fraud and motivate people to work who were perceived as ‘lazy’ or ‘work shy’.

As Pemberton et al (2016) highlight, the idea of the ‘undeserving poor’ was not new when it was utilised by the government, however it did reignite this conception in society through new strategies of ‘othering’ the poor. David Cameron argued that growing up on benefits resulted in a sense of entitlement that the state would provide a home and income regardless of your choices so there was no need to work (Cameron, 2012).

Hopkin and Rosamond (2018) describe the government’s misleading claims and false equivalence around austerity as examples of the ‘bullshit’ increasingly present in political discourse. They argue that neoliberalism has individualised the process of sense-making in politics, leaving it up to each person to sift through the misrepresentations.

However, economic literacy in the population is fairly low, with a quarter of the public not sure of the meaning of terms like ‘Chancellor of the Exchequer’ and ‘public finances’. Likewise, 27 per cent of people do not know what austerity is (Nolsoe, 2020). As such, making sense of the economic and political ‘mess’ surrounding austerity is a real challenge for everyday actors and the lack of clear, impartial information around the policy deepens this difficulty. As Hopkin and Rosamond (2018, p. 642) argue, this places “a heavy cognitive burden on citizens trying to make sense of the political world”.

The media have provided little challenge to the government’s pro-austerity arguments. Laura Basu (2019) argues that the media, including most newspapers and the BBC, did a lot of work to ‘soften up’ the public for austerity. Even before the word austerity was in widespread use,

spending cuts were discussed by various outlets. Beyond simply advocating for austerity, there is evidence that many outlets also offered little discussion of alternatives. For example, in 2010 the BBC introduced an interactive feature on their website which allowed users to decide how much they would cut government departmental budgets. Users were challenged to reach a saving of £50 billion, where the only option for tax rises was through increasing VAT. Here, the debate offered by the BBC was not whether cuts should be made, but where (Kay and Salter, 2014).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these narratives have been largely effective. Opinion polls show that the general public consistently believed that spending cuts are necessary (Dahlgreen, 2016). Research suggests that members of the public accept this narrative and strongly regard cuts as a moral necessity (Stanley, 2013). For many, this may indicate an acceptance of cuts as the most appropriate policy. For those who nonetheless oppose it, it may feel that political participation would not achieve anything because either there is no alternative or it is not clear how support for an alternative could be established. They may either believe that austerity is the most appropriate policy or that political participation would not achieve anything, undermining their self-efficacy.

Research shows that the language of 'scroungers' and 'entitlement' has been adopted by people living in Britain and is used in public fora to criticise those living on benefits (Seabrooke and Thomsen, 2016). In general, the British public substantially overestimate the frequency of benefit fraud and have little awareness of the proportion of welfare spending on out of work benefits compared to pensions (Geiger, 2018). People typically distance themselves from both ends of the wealth spectrum – the undeserving rich and the undeserving poor – seeing themselves as 'taxpayers', perceived as a moral high ground (Stanley, 2016). This stigmatising language has exacerbated the sense among people living on benefits that they are looked down on by other members of society (Pemberton *et al.*, 2016).

However, the narrative of being 'in it together' has been less successful. This idea is misleading because, as argued above, cuts have not been equally distributed. For those disproportionately affected by cuts, this narrative is likely to seem insensitive, if not insulting, exacerbating distrust in politicians. Accordingly, cuts have been considered unfair almost since they began (Dahlgreen, 2016).

Over time, public support for cuts has waned. In 2010, 59 per cent of people agreed that public spending cuts were needed, compared to 32 per cent who disagreed. By 2017 these percentages had reversed (Deloitte, 2017). In 2017, for the first time since the financial crisis, support for raising taxes to increase public spending overtook support for maintaining tax and spending levels (Clery, Curtice and Harding, 2017). This decline in support for austerity has in part been attributed to the "famine" in public expenditure and its serious consequences for citizens (ibid).



Although government narratives may have undermined political participation, recent declines in support for spending cuts and growing perceptions of unfairness could counteract this trend. However, as deprived communities continue to lose resources, opportunities for participation become ever more limited and the grievances of the rest of the population are likely to remain low. Furthermore, the evidence suggests the public see austerity as unavoidable, which may undermine people's self-efficacy to change the situation. This builds on a pre-existing reluctance to participate in politics which will be discussed in the following section.

#### **2.3.4 Declining participation**

Finally, it is important to situate austerity within the wider context of declining political participation. Scholars have argued that many citizens are withdrawing from politics because politicians do not represent the needs and preferences of the people. Rather than mobilising citizens, austerity may be seen as further evidence of democratic failure.

Over the last three decades, there has been growing evidence in the US and Western Europe of public discontent with democracy, characterised by declining trust in government and growing support for populism (Mair, 2013). This argument chimes with Hay and Stoker's (2009) argument that the democratic malaise is caused by declining accountability of political institutions through the subcontracting of decision making to independent bodies. This discontent is reflected in decreasing levels of political participation. In the UK, between 1992 and 2001 general election turnout fell by over 18 per cent. It has since steadily increased, but in 2017 was still nearly nine per cent down on 1992 (Audickas, Hawkins and Cracknell, 2017). In 2010, the combined vote share of the Labour and Conservative parties was lower than the number of people who did not vote (House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, 2014). Scholars have suggested these are symptoms of the decline of democracy, moving towards what Colin Crouch (2000) calls 'post-democracy'.

However, Pippa Norris (2011) argues that the problem lies in a 'democratic deficit', where public satisfaction with democracy falls short of its aspirations for it. She claims that citizens' expectations are rising due to greater knowledge, so government failure to meet expectations combined with negative media coverage results in public dissatisfaction. Conventional participation can decline in the face of such cynicism about politics. In 2013 32 per cent of people in the UK said they 'almost never' trust the government, three times the proportion in 1986. In the same period, trust in the government nearly halved. By 2013, only 16 per cent of people believed parliament would pay serious attention if they made an effort to do something about an unjust law (Ormston and Curtice, 2015). Those opposed to austerity may regard it as simply more evidence of poor government decisions, rendering political activity pointless.

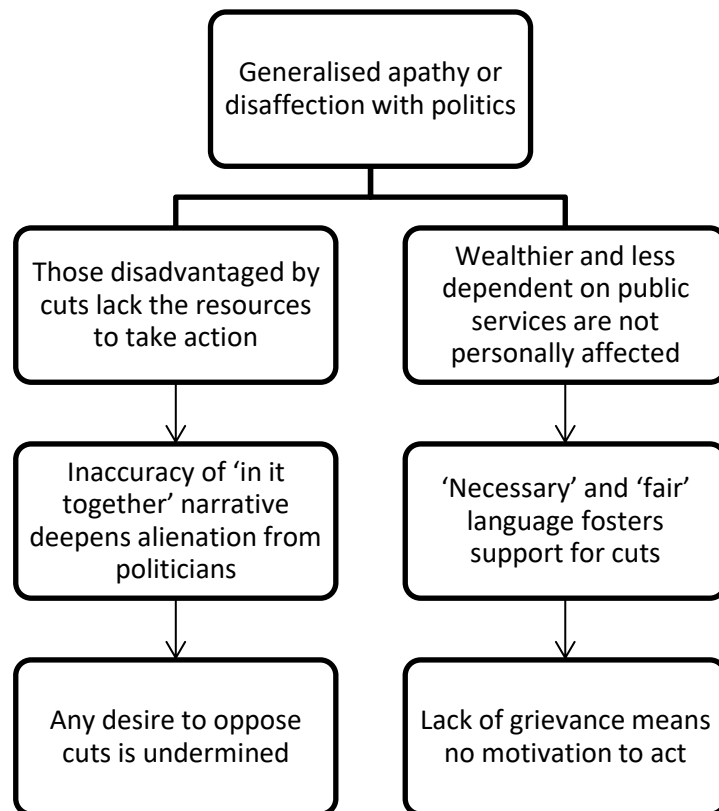
It is possible that austerity has exacerbated these attitudes of distrust and frustration.

Generalised cynicism about politics is likely to make marginalised groups further disinclined to use the few resources they have for participation. For all, the view that participation doesn't change anything is, I argue, reinforced by the narrative that cuts are inevitable.

## 2.4 How the theories interact

I propose that these theories can account for the differing impact on subsets of the population in two general streams, as illustrated by figure 1. Overall declining participation forms a backdrop for both streams, as growing alienation is likely to be found across the population. For those who claim benefits or live on low incomes, this generalised predisposition not to participate in politics is exacerbated by the alienation they are likely to feel as a result of the 'in it together' narrative employed by government. Cuts to benefits and other public services are likely to then reduce the time, money and energy they need to participate, further undermining participation.

Figure 1: Theoretical model to illustrate low political participation in response to austerity



Although the outcomes may be similar, for those on higher incomes and less dependent on public services, the interaction of these theories differs. While generalised disaffection with politics remains an important undercurrent, the government's narrative choices are likely to have garnered support, or at least indifference, towards austerity. This is because those who are not claiming benefits are more likely to accept that the cuts have been fair and necessary. In combination with the low personal impact of austerity, where financially comfortable individuals

have no significant grievance to communicate, there is little motivation to act. When participation levels are already falling, it is likely that a greater provocation than austerity is needed for political participation among this group.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The implications of unequal participation can be very serious for those who do not participate. A lack of political voice can result in policies which either fail to help or actively disadvantage non-participants, who are often most in need. Low political participation is associated with less redistributive policies, yet those who would benefit most from greater redistribution of wealth are less likely to vote or engage by other means (Pontusson and Rueda, 2010). Ultimately, those who do not participate are more likely to lose out. The problem can then become self-perpetuating, as a lack of welfare state provision can entrench social inequalities, further reducing engagement and therefore representation of those most in need. In contrast, redistributive policies can assist lower status individuals in becoming more politically active by providing the resources that are central to participation (Dalton, 2017). The consequences of inequality of participation are crucial in the case of austerity, as those who lose out under austerity are also those who are less likely to participate. If the public does not engage with politicians over austerity, the government may continue to pursue it as a policy, further entrenching the issues it creates. It is therefore important to understand why people do not participate.

I hypothesise that the theories of civic voluntarism, grievance theory and policy feedback all offer strong explanations for the low political participation in response to austerity. Yet none of these theories alone adequately explains the complex issues involved. It is therefore likely that all three are needed to most effectively account for what is ultimately a complex picture.

Pre-existing declines in participation are likely to have undermined any potential response in the population as a whole, as participation is increasingly seen as ineffectual. The government's narrative of being 'in it together' contradicts the lived experience of those dependent upon public services, which may exacerbate distrust in politicians. The loss of resources through benefits and social services cuts may then create further barriers to participation for marginalised individuals.

The government's narrative choices are likely to have influenced those less dependent on public services differently, promoting the idea that cuts are necessary and unavoidable. This wording indicates that participation would not change anything, while also encouraging many to support the policy. While these groups have the resources to participate, it is probable that their limited personal experience of cuts means they do not have a grievance to communicate.

Clearly, the impact of austerity on the British public, both personally and politically, is complex. Even where the outcome is the same, namely low participation, it should not be assumed that one theory alone can explain why this is the case. In this chapter I have therefore proposed a theoretical model to explain why austerity has provoked only limited participation that takes into account the differing impacts of austerity. However, it is also important to understand how the different factors interact in practice. As such, the goal of this thesis is to empirically test how these theories interact to create a nuanced model of why austerity has provoked relatively little political participation in the UK.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

Based on civic voluntarism, grievance theory and policy feedback, the previous chapter argued that austerity is unlikely to provoke political participation. This is because those who are most affected by cuts lack the resources to engage in politics, while those less affected lack motivation to speak either in support or opposition to austerity. Government narratives also influence the way the public thinks about austerity, which means that people are more likely to see it as necessary and unavoidable. For those who oppose austerity, this supposed inevitability of austerity can undermine political self-efficacy (Harrison, 2021a). Based on this literature review, the aim of this research is to test the extent to which these theories explain the public's political response (or lack thereof) to austerity. The central research question of this thesis is therefore 'why has austerity provoked limited political participation in England?' To answer this question, other key sub-questions will also need to be answered. These are as follows:

1. What impact has austerity had on the day-to-day lives of the public?
2. What do people think about austerity?
3. What role have the public's experiences of and attitudes to austerity played in their political participation?

To answer these questions, this research employs a mixed methods approach, including both quantitative and qualitative aspects. This chapter will describe the different research methods used, beginning by explaining why these approaches are appropriate in answering the research questions. Secondly, it will explain the ethical considerations for the research and steps I have taken to ensure the anonymity of participants. Next it will detail the methods I have employed in my qualitative research, including interview case selection, participant recruitment and the interview process. It will then explain how I conducted the qualitative data analysis. Finally, I will explain the quantitative research approach, including data sources and methods of analysis, before concluding.

### 3.1 Methodological Approach

The complex nature of the relationship between austerity and political participation means that a combination of theories may most accurately account for the variation in political engagement of different subsets of society. As such, qualitative research is valuable in that it allows for an exploration of the motivations of different people in participating and their views of austerity. It would be difficult to understand why people do or do not participate, and convincingly link this with austerity, using only large-scale quantitative datasets. This is in part because many pre-existing datasets do not explore the issue of austerity in a lot of depth, so there are insufficient

data to investigate the nuances of individuals' relationships with austerity. Furthermore, qualitative research allows participants to express themselves in a fuller and more personal way, which can bring out themes that survey data would not elicit (Warren, 2001).

The first stage of my research was to interview members of the public about their experiences of austerity and how they engage with politics. Semi-structured interviews provide rich data, not only on what experiences participants have had, but also the meaning that they give to those experiences (Edwards and Holland, 2013). The FrameWorks Institute work on 'Talking About Poverty' highlights how important it is to access meaning and not just statistics when working on and communicating issues around poverty. Their emphasis on the importance of "connecting numbers to values of justice and compassion" applies not only to poverty, which is a significant theme in this thesis, but also to discussions of austerity (Hawkins, 2018).

For example, in this research a key aim was to investigate what people think of austerity and how their opinion affects their motivation to support or oppose it. By using interviews to gather this data, I was able to draw out the nuances of participants' opinions of austerity, as many people had conflicting views, such as supporting it in principle but not how it had been implemented (see section 6.3). It would be more difficult to observe the nuances of such opinions through quantitative data, as the ability to follow up on points that participants make is valuable in clarifying their meaning.

In total I interviewed 43 participants in four different areas, with the intention of reaching people from different socioeconomic groups. The aim of these interviews was to gather data on how cuts had affected people (if at all), their attitudes to austerity and whether either had affected their participation in politics.

However, as is widely acknowledged, quantitative data is particularly useful in providing generalisable results. For constructivists, generalisability is not a significant problem. However I have taken a pragmatic approach, meaning that it is advantageous to utilise more than one method to provide the nuance of qualitative work and greater representativeness of quantitative work (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). This strengthens the findings of the research as different methods can have, as Brewer and Hunter (1989) argue, complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses.

Pragmatism accepts "both the existence of one reality and that individuals have multiple interpretations of this reality" (Maarouf, 2019, p. 6) which underpins the value of both qualitative and quantitative research. A consequence of this philosophy is that a researcher's values and politics are integral to the way they identify research questions and the methods to investigate them (Morgan, 2007). My belief in the importance of amplifying the voices of the marginalised is

therefore a fundamental tenet of my research method. Sharing people's stories can be a powerful way to challenge accepted wisdom and bring about policy change (Richardson, 2016; Matthews and Sunderland, 2017).

Nonetheless, I also believe it is important to consider the bigger picture and explore patterns across whole populations to illustrate the widespread nature of the challenges faced. People across the country and, indeed, much of the world have been significantly affected by austerity and there are many common experiences across the population. Statistical analysis of large-scale survey data therefore complements the rich data gathered through interviews because it reveals more about the story across England. Examining whether the experiences of people in my interview sample reflect wider national trends strengthens the conclusions of this thesis and exposes the scale of the challenges posed by spending cuts.

In addition to the interviews, I therefore conducted quantitative analysis of British Election Study (BES) and Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) data. This allowed me to test whether themes in the qualitative data are also reflected in large-scale quantitative data, and thus whether the findings might be representative. Conducting the qualitative analysis first uses the 'sequential exploratory' research design, which affords the benefits of using rich data to develop understanding in an area relatively unexplored. In this design the qualitative data takes precedence, which is important for a topic that centres the lived experience of poverty, and is complemented by the quantitative data to improve generalisability (Halcomb and Hickman, 2015).

My analysis broadly focused on descriptive statistics, comparison of means and logistic regression. There are a number of different variables that the statistical model took into account, such as type of political participation, demographic characteristics and political attitudes. The analysis examined the relationship between cuts in respondents' areas and their responses to whether cuts have 'gone too far' as well as the relationship of both of these to voting behaviour. This method will be discussed further in section 3.7.

## **3.2 Ethics**

The first stage in my fieldwork was applying for ethical approval. This section outlines the steps I have taken to conduct my research ethically and in line with data protection laws.

As is typical for such studies, I ensured that all participants were able and willing to provide informed consent, by providing them with detailed written information, the opportunity to ask questions and gaining their written agreement through a consent form. I made it clear to all participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study any time up to three months after their interview and could choose not to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with. I

conducted a risk assessment to ensure that I was not putting myself or my participants at unnecessary risk.

I chose to offer participants an honorarium of £10 each, funded by the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership, to show gratitude to them for giving up their time. Most participants chose to accept the money, though not all, while a few requested I donate the money to charity. It is commonly argued that money should not be offered as an incentive to take part and risks transforming the interview process into a 'marketised exchange' (Head, 2009, p. 343). As such, I avoided framing the honorarium as an incentive. However, I felt it was important to offer some recognition for their participation (Surmiak, 2020). In particular, as I was seeking to speak to people experiencing financial hardship, there were particular concerns around taking time away from other activities such as paid work or caring responsibilities (Hall, 2017).

One possible risk from the research was harm to participants or myself due to discussing distressing topics. The risk of this was quite likely because I was aiming to speak to people who were negatively affected by austerity and therefore were likely to talk about the distressing impact it had had on them. However, the amount of harm the interview process might cause was relatively low because the participants were not required to talk about anything they were uncomfortable discussing and were encouraged to stop or take breaks if required. The interview questions were prepared to ensure I only asked about issues that were pertinent to the research, to avoid unnecessary harm. In terms of minimising distress to myself as the interviewer, I was at low risk of harm but would have been able to pause or end any interviews if necessary. I also chose to transcribe certain interviews bit by bit over longer periods of time in order to reduce the risk of distress.

One challenge in my application for ethical approval was data protection, as recent changes to the law had made restrictions on how data could be handled much more stringent. Although these reforms introduced important protections, the recent timing of the law change meant that examples of wording on handling participant data were few and far between. The process was therefore delayed by having to reword participant information and consent forms multiple times. The measures I took to ensure that the data is stored in a manner compliant with data protection regulations included using an encrypted device for audio recordings and storing them on a password protected computer. All data was anonymised, including removing any references to distinctive characteristics that could be used to identify participants.



### 3.3 Interview Location Selection

The first stage of the interview process was to use a quantitative method to select the areas in which I would recruit participants. This section will briefly discuss the reasoning for this decision and then outline in depth the process by which I selected these areas.

Despite the first stage of my research being predominantly qualitative in nature, I used a quantitative approach to selecting areas in which to conduct interviews. A systematic method of choosing interview locations was important to increase the likelihood of speaking to a diverse range of individuals, which would help to test the different facets of my theory. I selected interview locations using maximum variation sampling, by identifying areas that contrast in levels of cuts and deprivation in order to increase the heterogeneity of my sample (Aurini, Heath and Howells, 2016). By analysing spending cuts data, I could ensure I was speaking to people who had experienced different levels of impact from austerity. In combining this data with deprivation measures I could also ensure that I spoke to individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds as, for example, those in the wealthier areas may not have felt such an impact of cuts, even if cuts in their area had been proportionally high. While the interview sample was not required to be representative, broadening the sample to include various areas of England with diverse economic situations facilitated better testing of the hypothesis that austerity would have affected people differently and thus have had a varied impact on political participation (Gillham, 2005).

In order to identify locations from which to recruit participants and conduct interviews, spending cuts figures were taken from publicly available IFS data (Smith, Phillips and Simpson, 2016), which provides figures on the cuts to individual local authority budgets between 2009/10 and 2016/17. These data were the most recent available and provided the most effective comparison of council budgets because they excluded certain aspects of spending for which responsibility had changed over the period. For example, through greater devolution of powers, local authorities became responsible for public health spending. If this budget were included in the figures there would appear to have been a significant rise in spending on public health that does not reflect actual spending changes.

The data only cover local authorities in England, as there are significant differences in the budgets that local authorities have responsibility for between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Gray and Barford, 2018). Given the consequent difficulty in comparing the extent of cuts between councils across the UK, the interviews for this research are restricted to members of the public in England.

I then combined spending cuts figures with deprivation data, in order to achieve a mixture of locations that had high and low cuts, as well as high and low deprivation. The aim of having diverse locations was to increase the likelihood of speaking to participants from across different socioeconomic groups and with varied experiences of austerity, to facilitate comparison (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Deprivation data were taken from the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) from 2015 (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2015), as these were the most recent available. There is a range of different measures of deprivation within this index. I used two different measures: the index of multiple deprivation average score, which provides an average of all the scores given to Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) within a local authority; and the proportion of areas within a local authority that are among the 10 per cent most deprived areas in the country. The former measure provides a picture of the overall level of deprivation within a local authority area. The second is useful in identifying extreme deprivation which, in the average score measure, may be offset by wealthier areas under the same local authority.

I then ranked local authorities by the percentage change to their spending between 2009/10 and 2016/17, to identify the councils that had seen the highest and lowest cuts. Initially, I selected four areas that had consistently high or low levels of deprivation according to both their average score and proportion of areas in the 10 per cent most deprived. The selected areas were Hampshire, Sheffield, Harrow, and Salford. As will be discussed in section 3.4.2, research in London was subsequently expanded to include Camden. Table 1 shows the deprivation scores and percentage change in spending for each local authority.

*Table 1: Deprivation scores and spending cuts by local authority*

<b>Local authority</b>	<b>IMD - Average score</b>	<b>IMD - Proportion of LSOAs in most deprived 10% nationally</b>	<b>Cut 2009-10 to 2016-17</b>	<b>Council controlling party</b>
<b>Salford</b>	32.959	0.2867	-44.95%	Labour
<b>Harrow</b>	14.302	0	-35.30%	Labour
<b>Camden</b>	24.959	0.0526	-38.98%	Labour
<b>Sheffield</b>	27.568	0.2348	-9.64%	Labour
<b>Hampshire</b>	11.917	0.0108	-5.45%	Conservative

Hampshire had the lowest spending cuts of any local authority, as well as low deprivation by both measures. Salford had the second highest cuts after Westminster, but higher deprivation by both measures so I deemed these a more relevant case. The cuts in Sheffield, Harrow and Camden were less extreme but had the most significant contrast between the extent of spending cuts and levels of deprivation. These three cases therefore provided a useful counter to the overall trend for greater cuts in areas of high deprivation to examine whether people in these areas had a

different experience of austerity. Although three of the councils were under Labour control, Hampshire provided a contrast as it was under Conservative control. Hampshire is also subdivided into boroughs which have individual councils that are not all under Conservative control. Hampshire participants were thus from a range of boroughs, typically under Conservative or Liberal Democrat control. Sheffield and Hampshire councils also have a large proportion of Liberal Democrat councillors.

One issue with the data used is that some areas are significantly larger than others. Local authority structures within the UK mean that many English counties, but not all, have a number of district councils underneath one overarching county council. Other areas, particularly cities and large towns, have just one unitary authority that does not fall under the jurisdiction of a county council. For example, Hampshire has a county council in the two-tier system, covering areas such as Winchester that have district councils. However, Southampton (within the county of Hampshire) has a city council, which is a unitary authority independent of Hampshire County Council. Greater London, meanwhile, falls under the Greater London Authority, which has very limited powers compared to the individual borough councils within London. There are also combined authorities, which oversee larger areas covering multiple counties or cities. Variation in the size of budgets and responsibilities of the different types of council therefore affects the validity of comparing spending cuts across councils.

However, as discussed above, the IFS figures do exclude certain parts of the budgets, such as spending on public health and emergency services, because they have changed over time and are not consistent across councils. As far as possible, therefore, the calculation of cuts is restricted to the most comparable budgets. In addition, the use of percentage change means that it is possible to compare cuts to different sized budgets, as opposed to change in GBP which risks skewing the results to suggest that the largest budgets have been cut the most. There is no perfect measure of spending cuts, however this approach best overcomes the issues created by the local authority structure in England.

## **3.4 Participant recruitment**

Once I had selected the areas in which I would interview members of the public, I began recruitment of participants. This section explains chronologically how I recruited participants.

### **3.4.1 Hampshire**

The first research area was Hampshire, which I chose from the four locations as a starting point for convenience, because of its proximity to the University of Southampton. This proximity

allowed more time to try out different recruitment methods in order to be more efficient when further from the University.

Initially, the plan had been to recruit predominantly through libraries and public service organisations, such as Job Centre Plus and children's centres. The reasoning behind this choice was that it would be valuable to speak to public service users because their experiences, and particularly the contrast in experiences of participants from different areas, would give a good indication of how austerity has affected the local area. I was particularly interested in libraries because I had worked as a library assistant in 2015-16 and had first-hand experience of the cuts to libraries in Hampshire. I had personally been offered a temporary contract and, when encouraged to apply for a permanent position, found that the nature of the contracts had changed, such that librarians were expected to travel between different libraries according to resource requirements. In addition, I was also present for a protest that took place within the library against the spending cuts. As a library assistant in Hampshire, the cuts were lower than many other areas of the country, leading me to have a particular interest in how austerity must have affected libraries elsewhere. As such, I was hopeful that speaking to library users would give me an insight into this, as well as the many other impacts of austerity.

I therefore began by producing flyers and visiting libraries in the Hampshire area, where I found the employees to be receptive to displaying the flyers. Many librarians were unwilling or unable to discuss my research further though, as I had been hoping to encourage them to speak to service users on my behalf. However, this reluctance may reflect their high workload. Despite the flyers being displayed, I had a very poor response rate through this method, as only one participant contacted me as a result of having seen a flyer in a library. One participant informed me that a local charity-run museum also offered benefits advice and suggested that they may be able to advertise my research to their customers. I did gain one participant through this organisation and, in doing so, observed a direct impact of spending cuts, as this participant told me that she regularly visits the museum because she is unable to afford the increased fees for the local adult day centre.

Given the limited success in recruiting participants through flyers I instead decided to advertise through Facebook. Participant recruitment through social media is not without its challenges, including around the privacy of participants and the researcher, but affords easy access to a range of people (Reich, 2015). In order to minimise privacy concerns, I created a Facebook page specifically for the research project and communicated with potential participants through the page's messaging function. This eliminated issues around 'friending' participants and enabled me to post materials from the information sheet so that it was clear what data I would gather from them.

I joined some local Facebook groups for towns within Hampshire and found this method got a very high response rate. Seven of the 13 participants from Hampshire were recruited through local community Facebook groups, predominantly used for news, events and local information. The remainder of the participants from Hampshire were recruited through word-of-mouth from the participants gained through Facebook. It is likely that this limited the range of my sample to some degree, as it restricted participants to those who are regular users of social media. However, given that other participants were recruited through other means, such as library advertisements, this is not a significant limitation.

### **3.4.2 London**

Having conducted 13 interviews within Hampshire, I continued to leave flyers in the area but began recruitment in the borough of Harrow. Librarians in Harrow were significantly less willing to assist in advertising my research, stating that they were unable to put up flyers because restrictions meant that they could not advertise research for which participants would be paid. I left flyers at the local Job Centre Plus and a village hall, although neither yielded any participants.

There was a striking difference in how receptive people were to advertising on my behalf between Hampshire and Harrow in general, but also within Harrow itself. I selected different areas within the borough of Harrow in order to reach participants from different demographics. However, in Wealdstone, chosen on the basis of being a more deprived area within Harrow, few people were willing to assist and there were generally fewer suitable places to advertise in. In contrast, in Pinner and central Harrow there was a greater range of organisations and shops, and the local people that I spoke to were more willing to discuss my research. Nonetheless, of the people I spoke to, only one became an interviewee.

I also reached out to potential participants via Facebook, posting in six Harrow Facebook groups, including community, parenting and political groups. Facebook posts were significantly less effective in Harrow than in Hampshire and I interviewed only five people from these groups over the course of five months. Snowball sampling also had limited benefit in Harrow, as attempts to gain additional participants through the people I interviewed only yielded a couple of participants.

As a result of my very limited success in recruitment in Harrow, I decided to broaden my recruitment area to Camden, another area of north London with similar demographics. This enabled me to reach out to a wider audience, largely through community Facebook groups, to overcome the issues I had faced with recruitment.

In general, however, it was striking how much more challenging it was to recruit participants in London in comparison with Hampshire. The reasons for this are unclear, although research

suggests that recruiting participants for research can be more challenging in major cities, including London (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012; Newington and Metcalfe, 2014). The public may feel busier and less able to give their time in the London area than they do elsewhere in the country because of the pace of life. People may also be less motivated to participate because there are more researchers in the capital. This may make the opportunity to participate less novel and mean there are other, potentially more lucrative means through which they may participate in such activities (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012).

### **3.4.3 Sheffield and Salford**

My final recruitment areas were Sheffield and Salford, by which stage in the research I had established an effective approach to recruitment. Given the greater distance I needed to travel to these locations to conduct interviews, I initially advertised exclusively online through local Facebook community groups which was very successful. I found people in these areas to be significantly more willing to take part than in London. I was able to recruit through snowball sampling to a limited extent, largely by interviewing the partners of participants I had reached through Facebook. I also attempted to recruit participants through word of mouth in Sheffield as I had contacts in the area who could put me in touch with local residents, though this only yielded one participant. Once I had arrived in both Sheffield and Salford I then also placed flyers in libraries and on local bulletin boards in order to reach participants who were not social media users. This, as in Hampshire, had only limited success but did enable me to reach a few participants who did not use Facebook.

Overall, the participants I recruited were fairly well spread across the four locations, with 13 from Hampshire, 11 from Sheffield, 10 from Salford and 9 from London. I was able to recruit participants with a reasonable degree of diversity in terms of age, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. In Hampshire and, to a lesser extent, Salford and Sheffield, there was a skew towards female participants. I sought to reconcile this by mentioning in my Facebook posts that I was specifically interested in speaking to male participants, though with limited success. I spoke to a greater proportion of men in London, however, and interviewed 14 men and 29 women overall.

The sample was skewed towards people who were politically active, which may be because they were more likely to be interested in the topic of austerity and therefore taking part in the research. 11 participants were political party members, so were significantly overrepresented in the sample compared to the 1.7 per cent of the British population who were members of the Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat parties (Audickas, Dempsey and Loft, 2019). Similarly, 40 of the 43 participants told me that they regularly vote, which is a larger proportion than the 2015 election turnout of 66 per cent (Audickas, Hawkins and Cracknell, 2017). As such, I estimate that

the political activism in response to austerity is likely to be overstated and am clear in the subsequent chapters that evidence of participation should be interpreted with caution.

However, it is important to note that a truly representative sample was not the aim of the qualitative research and its strengths lie in achieving data saturation through the contributions of each participant (Morse, 1999). Indeed, the benefit of conducting mixed method research of this kind is that any limitations of generalisability in the interview sample are reduced through triangulation of the findings through statistical analysis.

### **3.5 Conducting the interviews**

This section describes how I conducted interviews with the participants that I recruited, providing an overview of interviews in all the research areas. Although I adapted the interview slightly over time to account for gaps I identified in my earlier data, the nature of the interviews and questions I asked remained predominantly the same throughout.

All interviews took place between October 2018 and October 2019. I largely conducted interviews in person in the local area in which I recruited participants. The majority took place in either coffee shops or local libraries. I recorded all interviews on an encrypted audio recording device, which I later transcribed for analysis. The interviews were semi-structured. I had a list of questions on which the interviews were based, however some discussions followed the list very closely, whereas in others it was used simply as a guide, according to how forthcoming the participants were. This adaptive approach worked well because all interviews broadly covered the same topics. However, where possible, many of the topics were reached organically rather than through a more formal question and answer structure. For example, some participants raised austerity and their political activism before I had referred to it, because for them these issues were intrinsically connected to their experiences of public services. These conversations moved more fluidly around the topics to be discussed, which created some problems in terms of tracking which questions had been covered, but in many cases also provided very rich data.

I wrote the questions to cover three broad topics: experiences of public services; awareness and opinion of austerity; and levels of political participation. The questions were designed to uncover whether participants had noticed changes to public services over the last 10 years, both positive and negative. This was helpful to develop an understanding of their experience of cuts, before discussing austerity directly.

It was important to initially delay discussion of austerity itself for two reasons. The first reason was that when I conducted pilot interviews, I found it was better to put participants at ease by first discussing something they knew a lot about, such as their experiences of public services.

Austerity is for some people a confusing or emotive topic, so was not always a constructive starting point for an open and flowing conversation. Secondly, if I raised austerity first it was possible that participants may have been inclined to describe their experiences of public services more favourably or unfavourably according to their view on austerity. It seemed likely that I would elicit a more balanced account of public services by not framing the questions within the context of austerity. It was important to understand how they had personally been affected by spending cuts, or not, in order to analyse whether any political action or inaction was motivated by personal experience.

When discussing austerity explicitly, I proceeded by asking what their understanding of the word austerity was because it is a somewhat ambiguous and loaded term. To analyse opinions of austerity and why it impacts levels of participation in different ways, it is first important to understand what people think it is. I was also keen to find out how participants had heard about austerity and who they consider to be responsible for it, to examine whether this influences their likelihood of participating in politics.

A key aspect of the final phase in questioning was whether austerity affected their levels of political participation. As such, it was important to first gauge whether they were typically politically active to understand the degree of influence that austerity had had. These questions typically did not follow the planned order, as less active participants mostly had little to say on this topic whereas the politically active were more forthcoming and often led the conversation.

Both conducting and transcribing the interviews were not without their difficulties. As Carol Warren notes, “emotional costs are particularly relevant in qualitative interviewing because of its open-ended, exploratory character; probing for details and depths of experiences [...] can be stressful for all participants” (Warren, 2001, p. 86). The conversations I had with those who were struggling most under austerity were affecting, and in some cases distressing. This emphasised to me how little awareness many of the other participants had of the consequences of austerity. However, the emotional impact of the interviews was important, and in many ways expected, because the nature of the topic is itself distressing. I took steps to ensure that I was not at risk of becoming unduly distressed by the material, for example by transcribing difficult material gradually over multiple sittings. And, as described above in section 3.2, I also worked to ensure that the participants were not exposed to unnecessary stress during the interviews.

### **3.6 Qualitative data analysis**

Once the data had been collected and transcribed, I used thematic analysis to code the data for patterns in the language participants used in relation to austerity, as well as experience of and



attitudes towards austerity and political participation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I used Nvivo to code the data by theme, including 'participation motivated by austerity' and 'personal impact of spending cuts'. Many of these themes were further divided into subthemes, for example in the latter case this included 'personal experience of NHS cuts'. Codes were based on themes from the literature review and topics that stood out while I was conducting the interviews, as well as other themes that emerged as I analysed the data. By coding the data in this way, I was able to look for patterns in the data that indicated whether particular demographic groups or people with particular experiences of spending cuts participate in politics more or less.

A key part of the qualitative data analysis was developing a typology with which to classify the interview participants. Through the interview and transcription process it was clear that there were some key distinctions between participants, namely whether they generally supported or opposed austerity and how politically active they were. As I analysed the data, I classified participants under these themes, identifying those who were more or less politically active and those who were strongly, somewhat or not at all opposed to the cuts. This helped me to organise the data and identify further patterns (Walliman, 2011). This analysis generated four groups that I then examined in depth using other themes that had emerged in my analysis more generally, drawing on the theories of cognitive mobilisation, grievance, and policy feedback. For example, there were differences in the extent to which each group was personally affected by austerity and how aware they were of the impact on others. Once I had identified the principal differences between the groups I named them according to their key characteristics.

### **3.7 Quantitative research**

Once I had completed the qualitative analysis I then used the results to determine the nature of the research questions for the quantitative stage of my research. The primary goal was to triangulate the findings from the qualitative data by comparing them with the more generalisable national BES data on political attitudes and participation. I therefore followed the structure of the qualitative findings to identify research questions for the quantitative analysis. These were: how local authority cuts vary across the country; how attitudes to cuts vary according to experiences of cuts; the impact of austerity on attitudes to politics; and, finally, the impact of cuts on political participation.

#### **3.7.1 Quantitative data**

As described in section 3.1, I used BES data (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2015) on political attitudes and participation and IFS spending cuts data (Smith, Phillips and Simpson, 2016) to analyse how political participation varies according to demographics and experience of spending cuts. I used

wave 6 of the BES, from 2015, because this provides the most complete dataset in terms of demographic factors such as disability and includes a number of questions about spending cuts. This dataset also offers good representativeness of the population when the recommended weightings are applied, which I did.

As part of the data cleansing, I removed respondents from Wales and Scotland as the spending cuts data are limited to England and cuts have been implemented differently in the different constituent countries of the UK (Gray and Barford, 2018). Election turnout was a key variable in my analysis so I removed all participants under the age of 18 as they would have been unable to vote. Just over 250 respondents had no recorded local authority listed, so I also removed them as this was needed to compare experiences of spending cuts. Finally, due to complex differences in the way local authority spending works (See Sandford, 2021), I removed respondents from the City of London. This approach follows that of the IFS, who treat the City of London as an outlier (Harris, Hodge and Phillips, 2019). However, there were only eight participants from this area.

BES respondents are asked their local authority, however this is based on lower tier local authorities whereas the IFS data uses upper tier local authorities. As such, I created a reference list of lower tier to upper tier local authorities using Office for National Statistics data (2019) and used this to recode BES participants by upper tier authority. I was then able to match up BES respondents with local authority spending cuts data from the IFS. I merged these data in SPSS to enable analysis of responses to BES questions according to local authority spending cuts.

### **3.7.2 Quantitative data analysis**

I began the data analysis with a range of descriptive statistics to get a sense of the overall patterns around spending cuts, attitudes to cuts and attitudes to politicians. I built bar charts and maps to compare data on a geographical level, as well as further graphs and comparison of means to explore attitudinal variables from the BES. It would have been beneficial to explore these data in depth using inferential statistics, however constraints of time meant that this was not feasible. This would nonetheless be a valuable area for future research.

As the central research question of this thesis is how austerity affects political participation, I conducted the most detailed analysis on the turnout variable in the BES. This question asked whether respondents had voted in the 2015 general election. To examine this variable, I again began using graphs and comparison of means to explore whether there was variation in the experience of cuts of people who did or did not vote.

I then expanded this analysis by developing regression models of turnout. As turnout has a binary outcome (did vote or did not vote)<sup>2</sup> I used binary logistic regression to model the impact of austerity on voting. The first model was a simple model of turnout based on the three key factors that had emerged from my qualitative data as strongly influencing experience of cuts. I selected these variables to test initially whether the factors affecting experience of austerity play a role in political participation. The variables were local authority cuts, disability and household income. For the latter, I created a binary variable of income above or below £15,000 to identify those who were likely to be living in poverty. Household income in the BES is measured in bands, so I selected £15,000 as the cut off because this was the closest band to the relative poverty line of around £15,400 per year in 2016/17 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2018).

To strengthen this model, I then developed a second model using additional variables that are often used to predict voter turnout: political efficacy (Valentino, Gregorowicz and Groenendyk, 2009), age (Melo and Stockemer, 2014) and education (Lijphart, 1997). To test political efficacy, I used the categorical variable 'understands the important political issues facing our country' and for education I used highest qualification. I ran the model step-wise to add spending cuts in a second step, to test whether this would improve the model. When I ran this model initially, I also included income and disability in both steps as I had in the first model. However, disability was not a significant predictor ( $p > 0.05$ ) in either step, so I excluded it to better test the predictive power of the other variables in the model. Income was included as a binary variable in the same way as described above.

Throughout the statistical analysis I compared the findings with those of the qualitative data, in order to triangulate the data and strengthen my conclusions.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the pragmatic, mixed methods approach I have taken to this research. Using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data affords the benefits of both, by allowing rich but also generalisable conclusions. Austerity is an issue that has deeply touched the lives of those most reliant on public services, particularly those living in poverty and with disabilities. Sarah Marie Hall describes austerity as "a deeply personal and social condition" (2019b, p. 197), so it was important to use qualitative data to tell the real stories behind the statistics (Hawkins, 2018). The primary focus of my research has therefore been interviewing the public to find out how

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<sup>2</sup> I excluded 'don't know' responses because they are difficult to interpret. As 115 people selected this answer, accounting for only 0.5 per cent of the sample, excluding these responses is unlikely to affect the reliability of the findings.

austerity has affected their lives and their political participation. Comparing experiences across localities is particularly valuable to show how varied experiences of austerity are and provides context to these inequalities.

My interview sampling was not designed to accurately reflect the population, but instead to offer contrasting cases for comparison. Nonetheless, austerity is an issue that has touched everyone's lives to some degree so it is also valuable to explore its impact on a national level. Statistical analysis of more representative survey data therefore facilitates the testing of my qualitative findings in a more generalisable way. The BES is not a perfect survey, as it also tends to overrepresent voters relative to non-voters (Sanders *et al.*, 2007), however its much stronger representativeness still affords a useful comparison. In doing so, the quantitative data explored in depth in chapter 8 broadly supports the findings from the earlier qualitative analysis chapters, except for a few interesting points of divergence. These points of agreement and conflict are examined within chapter 8.

## Chapter 4 Impact of austerity on the majority

As discussed in Chapter 2, this thesis uses three key theories to understand how austerity affects political participation. The first is civic voluntarism, which suggests that resources such as time and money are crucial to political participation (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). However, austerity has reduced many people's resources, such as money, time and health, as a result of job losses and cuts to welfare and social care, among many other issues (Douglas *et al.*, 2015; McGrath, Griffin and Mundy, 2015; Mckenzie, 2015; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017).

Meanwhile, grievance theory argues that political participation is stimulated by grievances, where those who are discontented are more likely to engage in political activity than those who are not (Scheufele, Skanakan and Kim, 2002; Kriesi, 2014). This theory suggests that those who are comparatively little affected will not be motivated to participate in response to cuts, because they do not have a personal grievance to express (Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015).

Finally, policy feedback theory claims that people's attitudes to political participation are shaped by policies and their framing. In particular, the government's use of narratives around policies affects the way that people see the policy and their own political efficacy in response to it (Przeworski, 1985; Skocpol, 1995). In the case of austerity, government language focused on the need to reduce 'wasteful' spending, particularly on welfare where many recipients are condemned as 'work-shy' or 'scroungers' (Garthwaite, 2014; Seabrooke and Thomsen, 2016). As a result, experience of different public services and perceptions of how they are viewed by the wider public are likely to affect motivation to engage in politics.

Based on these theories, personal experiences of austerity are likely to play a significant role in an individual's motivation, or lack thereof, for political participation in response to cuts. As such, to understand the impact that austerity has had on political participation, it is first important to analyse how cuts have affected people's day to day lives.

Drawing on interview data from across all four locations from this research, this chapter and the next look at the changes to various public services under austerity and how this has affected people living in England. Chapter 4 considers services which, at least in theory, touch the lives of most people: healthcare, policing, education, waste disposal and road maintenance. Chapter 5 will then examine the impact of cuts to services which are used by comparatively few people, such as benefits and social care.

This chapter argues that, despite the relatively universal nature of the services discussed here, the impact of the cuts has still not been felt equally. Many people have seen relatively little impact,

particularly in Hampshire and London, although there are people in all areas who have struggled due to the cuts. Factors such as income, health, age and caring responsibilities play an important role in experiences of the cuts, while geographical variation in the extent of cuts to services also affects outcomes.

This chapter is broken down into five subsequent sections. The first looks in depth at how participants described their experiences of the NHS and other health services because this was such a significant theme. The second section considers policing and the criminal justice system and the third section, education with a particular focus on cuts to schools. The final two sections focus on local government services, exploring the impact of austerity on waste disposal and road maintenance. It concludes with an overview of the areas in which participants had been affected by cuts and which groups within my sample were at most risk of being negatively affected.

## **4.1 Impact of health spending cuts**

While many spoke of positive experiences, almost all participants, including those least affected by cuts, had noticed negative changes to the health service over the last decade, making this one of the most significant issues. Experience of cuts to the NHS are an interesting test case because spending has in fact continued to grow, however this has been at a significantly lower rate than prior to 2010: 1.2 per cent between 2009/10 and 2020/21 compared to an average of four per cent per year since the NHS was established. This is also considerably below the spending growth of 4.3 per cent a year needed to reflect growing demand on the NHS, according to the Office of Budget Responsibility (The King's Fund, 2018).

However, it is areas such as public health and lower profile health services outside of the NHS where the cuts have been felt the most (British Medical Association, 2018; Full Fact, 2018). Funding for the NHS is allocated through trusts, so cuts do not necessarily mirror cuts to local authority spending due to differences in the areas they cover. For example, differences in the pressures on GP services due to variation in the number of patients and the types of services they provide mean that experiences of the NHS will vary even within towns and cities (Baird *et al.*, 2016). As such, it is not surprising that the NHS was raised as a significant area of change in public services over the last eight to ten years by participants in this research.

### **4.1.1 Medical appointments**

Multiple people referred to difficulties in getting timely appointments with their local GP, a finding that reflects national trends (Robertson *et al.*, 2017), which for many was an inconvenience. One participant stated:

I don't go to my doctor, unless, well I just don't go to my doctor. The few times I've tried to go it's been so impossible in the last year that I've not gone.

Indeed, a number of participants spoke of avoiding going to GP unless absolutely necessary. This reluctance was due not only to the long wait for appointments, but also the initial difficulty of getting through to their local surgery to make an appointment in the first place. One participant showed me on her phone that she had recently called over 80 times to get through to her GP surgery. Mark explained that his GP surgery had the option of attending and simply sitting and waiting for an appointment, to avoid the two to three week wait for an appointment, but that this could take an hour and a half. Instead, he had opted to pay for a private GP service on a couple of occasions but acknowledged that not everyone had this option. He said, "it might well be a way of relieving pressure off the system where rich people can't be bothered and so they pay for things routinely."

Some participants expressed concern about lack of consistency in which GP they could see. Jane, an elderly woman with serious health issues, told me that not being able to see her regular GP led to a prescription error due to the doctor being unfamiliar with her other medications. This could have had dangerous consequences had she not identified the issue herself. A number of people also spoke about issues with getting sexual health and hospital appointments, illustrating that issues with appointments were not just restricted to GPs.

Delays and cancellations to medical care were also described by a number of participants. For example, Natalie in Salford told me that she was currently waiting for a medication review, but the two week wait for an appointment meant that she would run out of anti-depressants in that time. At the hospital level, Megan explained that an operation for her son was cancelled four times. Having originally been booked for when he was eight weeks old, he did not have the operation until he was 18 months.

A number of participants described how having knowledge of how to navigate the system could make a big difference in the care patients received. For example, Hannah, who I interviewed with her husband Tom, compared their experiences of healthcare. She explained that Tom's limited experience of dealing with the NHS meant that when he started to experience a significant health issue he didn't push his doctors for a diagnosis. This meant that his wait for care was much longer than she experienced, which she attributed to his 'not knowing how to ask'. Hannah felt that her own professional experience of the health system helped her to know what to ask for and be more forward with medical professionals.

Sophie, a participant from Camden, directly attributed this inconsistency of service to spending cuts. She explained:

For people who don't know what they want, it's terrible service. Because they don't know anything and they're just trying to make cuts and they don't want to offer, you know, scans or what have you. I mean, I really had to beg for a particular scan and that sort of thing.

While these participants did not identify significant repercussions for their health, it was clear from others that delays and inconsistency of care could have very negative consequences. For Chloe, the difficulties in getting GP appointments had meant that her frequent urinary tract infections were overlooked and often went untreated. This led to infections spreading to her kidneys and blood stream, which could have been prevented by faster treatment. She added that a lack of consistency in GP care meant that the recurring nature of her infections was not investigated for three to four years after they started.

Liz in Harrow argued that delays in treatment may have contributed to her mother's death:

She'd gone into hospital, she collapsed. And they said, she needs a lung, like, a scan of her lungs, but there's no one in. We'll do it tomorrow. Three days later, she's still not had a scan. That night she died. She had an embolism in her lung, which they could have dealt with had they seen it.

Liz described the situation as 'awful' and explained that as a result of her experience with her mother and a couple of other incidents she refused to attend that particular hospital.

Another participant expressed concern for the additional risk to patients and costs to the NHS of delaying treatments. She said:

Where these people are getting worse, they are going to need more help. So, helping when they need the help in the first place and then they won't get to the stage when they are needing extreme help like hospitalisation and stuff. Because that's where the money goes; it's when they are in hospital, the drugs, the bed spaces.

#### **4.1.2 NHS employee experiences**

Participants also recognised issues with NHS funding as employees of the NHS. Michael is a freelancer employed by the NHS, who expressed frustration that his rate of pay had not increased at all in the preceding 5-6 years, resulting in a real terms pay cut over that period. Although not affected herself, another participant referred to the issues around the 2016 changes to junior doctor's pay and conditions as a point of more general concern. Significantly, awareness of this issue had prompted political participation in that she signed petitions to support the junior doctors' strikes and call for better pay and conditions.



Another participant, Adhit, described his first-hand experience of cuts in his role as an NHS dentist. Lack of recruitment, caused by a lack of finance, was mentioned as a major issue, leaving his surgery missing a dentist for nine months. He had to increase his hours by an extra day per week in order to help cover the appointments but even this was insufficient, leading to fewer appointments and increased wait times for patients. Dentists' pay was also an area of concern:

...cuts in spending is a big issue because dentists haven't had a pay rise, real terms pay rise for years. The costs increase and if your income doesn't increase it does make a difference.

Zahra also works for the NHS, in an administrative role, and has endometriosis, a long-term health condition which is exacerbated by overwork. However, she feels this is "completely overlooked" by management and that "it's like they don't care". Zahra linked her managers' attitudes to the extra pressure caused by NHS cuts, which have led to her team being understaffed and increased her workload to the point where she feels she is doing two jobs.

#### **4.1.3 Mental health services**

Mental health services were a major theme when participants discussed NHS services, with many describing delays and inaccessibility of treatment either for themselves or people they know. Melissa, who has severe depression, described the difficulties she had faced getting support through the NHS, despite being deemed a high priority case:

I was on the [mental health service] waiting list, I was on the waiting list for two years [...]. And they said, like, you're entitled to intensive support. Which is like 20 sessions one-to-one. And then I finally got a phone call saying, right we can offer you tomorrow and I said, oh I've moved to [nearby area] now. They said, oh can't offer it to you anymore because you've moved. And now I've got to go through the process in [nearby area] again.

'Falling between the cracks' in this way was a concern for a number of participants. Denise explained that her daughter was really struggling with her mental health and was on the waiting list for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). However, as a 17-year-old, she would be an adult before she reached the end of the waiting list and therefore no longer be eligible. Despite this, they were told that she could not be put on the waiting list for adult mental health support. Fortunately, there was one particular member of staff who Denise described as 'stubborn' who found a way for her to receive Cognitive Behavioural Therapy when she turned 18. For others though, this would likely have meant joining a new waiting list.

At its worst, delays in mental health care provision can be lethal. One participant explained, “I know of at least two people that have been waiting to see services and actually end up killing themselves.” Another participant acknowledged the immense pressure that medical staff are under but described the potentially dangerous consequences:

[A friend’s husband] got admitted into the [local] hospital, but they were severely understaffed, it was a complete nightmare there. She was told by a member of staff that they might not be able to prevent him committing suicide. [...] But, to hear that, that’s shocking because you think that’s a place of safety. You know, they ended up going abroad to get treatment, ended up going back to family and getting treatment somewhere else.

Seeking mental health treatment outside of the NHS was not uncommon. Many participants described either themselves or friends having to pay privately for mental health services because they were either unable to access it through the NHS or the waiting times were prohibitive. This left some reliant on family to pay for their care, such as Melissa who was fortunate enough to be supported by her brother who paid for her treatment for over a year.

For drug and alcohol addiction services, lost funding has instead put the onus on patients to fundraise for their support. Denise in Salford explained that the funding used to be ringfenced for addiction support groups, however this is no longer the case which means it has become difficult to hire rooms for meetings. People who attend are now being asked to help fundraise to cover the costs. She said, “they’ve taken the life blood out of the recovery movement.”

Others described giving up entirely on seeking help for mental health issues because of the lack of support available. For people on low incomes, opting for private alternatives to public services was rarely, if ever, an option as the costs were prohibitive. Adriana, who has complex mental health needs and lives on a low income, explained that after nine months’ wait for mental health support she was offered only group therapy, which was inappropriate for her condition. She described taking medication as the only help she could get. She said, “I feel completely abandoned.”

Matthew, a church leader who helps members of his congregation access support, described a situation where one of his parishioners was not admitted to hospital despite experiencing a mental health crisis. He felt that she was kept at home due to a lack of resources and explained:

It certainly made her worse, but it also made it worse for her husband. And those of us that were trying to give some extra care. Incredibly stressful getting telephone calls at 2 in the morning, hearing her in the background screaming, when you’re thinking why don’t they just take her into hospital?

Accessibility of treatment can be an issue even for those who are eligible for support. One participant said:

I've had another good friend of mine who was severely ill back in 2015 and they ended up in [a hospital 30 miles away] because there was no hospital local to them that could take them in. And that's the thing with mental health. If you've got a poorly arm or broken leg or something you go in a hospital that's like in your town, unless you've got a really unusual health condition. But with mental health, they just shove you anywhere. So, again, it's yeah, it's frightening, it really is.

#### **4.1.4 Family care**

For some participants, the problems caused by NHS cuts in turn create a burden on relatives of the unwell who have to pick up the slack. For example, Sandra spoke of how her mother had received regular support for her Parkinson's disease from a specialist community nurse. However, after a couple of years the nurse was moved on to a different role and was not replaced, meaning that Sandra was left to care for her mother despite having no training in how to do so. She said, "I'm not an expert. But I was the only person to deal with it. But it was really, really hard work. It really did me in a bit to be honest."

Nicole spoke of having to provide personal care for her mother, who had fallen ill, at home due to lack of support from various NHS professionals. Despite contacting her local GP surgery, 111 service and social services' rapid response team, she was told she had to care for her mother herself. Her other caring responsibilities made it difficult to provide the required support and her mother ended up having a fall and breaking her leg. Sadly, after then being admitted to hospital, her mother died two days later. Nicole reflected that:

So, it was a real shock because, compared to the care we'd had, say, 2011, 2012, you know, previous years, it was never perfect, but I always knew she'd be safe. But this felt really unsafe, there was no staff, there was issues at the doctor's surgery, there was just issues everywhere. 111 were in a state. And I don't know if that's because they can't get staff, I don't know if it's because pay has been cut, I don't know, it's just like a perfect storm that led to this total disaster. I'm not blaming austerity as such that it 'killed my mum' or whatever, but I don't think it helped, I really don't.

#### **4.1.5 Attitudes to NHS staff**

Discussion of the NHS was not only the most common area in which participants identified personal experience of negative changes to services, but also the changes most often directly

associated with spending cuts. Despite the different issues participants faced, they rarely blamed front-line NHS staff. Some mentioned 'pen pushers' or a lack of staff when attributing responsibility for issues they faced, but most talked quite specifically about lack of funding. As one participant put it:

I do realise it is frustrating [...] as a patient, but I can see from our staff who are trying to make an appointment, they don't have a choice because the resources for them are limited. They cannot create a person.

This sentiment was widely shared by participants. The NHS was the one public service where people routinely expressed unprompted concern for the impact of cuts on the staff. For example, Liz in Harrow expressed concern for her psychiatrist, who she described as overburdened due to the high number of vacancies in his team. She said:

There's just not enough staff. And because the, the hours are crazy, the workload is extreme, and they don't get paid enough. And I've got to say they don't get paid enough. I wouldn't want to deal with 100 of me a day.

Concern about pay for NHS staff was also mentioned by other people. Jane, for example, said "the NHS, the nurses and that, [the government]'re not helping them. And I mean, they're the ones that saves lives. So they should have a lot more than what they're getting."

In general, participants expressed a great deal of respect and sympathy for NHS professionals. Linda was very critical of many of the NHS services she had encountered. Nonetheless, she still felt that "the people that are actually on the ground floor doing as well as they can do, as much as they can do, are just amazing." Failures were frequently attributed to lack of funding or resources, not the staff themselves. Indeed, Denise in Salford reflected the attitudes of many when she described her local NHS service as "cash-strapped but superb."

## **4.2 Impact of cuts to education**

Along with health and overseas aid, schools were one of the few areas of public spending that were relatively protected from spending cuts under the coalition government (Lupton & Thomson, 2015). However, even with budgets protected, increases in pupil numbers and rising employment costs meant that schools saw real terms cuts of eight per cent per pupil between 2009/10 and 2019/20 (Britton et al., 2019). This has led to increasing class sizes and a 10 per cent fall in secondary school teacher numbers (Britton et al., 2019), with education geared towards value for money rather than excellence (Granoulhac, 2017). Compared to other public services, schools were mentioned relatively infrequently by participants, with a number of parents saying

they were fairly happy with their children's schools. This satisfaction is likely to be related to the relative protections that school budgets have seen. However, there were some key issues that were nonetheless raised by parents, while the accounts from two participants who worked in schools were significantly more negative.

One of the consequences of school cuts has been increasing requests to parents for financial contributions. James from London described how his children's school does frequent fundraising drives and asks for an optional monthly donation. He said, "the school is constantly asking for more money from the parents, which I think is an outrage that they should have to do that." However, he also commented that the school "are lucky because they are in a really wealthy area, so presumably they get a fair amount of money from parents who are willing to put their hand in their pocket." James' comment reflects research which finds that schools in wealthier areas attract twice the donations of more deprived areas, in both money and time (Body & Hogg, 2018).

Another related impact has been reductions in the financial support that schools are able to offer parents on lower income. For example, Megan in Salford explained that her son's school is no longer able to subsidise school trips. She noted that the school wrote to parents to explain that the changes are due to a lack of government funding. Although this was not a significant issue for her personally, she did express concern about how far the changes were going to go.

Adriana, a very politically engaged participant from Hampshire, was very concerned about the impact of cuts on her children's schooling. She told me that she used a website about school cuts to find out the cuts to her children's school and was shocked by the figures, but felt that many of the other parents were unaware of the changes. The key impact cuts had had on her family was that her son was unable to select three of the GCSEs he had been hoping to take, including German, because the funding for those subjects had been stopped by his school.

On a broader level, growing student numbers and the lack of corresponding funding meant that some schools were reducing their catchment areas. Mark explained that the school catchments in Harrow were shrinking to the point that there are 'dark patches', where homes are not in a primary school catchment area. As a result, some people are "ending up having to travel several miles to your kid's primary school and it's a run down, kind of, you know, not so great primary school." He added that this also has wider consequences, as the shrinking catchment areas are reducing house prices in the local area. However, like James, he noted that the wealth of the area and 'educationally aspirational' local residents protected the quality of the schools to some extent, including through parent involvement.

Mark also raised the increasing form intakes, with schools having to increase the number of classes to accommodate the growing numbers of pupils. Similarly, Hannah from Sheffield, who

had previously worked in a school, had seen class sizes increase up to 32 children. As a Higher Level Teaching Assistant, she was asked to teach classes of up to 30, despite not being a qualified teacher. This work included teaching children who did not speak any English and providing wider support, including sourcing food and clothes for those with very little money. Although she stressed her enjoyment of the job, she ultimately decided to leave because of the amount of work she was asked to do which resulted in high stress for relatively low pay.

Insufficient funding for teaching support staff was also raised by Dan, a maths teacher from Sheffield. At his secondary school, he found they lacked the necessary support for teaching children with a statement of need. These statements are for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), but Dan explained that the associated funding is not sufficient to pay for the support staff these students require. He added, “one teaching support staff can cover four or five people who need one-to-one tuition”. Similarly, Michelle in Salford’s daughter was diagnosed with ADHD, however, she said “we found quite late on that she had it because the school just weren’t – because they hadn’t got enough people SEND trained to do it.”

For children without statements or learning difficulties, the lack of staff can still have repercussions for learning. Dan described how increasing class sizes combined with lack of teaching support was affecting students ability to learn:

Ideally a bottom set should probably be around 15; and you are starting to push 25. And, when you’ve got 23-plus with a special educational need and you are the only member of staff in a room, it’s just not manageable. Students don’t make progress in those environments.

Despite this need for more teaching staff, many schools have been facing cuts to staffing numbers. Dan’s experience of this has been extensive: “I’m a Maths teacher and they are saying Maths is specifically in demand. So, I’ve been teaching five years and I’ve just gone through my fourth round of redundancies.” His own job has remained safe because, as a comparatively inexperienced teacher, he is on a lower rate of pay than many of his more established colleagues. He explained further:

There’s just not enough money. So, we had, I think it was two months ago now, the Head gave a speech the staff were in, which point blank said, 70% of the staff are at the top of the pay scale; you are too expensive. Okay, so there’s all that wealth of experience that is just, they are wanting to replace. So, the school I was at previously, they actively sought to remove or force out teachers that were earning too much.

One of Dan’s concerns about these job losses was the loss of experience that accompanies these redundancies. Many newer teachers are less efficient and skilled, yet they are asked to take on

more senior teaching roles, which means they quickly become out of their depth. Dan attributed the growing teacher drop-out rate to this increasing workload and estimated that around 10 per cent of the teaching staff at his school were off work with stress at any one time.

However, beyond funding reductions, there were also broader changes to education under the coalition government. Academies were introduced by Labour in the early 2000s allowing secondary schools to be run by sponsors, such as businesses or voluntary bodies. Academies are funded centrally and given considerably more autonomy, including not being required to follow the national curriculum (West & Wolfe, 2018). This programme was expanded considerably under the coalition government, including to primary schools and some private schools, and chains of schools run by major sponsors were established. By 2019 65 per cent of secondary schools and 15 per cent of primary schools had become academies (Eyles & Machin, 2019).

Danielle was very positive about the academy that her son attended:

for me, personally, I think it's a good thing because they can share the profits around a few other schools and they do a lot of charities and they generate their own money and they're not reliant so much on local authorities funding. So I don't know, they can use their own initiatives to raise money and spend it how they feel, what their school needs based on the actual kids that go to that school.

However, the academy system is not without its critics. As a teacher in an academy, Dan objected to the lack of oversight from the government in academy spending and questioned how the funding is used. His perception was that many academies missed out on funding because a lot of the money goes towards the salary of the school's Chief Educational Officer (CEO). He explained that at his previous school the CEO had earned £230,000 per year, which is significantly higher than the average Head Teacher salary of £73,500 (Department of Education, 2021). His preference would be to work at a state school, but he did not feel that this was an option because the majority of schools in Sheffield were academies.

Schools are not the only area of education affected by austerity. In further education, funding fell by 12 per cent per student between 2011/12 and 2018/19 and teacher recruitment and retention is a significant issue, with 90 per cent of colleges struggling to fill posts in 2016/17 (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Tuition fees for higher education were tripled under the coalition government, from £3,000 per year to £9,000, while maintenance grants for those on low incomes were replaced with additional loans (Chalari and Sealey, 2017). Among participants, rises in tuition fees were the most commonly cited problem. Sarah and Sophie both referred to rising tuition fees in connection with their engagements with the student protest movement, while a

couple of others mentioned the end of nursing bursaries. Steven from Sheffield expressed concern for students now finishing university with high debts:

When I went to university you got a grant that you didn't have to pay off. So all these people that are making the laws for you young people had a privileged education, they didn't have to pay this money back. Got people like yourself and students coming out with huge debts.

Deborah also expressed concern about whether her grandchildren would be able to afford to go to university. However, not all reflections on higher education were critical. Mark expressed support for the tuition fee structure, but shared that this view is very negatively received by friends and acquaintances online:

I generally get called a Nazi or a wanker for saying that tuition fees are actually a reasonably good structure and it kind of works. And if you want to restructure it as a graduate tax then that's fine too, but, yes getting rid of the grant wasn't a great idea, but it's... No! Bastard!

Only one participant, Chloe from Salford, raised further education as an issue. Having had a child at 19, she explained how she had benefitted from an access course at her local college when her daughter started school. The course was free to anyone under the age of 23 and enabled her to get a place at university to study social work. She had also done evening courses in health and social care while her daughter was a baby. However, she explained that the access course was no longer available at her college, so if you wished to take it you now had to travel across Salford, which she said she would not have done. This reluctance was partly due to the travel involved and also because the course is now run in a very smart area of Salford where she feels 'out of place'.

Of the policy areas discussed in this chapter, education arguably has the smallest reach as it affects children, their parents and adults in further or higher education. However, the repercussions are widespread as, for example, cuts to further education limit the opportunities for those in work or, indeed, out of work who might seek further training. Additionally, the impact of cuts on those who work in education are significant, as demonstrated by the challenges faced by participants Dan and Hannah. Education is another public service where income affects experiences, with money affording the opportunity to donate to schools, reduce the impact of student debts and access private education.



## 4.3 Impact of cuts to policing and the criminal justice system

In contrast to the NHS and education, the Ministry of Justice has seen some of the highest cuts to any government department, having been cut by 25 per cent by 2020 (Sturge & Lipscombe, 2020). This led to a crown court backlog of 37,400 cases in December 2019 (Dearden, 2020), while numbers of police officers fell from around 172,000 in 2010 to around 150,000 in 2018 (Allen & Harding, 2021). Cuts were accompanied by sweeping changes to probation services, which a damning report by the National Audit Office (2019) argued had failed to meet both its targets and wider objectives. The private sector contracts set up as part of these reforms have since been abandoned, at an estimated additional cost of £467 million (ibid).

### 4.3.1 Policing

Unsurprisingly, policing was an issue that was raised by many participants, however experiences ranged from little to no impact of austerity to increasingly serious safety concerns. A lack of ‘bobbies on the beat’ was frequent theme across all four areas, but some participants felt that this was more of an issue for a feeling of security, rather than an actual risk of increased crime. For example, Denise in Salford said:

Now in most circumstances, bobbies on the beat don't have a huge impact on crime but if you had more bobbies spare they might able to do a more targeted thing to bust something... But people's perception of their police force is that if they see police they feel safer.

In wealthier areas, the lack of police presence was not seen as a significant issue. When talking about the closure of the local police station, Mark in London appeared quite indifferent. He said, “quite why people don't feel as secure without it, I don't know, but I think it was sort of a point of, I dunno, symbolism.” However, within London the experiences of crime varied significantly, with those living on council estates much more concerned. For example, Liz spoke of a stabbing and shooting on her local estate. Although she told me she was not worried for her own safety, she was very concerned about her children getting caught up in gang violence and felt that the situation was getting worse. She said, “I think it's got more serious and now kids are carrying knives because they're scared, and if you got it you're more likely to use it.”

Similarly, Matthew from London spoke of an increase in gang violence that he has seen through his volunteer work at a youth charity that works with gangs. When I asked whether he felt that growing violence was related to austerity, he told me that gang violence is a complex picture, but “financial provision that's well placed can go an awful long way to mitigating against gang involvement and catching people even earlier, at primary school.” He concluded that austerity has

played a part through the closure of youth clubs and other youth provision through schools. He found that charities and community organisations were having to “take up the slack because council services have been cut to the bone.”

In Salford, participants said that graffiti and antisocial behaviour had been increasing, which some also attributed to a lack of services for young people. When I asked Natalie in Salford if crime had increased in her area, she responded:

Yeah, it has. You know, all like graffiti and antisocial behaviour, you can really, really see it. It's not very nice here at night, and the day it's all right but at night, just kind of groups of kids and stuff. Because they've got nowhere to go. It's kind of that standard thing, isn't it? All the youth clubs are closing and the kid centres. Shame. You have to make the best of things. But not, it's not that easy sometimes is it, if you're really down?

Adriana in Hampshire was also concerned about crime on her street due to lack of visible police patrol. Like Liz, she was especially concerned for her teenage son after boys were attacked on her street twice in one week. She said, “it does make you feel unsafe for sure.” However, she summed this up as “only one little incident”, adding that:

There's been so many muggings and break-ins into cars and I've had, personally, somebody stole a van outside of my house and then drove it into my car a couple of metres down. Yeah, that happened right in my street in broad daylight.

Unfortunately, these issues were not unusual and the issues with policing went beyond a lack of visible police presence. Many participants spoke of how unresponsive the police were to burglary and theft calls. Linda in Hampshire said:

You just hear of people that have reported a break-in actually in progress and get someone round quickly and they don't. And it's all because they haven't got the manpower and that's because they haven't got the money to employ the people that are needed.

Chloe in Salford explained how her father did not report his tools getting stolen from his work van because he felt there was nothing they could do. She said, “I think they are that stretched and that under-staffed they'd only go to like the more serious ones.” However, even then she did not have confidence they would be responsive in more serious cases, adding “I wouldn't have faith that, you know, like if I was getting burgled that they would like, they would be there straight away.”

The fear that the police would not respond was true of some participants. Tom in Sheffield spoke of a recent time when he was in his house while thieves tried to steal his motorbike. The police

did not come to the house when he called, even though the thieves were still there, and again did not appear when he called again when they returned later that day. It was only days later once his wife had emailed their local MP and the local paper ran an article about it that the police did come round. He explained that this incident had created a huge amount of stress: “it’s caused some major problems. Especially with my mental health, because I was, it was at half past twelve in the afternoon.”

Similar to Adriana, Dan in Sheffield had his car damaged after it was hit by the getaway car from a burglary on his street. He was required to report the incident in person at a police station, but had to travel into the city centre despite there being a police station round the corner from his house. He was told that this station had closed their service desk due to cuts. When I asked if he was concerned by recent burglaries in his area, he said “I went and bought a burglar alarm so, it worried me enough to do that.”

Even when police are responsive, Laura told me that there are few repercussions for the people committing the crimes. She told me that in three months there had been four break-ins at the local Scout hut along with many local businesses which she attributed to the “lack of any sort of community policing.” She went on, “they are encouraged by crime because nothing happens when – even when they get caught nothing happens. They know who it is who is breaking into the Scout hut, they’ve got them on CCTV but they won’t prosecute them.” Elisabeth, a criminal defence lawyer agreed, saying that young people who committed crimes were previously brought before Youth Courts and spoken to by experienced youth justices. However, now they are increasingly diverted out of the criminal justice system but without any meaningful consequences, so she feels they are emboldened. She explained, “they know there aren’t enough police. They know that the resources to properly bring cases together aren’t there and so it’s an absolute – we are heading towards a lawless state and the whole thing is being absolutely white-washed.”

Laura had looked at the crime statistics for her area and noticed that crime rates had roughly tripled over the last four years. As a result of the increasing crime in her area, Laura has decided to move away despite having lived there her whole life, out of concern about her son walking around or getting the bus alone when he is older.

#### **4.3.2 Justice system**

Cuts to the Ministry of Justice have had consequences beyond community policing. Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service saw cuts of around 30 per cent to its annual resource departmental expenditure limit between 2010/11 and 2015/16. Legal aid also fell 29 per cent between 2010/11 and 2018-19, in part due to legal aid provision being stopped for the majority of civil legal matters (Sturge et al., 2019).

Elisabeth in Sheffield is a criminal defence lawyer, who works with clients who receive legal aid. She spoke at length about the impact of cuts to courts, legal aid and policing, having seen how it affects her work and the lives of her clients.

One of the major changes has been court closures. Between 2010 and 2020, 51 per cent of magistrate's courts in England and Wales closed (House of Commons Library, 2020). For Elisabeth, the closure of the court in Rotherham has meant that her staff and clients had to relocate work and court attendances, with significant consequences. She felt that "access to justice in that area has been quite significantly restricted" and people have been left feeling disenfranchised. One of the main reasons that court closures has been challenging is that it makes it much more difficult for defendants, victims and witnesses to attend court hearings. As a consequence, police are now required to transport people to court, which puts extra pressure on them when they are already under-resourced. She explained that before the court closure, many of the people required to attend would have been able to walk there.

The majority of the defendants she works with are benefits claimants. As a result, universal credit has contributed to these difficulties, as many people who are now on lower incomes are no longer able to afford to go to court. She explained:

We get lots of people who can't physically afford to come to court because we are often dealing with people for whom a £5 bus fare is a significant part of their weekly income. I often deal with people who don't have a weekly income, particularly since Universal Credit has been rolled out, there is an austerity issue. I've got people who have been sanctioned, sometimes for months on end; so, I have people with no benefits, with no local court, they can't walk to court anymore, therefore they don't get to court; therefore, they are brought to court by the police.

The additional time that police spend transporting people to court, made Elisabeth question whether the spending cuts had actually resulted in any savings. She said, "in theory it was a cost-cutting exercise. Whether or not there has been very cost saving I would be very interested to know actually, yeah." The evidence on this is unclear, as it is difficult to calculate where costs have increased as a result of savings elsewhere, but the House of Commons Justice Select Committee has also questioned whether the cuts have achieved value for money for taxpayers. Evidence does suggest that legal aid cuts represent a false economy, as legal aid can reduce costs elsewhere. Indeed, £60 million spent on legal aid is estimated to save over £300 million on other services (Speak Up for Justice, 2016).

While Elisabeth works closely with the defendants, there are also significant repercussions for the victims or witnesses of crimes. For many people, the cuts to police and courts means that accessing justice is much harder than it used to be, with hurdles at each stage of the process:

It's not just people that I defend, it is people in their communities who are seeking justice, who take the time to go along to the police; who find that there isn't anyone who can take a report. Or, if there is someone who can take a report, they often no longer have the time and the energy to put together a proper case file. And then you get things to court and people can't get there, they can't travel across South Yorkshire to get to court to give evidence as witnesses. Worse than that, since we've not had adequate staffing court cases, trials have been double and triple and quadruple listed, which means that you will get people who don't have a huge amount of cash, who come to court, time and time and time again to give evidence. And, by the time it comes to the second, third, fourth listing, of course, no one can be bothered.

Since the reporting of crimes is increasingly difficult, combined with the complex and expensive process of going to court, convictions are now difficult to achieve. Frequently, cases are presented at court that are unwinnable due to missing evidence or other oversights, but they are required to go ahead anyway. Elisabeth explained that witnesses are then required to face cross-examination for cases that cannot be proven due to a lack of time and money for those preparing the cases. She described this as "an absolute nightmare" for victims of crime and added, "justice isn't being done in this country anymore at all."

Another challenge is that legal aid is increasingly difficult to access through the family courts, which makes it difficult for victims of domestic violence who should be entitled to this support. As a result, they are more likely to go through the criminal justice system, which is 'creaking' because it is overwhelmed with cases. Michelle in Salford told me she had experienced this personally, "I'm trying to go through a divorce at the moment but I can't get legal aid for my divorce, unless I've been physically beaten by my ex-partner. Yes, there was emotional and mental abuse but it was never really reported to the police, so there's no record." She explained that going through her divorce had so far cost her "a great deal of money" but that now without an income as a result of her ill health she was "stuffed".

Another consequence of legal aid cuts is that solicitors are no longer able to help people who are unable to pay for their legal services. Elisabeth explained that in the past solicitors would commonly try to help anyone who came to them, as there was enough funding in the system that they were willing and able to work for free at times. Legal aid solicitors are also taking on privately paid work more often to boost their incomes, which means they are less available to help those unable to pay.

Legal aid firms in rural areas are closing down due to a lack of funds, which means that there are areas where people cannot access help. This has created so called ‘legal aid deserts’ where, for example, in England and Wales 78 per cent of local authorities do not have a community care legal aid provider and over half do not provide housing legal aid (The Law Society, 2021b). These deserts most affect vulnerable people, as these services are accessed by people who receive care or are at risk of homelessness, respectively.

In addition, newly qualified solicitors are not choosing to become legal aid lawyers because of the lack of funding, which is meaning that there is a shortage of people in the field. As a result, the profession is ageing, with an average age of 47 by 2018. There are certain areas of the country where over 60 per cent of solicitors are over 50, meaning that their expertise will be lost in five to ten years leaving people without access to legal advice (The Law Society, 2021a). Elisabeth also fears that this will eventually result in a shortage of judges, as they are often recruited from those working in legal aid. She summed up her experience: “it is almost infinite the impact that austerity has had on my work and the people that I deal with. If you look at it in five years, ten years, fifteen years’ time, where is it going to go?”

#### **4.4 Impact of cuts to waste disposal services**

While in many cases the impact has been low, refuse collection is an area of public service provision that affects almost everyone. Increasing numbers of local authorities have reduced the frequency of household bin collections and by 2019 only one in six councils offered weekly collections (England & Bradshaw, 2019). A few participants in each area raised household bin collections as an issue when asked about their experiences of public services, although there were important differences in the experiences between areas.

In Hampshire, participants were the least affected by cuts to bin collections. Jane expressed concerns about possible future reductions in services, while Deborah felt that the recycling was very limited in her area, but no other participants mentioned waste as an issue. Participants from London were similarly little affected, although some did object to their local council introducing a charge for the collection of garden waste. Fly-tipping was mentioned by a few people in London, which was more problematic. Matthew attributed the increase in fly-tipping to the closure of the local dump, which meant that people had to travel much further to dispose of waste.

Fly-tipping was a more significant issue in Salford and Sheffield, which was also attributed to reductions in the opening hours of local tips. Natalie in Salford frequently has issues with fly-tipping in her local area, along with people setting fire to rubbish, and there are delays in the council responding. She explained, “it’s bigger things like fridges and beds and it’s a lot more

dangerous. But does go but it takes a while.” In Sheffield, Danielle has had her waste bin collection reduced to once every three weeks, which she said has encouraged her to recycle more, but has found the general waste smells increasingly unpleasant. Another participant, Angela, helps to organise local litter picks, but without enough bins in which to dispose of the rubbish they have been told by the council that leaving bin bags of collected waste by park bins amounts to fly-tipping. She said, “we’re doing their job by collecting litter, leaving it tied up and then they are saying, that’s really good of you, but that could be classed as fly-tipping because you are leaving the rubbish.”

Although the issues with waste disposal were seemingly more significant in the northern areas, in general this nonetheless appeared to be a small concern for the majority of participants.

## **4.5 Impact of cuts to road maintenance**

As with bin collections, road maintenance is likely to affect the majority of people as drivers, cyclists or pedestrians. However, road maintenance was typically raised as an issue by those who were less personally affected by austerity, which suggests that potholes are a more salient issue for those who have fewer and/or better interactions with public services.

In London, participants were positive about the road conditions, with James attributing this to living in a wealthy suburb. However, Dan in Sheffield found that potholes are a significant issue for him as a cyclist and the council has been very slow making repairs, with the resurfacing of one road taking around eight months. In Hampshire, the problems were either more significant or more salient. As in Sheffield, many people complained that the council was slow to make repairs to the roads. A few participants described damage to their cars from driving through potholes, including to the tracking and tyres which needed to be repaired.

Inadequate gritting of the roads during cold weather was also raised by a few participants, in some cases with serious consequences. Adhit had an accident in his car due to ice on the road, while Sarah saw a number of accidents outside of her house:

It snowed really badly last March and on my road, I saw, from my window in the space of an hour, like 4 crashes. And they were only minor because it was quite slow. But my road hadn’t been properly gritted [...] It was just ridiculous. It was like crash, crash, crash, skid. And actually, that’s quite dangerous.

However, in Salford no participants mentioned issues with the roads. It is unlikely that this is due to significantly better maintenance, as Dan from Sheffield explained, “I used to live in Manchester before that and there – they have a somewhat lack lustre service on the roads I think.” It is more

plausible that participants from Salford were less likely to discuss road maintenance because it was comparatively trivial to many of the other public service cuts they had experienced.

## 4.6 Conclusion

The services discussed in this chapter were chosen because they are used by the majority of people, meaning that the impact of cuts to these services might be expected to be fairly equally felt across participants. In some cases this was largely true, for example GP services were difficult to access across all four locations and across demographics. Most people had experienced difficulties and, in the worst cases, cuts to GPs and hospitals led to serious errors and treatment delays which some participants felt had contributed to the deaths of loved ones. Not all participants had experienced issues, but there was nonetheless an almost random 'postcode lottery' sense to some of the findings, with stories of people in nearby areas having completely different experiences despite similar levels of affluence.

However, in many cases, cuts to health, education, policing and local government appeared to have a disproportionate impact on certain demographics. In some cases, this was simply due to higher incomes affording protection against the biggest challenges posed by cuts. Having the resources to access private healthcare, donate to the local school or move to an area with lower crime considerably reduced the impact of austerity on participants. Similarly, cuts to legal aid, court closures and reductions in policing disproportionately affects those claiming benefits and on low incomes.

The differences between participants' experiences are not just related to finances, however. Those with disabilities and complex health needs, including mental health issues, were much more likely to have experienced difficulties in accessing healthcare. Despite healthcare being a relatively universal public service, it is sadly inevitable that those on low incomes suffer more from cuts, because poverty is the strongest predictor of poor health and early death (Dorling, 2015).

Caring responsibilities inevitably placed extra burden on many participants and cuts to healthcare provision and schools were felt acutely by carers, as well as those requiring care. In schools, students with learning difficulties have less support available to them, which increases the burden on teachers and has negative repercussions for all students.

There was also marked geographical variation in provision of some services, particularly those provided by local authorities. Waste disposal was a more serious concern in the two more deprived areas, Sheffield and Salford, with higher instances of fly tipping and less frequent waste collections. In terms of roads, poor maintenance appeared to be more of an issue in the affluent



areas, but this may be due to increased salience there as people had experienced fewer austerity related issues in general. Geographical variation in crime levels, which is often related to levels of deprivation, meant that people in the north typically experienced more issues with crime. Those on lower incomes in Hampshire and London were, however, more likely to discuss crime as a concern than wealthier people in the same areas. This may be indicative of so called 'nested deprivation', where high deprivation is found in a small area 'nested' within a larger affluent area (Boswell *et al.*, 2020).

Overall, this chapter paints a picture of unequal effects of austerity, with those most disadvantaged in society typically bearing the brunt of the cuts. Despite these services being used by almost everyone, the effects of the cuts are not balanced due to variations in the extent to which they are relied upon by different groups. Inequality has long been considered a serious challenge for many wealthy countries (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Dorling, 2015; Marmot *et al.*, 2020) and this chapter demonstrates that austerity has only increased inequalities in the UK. These data provide strong evidence that resources such as money, good health and living in an affluent area strongly influences experiences of austerity.

## Chapter 5 Impact of austerity on the minority

This thesis explores the extent to which the theories of policy feedback, grievances and civic voluntarism can together explain why there has not been a stronger political response from the British public to austerity. Policy feedback argues that the way politicians, the media and other elites speak about policies influences the way the public understands them, but also how they view themselves and their political efficacy (Przeworski, 1985; Skocpol, 1995). As such, the government narratives around austerity as necessary and unavoidable may have encouraged the public to regard austerity as pointless to oppose.

Grievance theory claims that grievances provoke political participation because people are mobilised by discontent with the political situation (Scheufele, Skanakan and Kim, 2002; Kriesi, 2014; Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). In the case of austerity, those who are fairly unaffected will thus not be motivated to participate as they are more likely to be either indifferent to or even satisfied with the policy and therefore do not have a grievance to communicate.

Finally, the theory of civic voluntarism claims that resources are crucial for political participation because engaging in politics typically requires at least some time, money and good health (Schlozman, Burns and Verba, 1994; Lijphart, 1997; Perea, 2002; Mattila *et al.*, 2013; Gollust and Rahn, 2015). The ability to participate in politics has arguably been damaged by austerity because it has undermined these resources for the most vulnerable people (McGrath, Griffin and Mundy, 2015; Mckenzie, 2015; BMA board of science, 2016; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Hall, 2019b). Understanding the impact of cuts on people's resources will be the central question of this chapter.

To answer the question of why the public's response to austerity has been somewhat muted, it is important to understand what people's experiences of cuts have been. The previous chapter therefore examined the impact that cuts have had on services used by most people in England. It argued that despite these services being fairly universal in nature, it is typically the most vulnerable people who have been hardest hit but the effects of austerity on these services. Now, to explore these inequalities in more depth, this chapter will consider those services that are only used by select people.

Looking at benefit reforms, as well as cuts to social care and libraries, this chapter will demonstrate that the impact of cuts has been extremely serious for those living in poverty and/or using social care. It is important to understand the effects of these cuts in particular because reductions in welfare amount to reductions in resources for the most vulnerable. As these people are typically least likely to engage in politics (Lijphart, 1997), evidence that their resources are being depleted suggests that they will be increasingly likely to withdraw from political

participation. Therefore, analysis of the impact of cuts to the services they need most provides important context to understanding their opinions of and political engagement with austerity, which will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

An additional contribution of this chapter is to better understand the impact of cuts on service providers. Chapter 4 showed that those working in healthcare and education were struggling hugely with the additional pressures created by smaller budgets, despite these being relatively protected areas of public spending. Section 5.2.1 below explores in depth the experience of those working in social care, who are typically on low wages and poor working conditions. A key theme across this chapter is one of ‘the poor helping the poor’. This is perhaps an oversimplification, as only a few of the services providers interviewed could be considered to be living in poverty, but stories of hardship, overwork and low pay are common among those working to help the most vulnerable.

The first section of this chapter explores the impact of benefits reforms. The seriousness of the difficulties participants in receipt of benefits face provides a stark contrast with those who are not affected by such cuts. The second section describes how participants have been affected by reductions in funding for social services and children’s centres. Finally, the third section examines the impact of cuts to libraries. Although libraries are a service available to the general population, they are typically used by the most disadvantaged people and, as participant Angela explains, are increasingly required to provide social services. As such, this section is included in this chapter as thematically it fits closely with discussions of benefits and social care reforms. The chapter concludes by drawing out the key themes from across these policy areas and compares the findings with those of Chapter 4.

## **5.1 Impact of benefits reforms**

Major benefit reforms were introduced by the coalition government with the aim of simplifying the system and incentivising people to start or increase their paid work (Department for Work and Pensions, 2015). These reforms included a benefits cap, more stringent and frequent testing for disability benefits and housing benefit penalties for under-occupation, known as the ‘bedroom tax’ (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). Benefit spending saw a gross cut of nearly £25 billion by 2015 which was masked by increased pension spending in the overall departmental budget (Hood and Phillips, 2015). These changes do not affect the majority of the population, but there are nonetheless a significant number of people who claim benefits. By February 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 3.9 million people were claiming either Personal Independence Payments (PIP) or Disability Living Allowance (DLA), while 2.9 million were claiming Universal Credit (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020a).

### 5.1.1 Universal Credit

Universal Credit was introduced in 2013 as part of the benefits reforms to consolidate six pre-existing means-tested benefits and tax credits, including Job Seeker's Allowance (Millar and Bennett, 2017). Unsurprisingly, a minority of participants were in receipt of benefits, although some of those who were not did have prior experience of the benefits system. However, for many of those who did receive benefits, the consequences of being moved to Universal Credit has been particularly stark.

One participant, Maria, spoke of how the £73 per week she receives in Universal Credit has left her unable to buy sufficiently nutritious food. The food intolerances she has, caused by the disabilities that prevent her from working, mean that she is unable to eat a satisfactory vegetarian diet. However, she is unable to afford meat regularly enough to get adequate nutrition that way. Instead, she is reliant on vegetables and carbohydrates for most of her meals, which make her bloat and put on weight. She said, "by the end of the month it's like pasta and rice and very little else." Maria also experienced difficulties with affording other essentials. She said that she buys her clothes from charity shops but can't afford to buy new underwear or to get her hair cut. For four years she has been unable to afford to buy her grandchildren birthday or Christmas gifts.

A few participants also spoke of the distress caused by having DLA taken away and replaced with PIP, only to have their claims refused despite both having chronic health conditions for which they had previously been awarded life-long DLA. Maria expressed her frustration that the person who assessed her claim for disability benefits under Universal Credit declared her fit for work, despite being the same person that had granted her life-long DLA under the previous system.

Other participants described the difficulties their friends and families had faced in claiming benefits. One participant described how her daughter and son-in-law were taken to court over a benefits claim for their seriously disabled son. However, at the time they were expecting a second child and the court date happened to fall on the baby's due date. When they explained that they were not able to attend, the parents were told that the father was still required to attend court. He decided not to do so, despite the risk that they would then not be eligible for the benefits, because his priority was on the birth of his second child. Despite their non-attendance in court the benefits were granted. The participant said, "the judge overruled everything and said that the case should never have got as far as him. That all the evidence that you have to provide should have been enough." Such situations are not uncommon, as multiple participants spoke of being granted benefits after appeals in cases where it seems unclear why they were initially refused. Similarly, Melissa, whose medical evidence was ignored in the initial application, was subsequently granted benefits and told "you should never have been put in this position".

Liz, a participant from Harrow, explained how she had been accused of benefit fraud due to an error by someone who helped her to fill in her benefits application. She was taken to court, which she was required to attend eight times despite her solicitor failing to attend court on two occasions. Liz found the experience distressing, made worse by poor legal advice given by her legal aid solicitor. She pleaded guilty on the advice that she risked going to jail for 6 months if she didn't, yet the judge described the recommendations for a curfew, electronic tag and 300 hours of community service as 'ridiculous'. She was ordered to repay the overpaid benefits but received no other penalties.

Participants expressed their frustration at the difficulties benefits appeals cause. The initial rejection of the application for Universal Credit put some people in significant financial difficulty, including being forced to rely on emergency payments, which have to be repaid, and food banks. But the application and appeals process can also be harmful in itself. Melissa, spoke of how she became depressed and was unable to even open letters regarding benefits, meaning her support lapsed until a friend took over and contacted the support services on her behalf. This has been a recurring issue, so that any communications regarding Universal Credit have become problematic for her mental health:

Anything to do with benefits, literally, I can't, like my support worker has to talk to them, because it almost triggers something from last time. Just the thought of doing it, I just kind of curl up in a ball and think I can't do it.

The process proved so difficult that this participant lost all faith in the system. She said:

I think there's just a culture I think, when you have to justify your disability a hundred times even though you've got medical letters, it's almost like they want to humiliate you and punish you for being disabled. [...] It's just the system's shit. It really is. It is, I mean, I've come close to wanting to end it all more than once, directly as a result of Universal Credit.

Among those talking about benefits changes, the emotional toll the process takes on claimants was a recurring theme. Participants spoke of being looked down on by Job Centre staff and made to feel that they should not be there. Amy, who lived in Camden, described how she felt humiliated attending the job centre as a university graduate. She struggled with these feelings, aware that she was "not better than anyone" else at the job centre, but also felt that there was a culture of blame towards universal credit applicants. She said it felt like "if you don't get a job you're – you're to blame basically. You did something wrong". Another participant simply said "I have never been treated so awful." Discussing the DWP, Liz said:

They treated me like I was a parasite and only out for what I could get. And there was nothing wrong with me. I was a liar. That was their default setting, that anything I said was a lie. And you're like, why? Because I'd come for help?

These findings mirror those of Redman and Fletcher (2021). They argue that the increase in stigma around welfare under the coalition government has “facilitated the production and delivery of institutional violence on the front-line of service delivery” (Redman and Fletcher, 2021, p. 17). Where their research focuses on the impact of reforms from the perspective of DWP workers, my data show the human cost to the benefits claimants subject to the ‘inhumane’ reforms.

Another participant explained that a friend had her mobility car and Blue Badge parking permit taken away, despite having severe mobility issues. She “bought herself a car in the end, which she couldn’t really afford”. But the participant explained that without a Blue Badge allowing her to park in a disabled bay, on one occasion “she couldn’t really get out of the car and get where she was going. So, she just sat in the car and wept.” The emotional harm that benefits reforms have had on many claimants has important implications for political participation because, as will be discussed further in section 7.4.1, it can hinder people’s motivation to express their views.

For some people, the benefits application process was a hindrance to even applying for support. Sophie did not apply for disability benefits when she experienced serious problems with her back because she did not think she had any chance of being awarded benefits. She said, “according to the tests I was definitely completely fit to work which I definitely just wasn’t.” This left her on a very low income because she had previously been self-employed, which left her without the option of statutory sick pay.

As with accessing healthcare, successful benefits claims often relied on having a good knowledge of the system as well as particular skills and resources. A number of participants mentioned the technical challenges of applying for universal credit. Steven said, “The whole thing is really geared to people who are good with computers, it’s all online. So if you’re not any good with the computer you’re in big trouble to get your money.” There was also a financial aspect to the online nature of benefits claims. Michelle told me that she didn’t have a computer: “we’ve got to rely on using our phone and going to the library now. If our phone conks out or dies, we’re stuffed because we can’t basically do anything, can we?”

Angela works in a library and told me how welfare claimants would come in and ask for her help in using the computer to apply. She explained how challenging it could be to help people:

I’ve actually been on a course with the job centre, and it was more or less how to not be helpful, which astounded us. [...] They even spoke about a time when a man had got no

hands and they wouldn't even do it for him. They had to approve him on a phone and somebody in a call centre had to do it for him. Because the thing is, if you [as a member of staff] do it wrong, then you click a button and they might get some sanctions. You know, they're putting their life in your hands.

Church leader Matthew has helped a number of people from his congregation with the appeals process when their PIP claims were rejected. His literacy skills and proficiency with forms enabled him to provide support to those who were less able to manage the application process. He described how one case was about to be taken to a tribunal, but he advocated for them by "quoting the law" and demonstrated that the points they had been awarded in their assessment meant they were eligible for PIP. Without this intervention, they would have been facing bankruptcy and losing their home. Matthew described the benefits reforms as "really heartless and poorly thought through" and expressed strong frustration at the expectation of education and literacy for applicants:

[The government] often seem to have no real understanding of, I think they assume literacy, they assume people are comfortable with forms, that they're mentally well, that they've got everything together. As soon as a few of those factors are removed, if you're not literate or you struggle or you're mentally not holding it together, the whole system falls apart because it's not there to help you.

Liz, having previously been taken to court accused of benefits fraud, also felt that the application forms were needlessly complex and paid a local charity for assistance in filling them in. She said:

I'm sure they make it as hard as possible, because you read the question and it's not written in a clear, concise manner. It seems to be written to be as double, you know, as many different meanings as possible. And put in such a way that they're actually trying to get you to say no when you should be saying yes. You know, I have noticed that the forms have not get any easier over the years. They have got worse. You know, it's like if they find any little thing to stop you receiving money, they will.

Having access to practical but also financial support was crucial for many people, though many were reluctant to ask their friends or family for the help they needed. Amanda in Salford knew that her parents would help her if she fell into financial difficulty but said "I'm 47 and I've been living independently and I don't want my parents stepping in and rescuing me."

Even when the participants are in receipt of benefits, the changes under Universal Credit including the benefits cap mean that recipients are significantly worse off than they used to be. Melissa explained that she is £160 per month worse off than she was under the previous system, despite having eventually been granted the same kind of support and her circumstances remaining

unchanged. The pressure on her finances is considerable and she says she can see herself having to use food banks again in the future. Again, this has a significant emotional toll which goes beyond just the effect on the claimant themselves. Melissa described how her teenage daughter struggled at school due to the social pressure of not being able to afford school trips and comparing herself with much wealthier peers. Her daughter attempted suicide “as a direct result of being a young carer and of the finances”. Inevitably, this also had repercussions for her own wellbeing. She said, “I used to do this for a job to help people and now I can’t cope with my life because I haven’t got enough money. And then you feel like a terrible parent.”

Many participants spoke of benefits negatively affecting their mental health. When having to sign on, Maria said she felt hassled and even frightened. Others spoke of feeling “abandoned”, “worthless” and “useless”. Michelle explained how inconsistent universal credit payments have created significant stress and further money worries. She said, “it is very stressful because, obviously, when they are leaving you without money, they are throwing us open to more and more debt.” Instead of offering a safety net, welfare increasing acts as a source of additional stress and financial insecurity.

### **5.1.2 Food banks**

Food bank usage has been a well-publicised consequence of the benefits reforms. The number of food parcels given out by the Trussell Trust increasing from 61,000 in 2010/11 to 1,583,000 in 2018/19, with 86 per cent of people using food banks on state benefits (Sosenko et al., 2019).

Access to food banks is not straight forward as many require a referral or voucher and it is not necessarily clear what support is available to welfare claimants. Melissa explained that the money she received in universal credit was not enough to pay all her bills but, even as a former social worker, she was not aware of the support she was entitled to:

[The council] had to give me, like, voucher things, which again no one tells you exist. It was only because I broke down and just said like, I haven’t got gas and electric, I haven’t got food, that they said, right, we’ll give you some. But they don’t tell people that they can.

Church leader Matthew explained that his church had a small, informal food bank that didn’t require referrals, but instead supported members of the congregation. Many of their food recipients were on benefits or were in a position where their immigration status meant they were not entitled to benefits. Food was supplied through donations from the congregation and shared on a weekly basis, which is more frequent than is permitted for users of Trussell Trust food banks.



An important aspect of this service for Matthew was that they had built up friendships with those receiving the food, allowing for more personal support based on trust.

Steven in Sheffield expressed concern over the quality of food he had received at a food bank. He said it was nearly all tinned food, with little fresh except sometimes bread, and had got sick from eating some tinned food which he later realised was out of date.

Other participants did not use food banks but had used other food services such as meal centres or food delivery service. Natalie in Salford said she often ordered parcels of leftover food from local supermarkets and shops, such as Greggs, through a local delivery service, which provided food for two people for £4. Others mentioned similar local services that they had used to access cheap food. However, Steven explained that using a meal centre could be an isolating and even intimidating experience:

The problem with that is you have to go to these places where nobody really talks to you. You might meet a few people to talk to but they're all in cliques. Some guys play cards, they don't work and you've gotta be careful what you say and all that. There can be friction.

He said that he tends to avoid such places since a man had tried to start a fight with him there.

Food poverty was also an issue for some of those in work. George and Michelle, a couple from Salford, are both care workers who claim universal credit due to low wages and insecure work. They had used a food bank, but both said they disliked the experience, describing it as 'degrading'. Michelle said:

It's nothing disrespectful to the people at the Food Bank, they were absolutely lovely, weren't they? It's the actual thing of walking in there, the – you feel, I shouldn't be doing this. I'm working, I'm doing this, why am I walking into a Food Bank when I'm working?

Shame was an important theme around food bank usage. Melissa explained that she didn't feel shame about using it herself but blamed the system for putting her in that position. However, she had met others there that did feel shame:

There was a young girl there who was like 18 with a baby and I said, I gave her a lift back, and she was crying. And I said, you really shouldn't feel ashamed or anything you should be angry.

A number of participants who had not personally experienced food banks also mentioned them when discussing austerity, expressing similar feelings of anger or shock at the need for them. Tom

in Sheffield said, “it’s like... how are things this bad? Being this badly managed that people are having to effectively beg food to survive?” For some, this fed into feelings of unfairness with regards to austerity, which will be discussed in more depth in section 6.3.

### 5.1.3 State pensions

Unlike benefits, state pensions have been relatively well protected under austerity policies, due to the ‘triple lock’ protecting the amount that pensioners receive (Lupton *et al.*, 2015). Nonetheless, Jane, described how she struggles financially on the state pension, despite also receiving PIP, because a large proportion of her income is spent on carers and cleaners due to her health issues. This experience was rare among the people I interviewed in Hampshire though, as those who were retired typically benefited from private pensions and, often, part-time work.

Like Jane, Barbara in Harrow receives only a minimal state pension because she did not earn enough to pay tax during her working life. She receives just over £300 per month, which she described as “not a lot” but still felt she had enough. There are two key differences between Barbara and Jane which are likely to account for their differing experiences of the state pension. Firstly, Barbara is in good health and has no need for social care or other support which can be very costly.

Secondly, Barbara is married, whereas Jane lives alone. For Barbara, this means two incomes in the household and her own pension amount is related to her husband’s, who worked for his whole adult life. This is because many married women born before 1953 are eligible for a pension ‘top up’ based on their husband’s pension (UK Government, no date), putting Jane at a disadvantage compared to Barbara.

This is not the only way in which some pension age women have been disadvantaged compared to others. Since 1995 state pension age had been due to gradually rise from 60 to 65 between 2010 and 2020, however the Pensions Act 2011 accelerated this process so that it would reach 65 by 2018 and 66 by 2020. For many women born in the 1950s this meant an unexpected and, many argue, poorly communicated change that they were unable to sufficiently financially plan for (Thurley and McInnes, 2019). One participant, Julie, who is affected by this change described how, despite being relatively protected by having a private pension, this has caused her to worry about what might change in the future:

So, yeah, again, you work and you think this is what’s going to happen and then the rug is pulled from under you. My fear is then, my daughter is 35 and I think, well, what age you are going to have to work ‘til? Are they going to make it 70? How far up can you go before you put a ceiling on it? You know, we’ll have people of 90 toddling out to do a

job. So, yeah, a bit daft, but it almost feels like it's heading that way. So that's been something that I've found a problem.

However, despite the worries for future generations, the protection of a private pension lessened the burden of these pension changes on Julie. In contrast, Maria, who also had her pension age increased from 60 to 66, has struggled enormously because she has no other income to fall back on. As described above, this has led to her claiming benefits which have been inadequate to cover many of her basic needs. She looked forward to reaching 66 when she would be entitled to her pension, saying "it's not a lot of money on the pension but it's more than what I'm used to."

David from Hampshire, meanwhile, remained entirely unaffected by pension changes. He was able to take advantage of a government incentive to delay drawing his state pension, which allowed him to accrue interest. He explained, "we didn't use my pension so we could increase it." The consequence of this is that having an alternative income source, in his case his private pension, in fact enabled him to earn even more in state pension than those who had no other income. He spoke of having been pleased to vote for a party that enabled him to have control over his pension, a feeling which contrasted hugely with the lack of control felt by others. This demonstrates that personal circumstances play an important role in either limiting or increasing the harms of benefits reforms.

## **5.2 Impact of cuts to social care**

Another key public service that many participants discussed was social services and the impact that spending cuts had had on them. Despite being a relatively protected budget in local authority spending, spending per adult on adult social services fell by 13.5 per cent between 2009/10 and 2016/17. Cuts have disproportionately fallen on the areas with highest needs due to substantial cuts to central government grants, which are relied upon most by areas least able to raise funds through council tax (Simpson, 2017). For care workers, these cuts have manifested in low pay, poor conditions and additional work pressure (Cunningham, Lindsay and Roy, 2021). A large proportion of my sample were current or former social workers, all of whom expressed concern over the impact that reduced funding had on their ability to do their jobs and on the clients who were reliant on those services.

They explained that funding cuts made it very difficult for clients to get the care they needed. One participant argued that when private care agencies became responsible for providing care to the elderly their priority was to make money, which meant that services were restricted. People are offered 15 minute calls to help get them washed and dressed. This participant felt such services were so inadequate that she said, "I dread, in a sense, ever needing social care and I've worked in

it all my life". Certain services were so restricted that it became very difficult to get funding for them from the council. One former social worker said:

You are lucky to get anything to funding panel. Gone are the days when you could get something like social and emotional support. And I know with the mental health team you have to be on the roof about to jump, it's just crazy. [...] there's just no money for anything. It's ridiculous.

Multiple participants commented that they had noticed an increase in homelessness, attributing this to inadequate social housing provision but also a lack of social care. One participant explained that she had previously been homeless and that her ex-husband had been homeless for a number of years. She said that when you are in that position "you suddenly notice that there is no help whatsoever. No help whatsoever."

Two social workers expressed their frustration at not being able to provide adequate services because they were restricted to providing "sticking plasters" that only provided short term solutions. A major issue caused by the lack of funding is that gaps appear between services, meaning that some people are unable to access support because their needs are not met by any service. One participant explained:

And people slip through the gaps, again, with less money, eligibility criteria tightens up and a lot of these teams are disappearing. The ones that used to pick up, what's classed as vulnerable adults, if you don't hit enough criteria you literally fall through the gaps. And there's no voluntary service to pick these people up like they used to, because they don't exist for a lot of the services, they've had their funding stopped. So, a lot of the universal services that would have supported them in the past are not there.

Some participants spoke of the need for them to organise their own care, which could be challenging. Melissa's support worker went off sick for a month and was sent a letter saying she needed to ring if she wanted someone else to step in. However, due to her depression she did not open the letter and therefore wasn't able to access the support. It was only because she had a close friend who was a social worker who contacted the council on her behalf that she eventually was offered a replacement support worker.

Another consequence of service cuts has been the closure of many social and community groups for care recipients. Chloe, a carer in Salford, described the importance of such groups: "when they get out and they mix in groups it's like, I'm not the only one suffering, or I'm not the only one on my own. So, it is good." However, as such services close, she finds an increasing reluctance to attend the ones that are running. She explained, "I think the majority of the ladies that I support have sort of given up. You know, thinking I don't want to join anything because it's just going to

go off in the same way.” Losing out on these events increases social isolation and reduces the peer support that can be so important for people using care services.

### 5.2.1 Impact on social care staff

Unsurprisingly, the reduction in quality of the services became very frustrating for those in the profession. Participants described the difficulties they faced having to reduce the care packages for service users whose needs hadn't changed. Laura said, “the money we're given in budgets to look after people now is frightening, compared to what it was.” For the social workers I spoke to, these restrictions were very demotivating. The work changed from “helping people to help themselves” to “throw something at it and move on”, which understandably left these participants feeling demoralised. As one participant said,

...each year we were expected to do more with less. And so from that point of view it was extremely difficult. And we were, sort of, as, sort of, frontline staff you're sandwiched in the middle. Because you've got the client who wants and needs the services and you've got the senior management who are saying, well there isn't the money. [...] I was a manager when I finished and that was a thankless position, to be quite frank. Because again, you were then just one step away from the frontline staff but you still had all of the senior managers above you. So they, then fed down to you and you then had to feed down to your team, really, what you didn't want to be saying. As in, we haven't got the money for that. Or we can't do that. And it was always very negative in the end.

Inevitably, working on the front-line delivering services that were being cut affected morale and turnover of staff among social workers. Some current social workers said they were considering leaving their jobs, while those who had left often said they probably would have stayed if conditions were better. One participant found that, after returning to work as a care manager following maternity leave, the pressure on herself and her colleagues had grown immensely. She explained that her team had been happy when she left, but found:

I went back and I still had, like, the same [case load] as I had full-time. So it was even worse working part-time. And that's the other thing, everyone was unhappy, morale was low, people were leaving left, right and centre. We were told that they'd either make redundancies or cut our pay. Everyone was striking, you know. You're under pressure as it is and then I was given the same amount of cases as I had before.

This experience was not unusual. Other participants spoke of social workers going off sick, leaving their jobs without another to go to or simply getting much less satisfaction from their work. One

participant told me that her father, a case worker, had struggled with his mental health due to the pressure of having a workload of at least 100 cases at any one time. She said, “it feels like he has been taking, you know, these massive breaks at least once a year for the past few years. But he wants to retire early because he really does – he’s really struggling.”

Many people in the social care sector have been subject to pay freezes under austerity. Laura in Sheffield said her pay was frozen for five years and then only subject to half-increment rises in the following two years. She was also required to ‘buy’ three days annual leave at around £50 and given no choice about when to take the holiday. She expressed frustration that the poor conditions in her field were causing a shortage of staff, which in turn led to the council paying extra for agency staff.

Job insecurity was also an important issue for many in the profession. Support workers Michelle and George explained that the private care company they worked for had recently lost their tender for care work in the Manchester area. As a consequence, their roles were being moved to alternative care companies, however they did not know where they would be moved to and were facing major uncertainty. They also described how the insecure and inconsistent nature of their employment meant that their hours varied substantially from one month to the next. This led to a highly variable income, reliance on universal credit and, as described in section 5.1.2, the need to use food banks.

This is also frustrating from the perspective of social care users, such as Amanda, who requires care for 20 hours per week but struggles to find carers available for those hours. She said:

Trying to get people to work for such short periods of time, it’s really hard. Especially when people are being penalised for having more than one job, or job centres tell them they need to work more hours. I lose a lot of staff because the job centre says they are not working enough hours. So, then they end up being placed in situations where they have to do full-time jobs, and then they’re not able to cope with that and then they’re ending up out of work but can’t come back to work for me because it’s not enough hours. It’s like this vicious circle.

This can be a challenge for many people receiving care, but particularly those who are less able to understand the reasons behind the loss or changes in services. Chloe told me:

A lot of my ladies that I care for, they find it really disheartening and they take it personally; like they think it’s their fault that people don’t want to work with them anymore. But it’s not – I’m trying to explain that it’s not that they don’t want to work with you.

Julie, a former social worker, said that if her granddaughter expressed an interest in becoming a social worker she would actively try to dissuade her from doing so because “if you’ve got that sort of heart that [...] you want to make a difference in people’s lives and you want to see them go from one position to another, you’re not going to be able to do that”.

### 5.2.2 Inefficiency of social care service

There was also frustration at the costly inefficiencies in the social care system, that see clients lose out because money is wasted on unnecessary process. One participant gave the example:

I remember once I think I spent the best part of a whole day, I had to go to funding panel to get someone’s taxi paid, it was something like 20 quid taxi fare, and I just thought how much are they paying me for this day to do this? Just give them the fucking money. You know, it’s just like, it’s just crazy.

These inefficiencies go beyond such smaller cases, affecting the costs for service users as well as the social services. Participants explained that in-house services have been taken over by private companies, meaning that for service users, such as those requiring respite care, there are fewer options and greater costs. Furthermore, one participant argued that cutting services can end up costing the government more in the long run:

There was no preventative work, which really annoyed me, because it’s like by not funding that you’re tipping people into a bigger crisis and it’s going to end up costing you more. It’s not cost-effective. It’s just people running around like headless chickens and no one’s looking at the bigger picture. [...] there’s never preventative work, with like, parents who’ve had to give up, lost their children to the system, so they get pregnant again and there just seems to be no counselling for someone who’s lost their child to deal with the issue. And then it’s like a revolving door.

### 5.2.3 Sure Start centres

Given that austerity was introduced to reduce government spending and, as a consequence, the budget deficit (HM Treasury, 2010a), it is striking that inefficiencies and lack of cost-effectiveness was a common theme. Participants described the inefficiency of funding cuts and, in many cases, closure of Sure Start centres<sup>3</sup>. Sarah described how her sister had faced significant challenges following the birth of her child, yet it was not until her son was 18 months old that she had an

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<sup>3</sup> While Sure Start centres are not a form of social care, falling under the remit of the Department of Education, there are important parallels between these services.

offer of support from her local Sure Start centre. She explained that by this time her sister was managing a lot better, but that the support would have been more beneficial earlier on. This participant attributed the delay in offering support to a lack of capacity in the service. She argued that:

...the number one thing everyone talks about is that early intervention in support saves so much money later on. And what austerity did was kind of cut and cut and cut so that only the very specialist statutory services existed, which are now overrun. And at the point at which people are getting involved in services they are already so much worse than they might have been. And that's very expensive and costly and difficult to ever recover from.

Sure Start not only provides services, but also the facilities for other services to be run, meaning that the closure of centres has effects beyond just the loss of the services they directly provide. Adriana explained how she had been a volunteer at a breastfeeding support charity that used Sure Start centres as a place to offer support to new parents. She explained how problematic it was that the centres were closed down:

If those sure start centres are not there then there is less opportunity for us to intervene and meet our parents, because we have to find other places and other ways to find those parents and it is just more difficult because those, those mums and those babies, they will stay at home more.

This means that parents have fewer opportunities to access support, but also that professionals are less able to identify parents who need support.

Nicole explained how her local Sure Start centre, which had provided valuable support after the birth of her first child, had now closed down. She described how it provided a range of courses and services including new parents' groups, baby massage courses and 'stay and play', as well as an opportunity to meet other parents. As for Adriana, Nicole's centre was also a venue in which parents could access other services. These services included health visitors, midwives, mental health support and representatives from the job centre, to discuss going back to work and benefits advice, as well as the opportunity to take courses in numeracy and maths. Nicole described how valuable it was when it was open every day, "if you were just having a really bad day there was always someone. You could always just go in and have a word, you know, just have a chat to."

However, by the time she had her second daughter in 2015, the hours were cut and eventually the centre was closed down. This caused particular problems when, while also dealing with a difficult bereavement, she struggled to access support for her daughter's sleeping difficulties.



I phoned up in tears when [youngest daughter] was you know, 2 years old and not sleeping and I actually felt like I was gonna have a breakdown. And it was, you know, it was a week before someone was able to come and see me. So you know, yeah, you just kind of figure it out yourself now. In a way, austerity, I suppose, the flip side is I suppose people are tapping into their own resources more and being independent. But then I'm lucky I've got those resources, a lot of people haven't, you know. And that's the thing. There's a lot of vulnerable people out there that've been really hit by this.

This quote highlights a key theme through many of the interviews, that people who were struggling under austerity for different reasons were often left to pay for services privately or became dependent upon the support of others. In this case, due to the limited support available from health visitors, Nicole ultimately elected to pay privately for sleep support, but she expressed that she is fortunate to be able to afford to do that. For some people it may not be possible to bridge the gap left by the closure of services, leaving them facing huge struggles alone. However, Nicole highlighted how the relative affluence of the area does not make parents immune to the pressures of parenting:

...as far as I'm aware, unless you've got major difficulties with raising your children you're kind of left to it nowadays to be quite honest with you. [...] So yeah, so that's been, I think, a real blow to the area. And that is definitely because of the austerity cuts. And [area of Hampshire] being a kind of well-off area, in a way, they obviously didn't think we needed it anymore. But I think you do still need that guidance even if you have got money in the bank or a job. I think you still need that support, you know. And I think families around are worse off really without it, you know.

### **5.3 Impact of cuts to libraries**

Libraries are an important resource for those on lower incomes, as they provide free access to the internet, educational resources and, of course, books. These benefits are not limited to the poorest, however, and provide a space for people across all socioeconomic groups. The diversity of their services and customers are important for social inclusion (Aabø & Audunson, 2012), as well as social mobility (Anderson & Whalley, 2015). Despite their social significance, however, libraries have been significantly impacted by spending cuts. Libraries saw a real-terms cut of 40 per cent between 2010 and 2020, which is reflected in a 16 per cent cut in the number of library service points and a 22 per cent fall in book stock over the same period (Woodhouse & Zayed, 2021). The reduction in services has therefore been substantial, with the quality of library provision expected to deteriorate further without significant changes (Page et al., 2020).

Given these changes to library provision, it is unsurprising that many participants in Sheffield expressed dissatisfaction with their library services. A common problem was limited and variable opening hours, caused by a lack of paid staff. Research shows that between 2010 and 2018 library hours across England fell by more than 20 per cent (Thorpe, 2018). Christina explained that she does not use the library as often as she used to:

I use the library very rarely because, unfortunately, a lot of our libraries are closed and, or open erratic hours and manned by volunteers, so it's not always convenient. But I use charity shops to get my books mainly and swap them between friends.

The role of volunteers came up in discussions across Hampshire, London and Sheffield. Although some felt that library volunteers were a good way to reduce costs, it did negatively affect the customer service. Michael explained, "the volunteers will know the easy stuff, but that's stuff I could probably do for myself." Similarly, Amy found that the volunteers at her local library in London did not know how to use the printer, but there were no paid staff there to provide support.

Libraries staffed entirely by volunteers were also found in Sheffield. Angela, a Library Assistant in Sheffield told me that "a lot of the staff see it as a bit of a treachery" that paid staff have been replaced by volunteers. Like other participants, she found that volunteers were not able to provide the full services. She said, "we get a lot of the fall back on us and they will even say, oh, it's no good asking us. Go and ring a proper library up or go to a proper library."

The rise in library volunteers reflects a broader reduction in paid library staff. Between 2010 and 2020 the number of library employees across England, Wales and Scotland decreased by 38 per cent, while the number of volunteers increased by 215 per cent (Woodhouse & Zayed, 2021). More than half of the staff in Angela's library had been made redundant, which she found meant they were less able to help people. This decrease in staff was coupled with an increase in work due to the library offering more services, such as e-books and e-magazines, and customers having greater needs. She said, "we are doing things like helping with universal credit; helping somebody get to the memory clinic and [...] books on prescription and stuff like that."

Angela explained that increasingly her library is used by homeless people and people with dementia and severe mental health issues who require additional support, which she attributed to cuts to other services. She said, "I think most of the services have gone. I mean, you used to talk about care in the community in days gone by; all that's gone. There's just nowhere for people to go." As a result, the nature of working in a library has changed significantly, with time frequently spent on helping people with universal credit applications and helping homeless people to find accommodation. At quiet times she would typically spend up to 45 minutes with

one person contacting hostels, but this is more difficult at busy times when this will “get frowned upon” by managers. She summed up the changes, saying:

And a lot of our job seems to be that, you know, not serving books and not telling people what the latest Stephen King book is and that; it’s like dealing with things where people have been let down by other services.

This growing emphasis on supporting individuals with complex needs has left Angela feeling that “a lot of our job has really turned into [...] more like social workers. And, like I say, lots and lots of mental healthcare.” Although she was generally positive about this aspect of her work, explaining that she enjoys helping people, it comes with significant challenges. Her broader library work can easily become side-tracked by customers in need of help:

You are on your feet all day and you think you’ve got A, B and C to do and D, E and F walk in the door and they’ve got a problem that needs addressing. You know, it might be a young Mum that’s struggling or it might be somebody who is starting to get confused and they want to know what services are available, so we might put them in touch with the memory clinics. It might be somebody who is homeless. It might be somebody who has been beaten up outside and they’ve come in for a bit of sanctuary. Because we’ve had that – we’ve had drug dealers in the library, looking for people and showing off. That was only a few months ago.

Angela explained that at times customers have posed a serious threat to her and her colleagues:

A couple of times in this last year we’ve had to be escorted to our cars and things like that because we’ve had people in, not on their meds, showing off, threatening us, throwing things at the windows.

In dealing with these issues, staff are not adequately trained or remunerated. For example, Angela explained that the mental health training focused on the detail of mental health issues, including psychosis and self-harm, which was not helpful to her. The training was aimed at people from a range of public services and, as such, was not adequately tailored to the role that library workers play. Instead, they needed training which focused on how to provide support and where to signpost individuals to. Similarly, she was ‘astounded’ by the training offered by the Job Centre on supporting Universal Credit applicants because it focused on *not* helping people. However, she reasoned that “the thing is, if you do it wrong, then you click a button and they might get some sanctions. You know, they’re putting their life in your hands.” Angela also felt that Library Assistants received very low pay for the demands of the job, saying, “we are on not much more than minimum wage either, which I think is appalling for the skill set that we’ve got.” Other work

benefits have also been lost, such as the option to take unpaid leave, because there are not enough staff to cover the extra time off work.

However, discussions of library services in Salford provided a stark contrast to these negative experiences. There, the council introduced 'Gateway centres' designed as a 'one stop shop' for community services. Unusually, these buildings were designed and set up by the city's primary care trust who are responsible for NHS services in the area. The centres bring together a range of health services, including GPs, dentists and mental health services, with a library and other community rooms (Mathieson, 2011).

Among the people I spoke to from Salford, these centres were extremely popular and appeared to increase library usage. Megan told me, "before that [the creation of the Gateway centres], I don't think I really used it before that. It was a really small building and it wasn't used much." It was striking that every person I spoke to from the area told me they used the library and none were critical of the services they provided, which was not the case in any other area. Participants explained that they appreciated the convenience of multiple services being offered in one building, including assistance with council tax and benefits.

Across the interviews there was a notable pattern that the libraries that were invested in and updated were popular with the interviewees and tended to be more widely used. Combining library services with other services in the same building was particularly helpful, but this was rare outside Salford. The only other example was from one participant from London, Matthew, whose library had been combined with the local leisure centre, meaning that he attended on a weekly basis while his children did gymnastics. However, the broader trend was one of lack of investment, limited services and library closures, which unsurprisingly discouraged library use for the majority of the participants.

Mark from London explained how a library in his local area had closed but he was not personally affected by it. He said, "I just don't think they're used in quite the same way anymore. They say use it or lose it and by and large people just go, oh well." Yet, this view was not shared by all participants, as many saw library closures as a significant challenge to themselves and others. One of the main reasons for this difference was income levels as those who were able to access the resources offered by libraries through other means were more protected from the loss of their services. For example, James in London explained that he didn't go to his library simply because he is able to buy his own books. In contrast, Julie spoke of how libraries were an important way for her and her children to access books when she was a single parent. She explained, "I've always said that the library is a lifesaver for people".

For adults, the appeal of libraries can be very broad. Maria, who is on universal credit and feels isolated by her struggle to afford to go out, spoke of hoping to join knitting and colouring groups at her local library. Indeed, it was striking how few participants spoke of using their library to borrow books, although this was of course important for some. Sandeep also used his library to prepare for his English language test after moving to the UK. The provision of internet access, printing services and baby groups were also important library services. The loss of these services can therefore have important repercussions for many service users.

Overall, libraries were one of the areas of public service provision with the most marked geographical differences in participant responses. Sheffield was in many ways the worst affected, in that a number of people used their local library in this area but were often dissatisfied with the services they provided. Participants in London and Hampshire were typically less affected, in part because many had access to the resources provided by libraries at home, such as books and internet connections. There was, however, a stronger sense of decline in the provision of libraries in London than in Hampshire, which may reflect their higher spending cuts. In contrast, despite higher spending cuts which might have indicated poorer service provision, the marked investment in libraries in Salford was reflected in high usage and high satisfaction. These findings show that by adapting to the changing way that people use libraries, public investment is in fact effective at increasing attendance, improving public attitudes and protecting services.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter tells a story of hardship and difficulty for a select part of the population in England. While still being affected by the challenges discussed in Chapter 4, people who claim benefits and receive social care have truly borne the brunt of the cuts. For some this has resulted in the loss of livelihoods, hunger, mental health issues and inadequate care. However, it is also the service providers who have faced substantial challenges, having to adapt to ever increasing workloads for low pay and poor conditions. Frequently it is those in need of support themselves who are the ones working to help others.

A consequence of cuts to benefits and social care has been increasing pressure on libraries to help people who are unable to find the support they need elsewhere. Again, this results in library workers providing assistance in ways that they are neither trained nor adequately compensated for. The people who are no longer able to access benefits advice or day centres do not simply cease to exist. Instead, cuts to one service often appear to simply create new pressures on another.

There is also little evidence that cuts to these services has resulted in efficiencies or more targeted services. Public sector workers frequently expressed frustration at the costly and unproductive changes, such as increased need for justification for small expenditures, which detract from the services they provide. Instead, service users are finding it increasingly difficult to access services and, in some cases, to even find out what support is available to them.

Austerity has touched almost every aspect of daily life for many people in the UK. These findings demonstrate that the impact is wide-ranging but uneven and often deeply unfair. Parenthood can make people more vulnerable to the negative effects of austerity. This corresponds with the broader theme, also discussed in Chapter 4, that an individual's life stage is often a key factor in how big an impact austerity has on them. For example, participants in early stages of retirement described fewer personal impacts than young parents. Even for those who are financially comfortable and able to plan for difficulties, the responsibilities of childcare and care for older parents make the effects of cuts more acute. Most of the retired participants I spoke to were little affected, because they were well off, in good health and had no major caring responsibilities, as well as being in the earlier stages of retirement. However, for those who were older or less fortunate, increased costs of social care combined with decreasing disability benefits and reliance on state pension caused financial, practical and psychological challenges.

Austerity has also had significant consequences for younger people. Nicole in Hampshire explained why she was concerned about the impact of austerity on young people's mental health:

Housing, job uncertainty, benefit changes, zero-hour contracts. I know that's not to do with austerity but it all ties in. I think universal credit is gonna impact massively [...] it must be such uncertain times to be a young person now, with all the university fees, the housing, rent is so expensive, there's no social housing. They're living, you know, there's working people that are having to go to food banks. It's just rubbish. It's not a great time in a lot of ways, it really isn't.

As demonstrated in section 5.1 about benefits changes, life stage is not the only factor. Disability and ill health also put individuals at risk of being negatively affected by spending cuts. Every participant identified at least one public service that had deteriorated or shut down as a result of reductions in funding, although the impact these changes had on them personally varied considerably. Some were simply inconvenienced by changes to services, compared to others who were left feeling hopeless and even suicidal. As Sarah Marie Hall (Hall, 2017, p. 11) wrote in her important book, 'Everyday life in Austerity':

[...] living in austerity—in a time of deep social, political and economic change—is not necessarily the same as living with austerity, that is, bearing the everyday brunt of the impacts of austerity policies.

Clearly, even the affluence of Hampshire and London was not sufficient to protect people from the harmful consequences of spending cuts. Although, it is noticeable that some of the most damaging changes, such as cuts to welfare spending, only affect a select few. As discussed in Chapter 4, even in public services that affected most people, such as health care, strong support networks and the means to access private services often mitigated many of the challenges for the affluent. In the context of these findings, it is now important to understand how knowledgeable participants are about austerity and whether they view it favourably or not.

## Chapter 6 Public Perceptions of Austerity

As discussed in chapter 2, I propose that three theories together explain why the UK public's political response to austerity has been relatively muted. The first is that the government's narrative choices around austerity have influenced the way people think about spending cuts. According to the theory of policy feedback, the way politicians talk about policies can influence the way citizens see themselves and whether they feel empowered to participate in politics (Skocpol, 1995). As such, government arguments that austerity is necessary and unavoidable may have discouraged participation, on the basis that it is unlikely to change anything.

The second theory is civic voluntarism, which argues that resources such as time, money and health are necessary for political participation (Schlozman, Burns and Verba, 1994; Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Lijphart, 1997). Austerity has disproportionately hurt vulnerable citizens (Duffy, 2013), so many of those who were already less likely to participate have seen their resources depleted, further undermining their political participation.

Finally, for those relatively protected from cuts, I argue that austerity has not been a mobilising issue because they do not have a personal grievance to communicate. Grievance theory argues that political participation often results from people wishing to express discontent with the political situation (Kriesi, 2014; Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). For those who have experienced little personal impact of austerity and have limited knowledge of the effect on others, there is little reason to actively support or oppose the cuts.

Chapter 7 analyses participants' political participation in response to austerity in order to empirically test these theories. First, though, this chapter lays the groundwork for this analysis by examining how the public perceives austerity and how their perceptions have been influenced by the government's narrative choices around cuts<sup>4</sup>. It also identifies a key distinction in the way people perceive cuts: whether they support austerity in principle and whether they support the way it has been implemented. Finally, it explores who participants consider responsible for the cuts, either as a positive attribution of policy decision making or as blame for austerity.

A key contribution of this chapter is the participant typology in section 6.1. This typology groups participants according to their experience of and attitudes to austerity, as well as demographic factors. These groupings then facilitate analysis of how people understand what austerity is, how opinions of it vary and who participants believe is responsible for the cuts, as well as questions of

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<sup>4</sup> Sections 6.1 through to 6.3 are based on my article 'The futility of participation: Austerity and public reluctance to oppose it' (Harrison, 2021b).



participation in the next chapter. The typology is developed further in Chapter 7 to include each group's level of political participation in general and specifically related to austerity.

This chapter demonstrates a widespread acceptance that austerity is both necessary and unavoidable but there is greater divergence on the fairness of the cuts. The Conservative government are held responsible for the cuts noticeably more often than either the Labour Party or the banks. However, socioeconomic factors play a significant role in attitudes towards austerity.

## **6.1 Participant typology**

Inevitably, the responses of members of the public to austerity vary according to individual circumstances. Before examining in depth how attitudes to austerity vary, it is helpful to identify key themes in how different people have responded to the cuts. This section therefore provides a typology with which to classify the interview participants.

This typology breaks down participants by demographic differences, their own experience of cuts, knowledge of austerity and its impact on others, whether they support austerity in principle and/or in practice, and who they consider to be responsible for the cuts. The distinction between attitudes to austerity in principle and in practice is an important theme that will be discussed in depth in section 6.3. The names of two of the groups, 'inactive anti-austerity' and 'actively anti-austerity', relate to their levels of political participation, which is an important aspect of the typology. As such, I build on the typology to add political activism and whether they have actively supported or opposed austerity in Chapter 7, which analyses political participation in response to austerity.

This chapter focuses primarily on awareness of and attitudes to cuts. Demographic differences and personal experience of cuts will nevertheless play an important role in understanding the nuances of knowledge and attitudes towards cuts. Participants broadly fall into one of four groups, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Participant typology

	<b>Pro-austerity</b>	<b>Austerity sceptic</b>	<b>Inactive anti-austerity</b>	<b>Actively anti-austerity</b>
<b>Demographics</b>	Older, retired or in secure employment, little reliance on public services	Full time employed and/or parents	Unemployed or in low paid work, high dependency on public services	Average or below average income, but stable
<b>Personal impact of austerity</b>	Experienced little personal impact of austerity	Experienced at least some personal impact	Very negatively personally affected	Somewhat personally affected
<b>Knowledge of austerity as a policy</b>	Most somewhat knowledgeable, some uncertainty	Mixed, most at least somewhat knowledgeable	Fairly knowledgeable	Highly knowledgeable
<b>Awareness of impact on others</b>	Little awareness of the impact on others	Good awareness of the impact on others	Highly aware of impact on others	Highly aware of impact on others
<b>Attitude to austerity in principle and practice</b>	Support austerity in principle and in practice	Most support austerity in principle but none in practice	Some support for austerity in principle but none in practice	Oppose austerity in principle and in practice
<b>Who considered responsible for austerity</b>	The government <sup>5</sup>	Conservatives	The government, Conservatives	The government, Conservatives, Labour, banks

The first category of people is the ‘Pro-austerity participants’. They were relatively protected from austerity due to stable employment or private pensions and low reliance on public services. They were typically older but in good health and did not claim benefits. As the name indicates, they were generally supportive of both the idea of austerity and the way it had been implemented. However, they showed little awareness of the impact it had on others.

The second and largest group was those described as ‘austerity sceptics’. These participants were mostly in full time employment and/or had children. They had typically experienced at least some personal impact of austerity and had reasonable knowledge about it and how it had affected others. However, there was more variation in knowledge of austerity as a policy in this group than the others, most likely due to the greater number of participants who fell into this group. Although these participants often showed some support for austerity in principle, they were all

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<sup>5</sup> There was very limited data from this group as I did not ask most of them who they felt was responsible for austerity due to introducing this question later in the interview process.

critical of the way it had been implemented. People in this group most commonly attributed responsibility for austerity to the Conservative party, although a few also mentioned the government more generally, New Labour, banks or the private sector.

The third group consisted of people who spoke of struggling financially and were often reliant on benefits or state pension for income. As discussed in Harrison (2021a), austerity has been most keenly felt by those with disabilities and/or living in poverty, in part because their reliance on public services is typically greater than others'. Cuts to benefits and health and social care have therefore taken a greater toll on these individuals, meaning they were keenly aware of austerity and its impact on others. Some people from this group did support austerity in principle, although this was more mixed than the first two groups, but none supported the way cuts had been implemented. This group was most likely to consider the government generally or Conservative party responsible for austerity, although New Labour and the private sector were each mentioned by one person.

The final group of participants was the 'actively anti-austerity' group. They were typically personally affected by austerity to at least some extent, although compassion was the key driver of their high political participation. These participants were typically in employment, although sometimes low paid, and did not struggle to the same extent as the 'inactive anti-austerity' participants. They were very knowledgeable about austerity as a policy but also its impact on others, and strongly opposed it in both senses. They tended to hold the government and Conservative party responsible for the cuts but, as will be discussed in section 6.4.1, were also most likely to mention Labour.

## **6.2 Effectiveness of the narrative**

Using these typologies, it is first valuable to explore how the government's narrative choices have affected how people view spending cuts. This section will begin with a recap of the role of government narratives in austerity, before examining the evidence of these narratives in the interview data. Section 6.2.2 examines the extent to which people have accepted the government's framing of the cuts. It also highlights a distinction between whether they support or oppose cuts in principle and in practice, which will be discussed further in section 6.3.

### **6.2.1 The austerity narrative**

Spending cuts have been undertaken in the name of austerity – a term used internationally since the financial crisis to describe reductions in public spending aimed at reducing budget deficits. Many have come to regard the word austerity as distinctly negative, particularly in southern

Europe, with associations of harsh economic conditions imposed by an external power such as the European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Konzelmann, 2014). However, within the UK the use of the term 'austerity' has taken on a somewhat distinctive character, with the associated government narrative evoking the 'blitz spirit' of the second world war (MacLeavy, 2011).

Many scholars have demonstrated the impact that the language used by the coalition and subsequent Conservative governments has had on perceptions of austerity. Broadly, the government's narrative choices have had three key impacts upon understandings of austerity. Firstly, language such as 'scroungers' and 'living beyond our means', designed to appeal to a sense of fairness and responsibility, has been widely adopted by the British public (Seabrooke and Thomsen, 2016). Relatedly, the government's behavioural discourses, placing responsibility for poverty on the actions of the poor, have caused people to feel isolated and 'othered' (Pemberton *et al.*, 2016). Finally, austerity is widely regarded as necessary and somehow 'deserved' after the excesses of pre-financial crisis Britain (Stanley, 2013). The household budgeting analogy was used by the government in this context to argue that overspending and debt should be no more acceptable in public finances than in personal budgets. As such, it was 'necessary' for the government to cut spending, in the same way that a household might cut back (Montgomerie, 2016; Seabrooke and Thomsen, 2016).

### 6.2.2 Understandings of 'austerity'

One of the key questions asked of all participants to gauge the impact of the government's narrative choices was what they understand by 'austerity', a loaded and contentious term. Definitions varied substantially, ranging from "whether you're rich or poor, or whether you live [in] a good area or a bad area" to an extensive explanation of the political context in which the word is now used. The descriptions were strikingly negative from most participants, with one austerity sceptic defining austerity as "hardship, punishment, lack of money, lack of support". Even those who supported austerity in principle, as opposed to how it had been implemented in practice, mostly defined it in negative terms. For example, Megan responded, "I understand it to be like cuts, the cuts that are being made. And the situation that everyone's left in, everyone is basically worse off."

Many participants used language reminiscent of the way the Coalition and Conservative governments described austerity. Some participants referred to government narratives explicitly, referencing the way in which austerity was 'sold' to the general public. However, for the majority, language around 'tightening our belts' and 'living within your means' appeared to have become

everyday parlance. Adhit, from the pro-austerity group, defined austerity almost entirely using phrases from the coalition government:

Austerity for me means budgeting, living a little bit on a smaller budget. Cuts have to be made which I can understand, because we cannot afford [...] Living on smaller means, that's in the simplest words I can give, living on less money. Downgrading.

Many participants from the pro-austerity group compared the economy with household budgeting and even spoke of how “the government have got to set an example”. One participant was keen to point out that “you can't do all this by grocer shop economics”, but repeatedly spoke of the economy in those terms nonetheless.

Participants from different groups also used this language, although those who used it the most were often those who were most supportive of austerity both in principle and in practice. Linda and David, who emphatically responded ‘yes’ when asked if they support austerity, spoke of it interchangeably with their own household budgeting. Linda spoke at length on this, arguing that:

It should all be pretty sensible really, if you haven't got it you can't spend it [laughs]. It's simple logic, you know. It might be a bit too simplistic, me sort of putting it that way, but I've always thought of myself as being quite a realist. [...] I've never liked having any kind of debt. And you know, there have been some debts that obviously are unavoidable. [...] You know but we try to be sensible about how we do it. And I think the government has to do the same.

This suggests that for those little affected by austerity the analogy of household budgets has become an ingrained way of understanding the economy. The actively anti-austerity group were less likely to use government narratives in the way they spoke about the cuts. In general, they gave detailed and informed responses which is likely to reflect them having been more attentive to the issue and independently seeking to understand it through their political engagement. For example, Adriana from Hampshire defined austerity as:

basically the payback of that debt through the cutting of funding, of services, any assets, any public assets, selling off public assets and cutting down funding for social services, for any service that is a public service. That is what austerity is, you know, they basically make the taxpayer pay for a debt that is not created by the public.

Here her answer refers to public debt, cutting of public services and selling of public assets. Although not explicit in this quote, she went on to discuss in depth the role of the banks in the financial crisis and their subsequent bailout. This answer clearly demonstrates a strong understanding of austerity and its causes. Her ultimately critical definition was typical of these

respondents, who emphasised the negative consequences and inequality of austerity. They made claims such as “it makes us all poorer” and “the Tories appear to be targeting the most vulnerable people in society for really, basically so they can make more money.”

One participant, a retired male who broadly fell in the pro-austerity group although at other points expressed some critique, refused to answer at all. When asked to define austerity or explicitly give an opinion on it he became defensive and evasive about answering. His response was instead to criticise the use of the word:

I get a bit confused about what austerity means, because it often feels to me just that we had a really bad crash 10 years ago as an economy and we're still recovering from it. And I'm not sure that labels like austerity help us address how to do that.

This was interesting because through the course of the interview it was clear that he knew quite a lot about both austerity and political participation and had some strong opinions on the issues involved. Yet in speaking about changes to public services that had taken place, he was keen not to attribute these changes to austerity. A possible explanation for this reluctance to acknowledge and discuss austerity is that this participant was a member of the Liberal Democrats, so may have been hesitant to criticise a policy initiated when the party was in power.

Other participants from both the pro-austerity and austerity sceptic groups, in contrast, were willing to answer when asked what they understood by the term austerity but expressed a lot of uncertainty. One participant answered, “I'm guessing it is to save money for the greater good, as they might see it. So, I know our country was in a lot of debt...” Although this answer demonstrates understanding of the issues involved it is not specific and the participant had difficulty in articulating exactly what ‘austerity’ means, as did many others. Another participant told me she had looked up austerity before the meeting, but added, “I haven't really got a good understanding of it, but I sort of – from a distance, if that makes sense, I sort of get what it is”. This lack of clarity may reflect the simplistic and ambiguous ways in which the government communicated about national debt. As such, while the public appears to have found analogies such as household budgeting intuitive, these explanations have not facilitated detailed understanding of the economic issues.

One participant explicitly argued that politicians withhold information. She said, “I think the government are very cautious and they just drip feed a little bit of information. I don't think we get enough to make an informed decision on a lot of things”. This vagueness in the way participants spoke of the debt and cuts matches the findings of Liam Stanley (2013), who found that debt was seen as an ambiguous moral obligation, with personal and public debt discussed interchangeably. It is interesting, however, that the findings of this research conducted over six

years later are similar, suggesting that knowledge about austerity has not increased over this period.

There were very few references to wartime nostalgia in the way participants talked about austerity. One pro-austerity participant explicitly linked austerity with that of wartime, having early memories of rationing after the second world war, but had little knowledge of it in the context of the current political agenda. This may suggest that the attempt to draw on British nostalgia of being 'in it together' has been ineffective. Three other participants also made this explicit link to the war, but there was little evidence that any others had consciously made this link. However, such references may have influenced attitudes towards post-2010 austerity, because some pro-austerity participants did make references to austerity being for 'us' in a collective sense.

Participants Linda and David referred to being 'in it together' while expressing concern over MP's pay rises. Linda said 'austerity should be for everyone, not just for us'. She later reiterated this, saying 'I think that austerity should be for everyone not just for the, not just the average Joe Bloggs in the street. You know, it should be all across the board, everyone should be having to pay.' These statements were consistently made in the context of how elites ought to be subject to austerity. It is noteworthy that she used this strong and repeated assertion because it implies she had felt the impact of austerity herself. Yet her account of public services suggests she was relatively unaffected by austerity which, combined with her otherwise favourable view of cuts, placed her in the pro-austerity group.

Neither of these participants was able to identify any significant changes to public service provision that they had experienced beyond increases in GP wait times and worsening road conditions. Compared with other participants, I interpreted these issues to be relatively minor and of low impact on their lives. As austerity appears to have had little impact on them directly, they may have been less aware of austerity and paid less attention to references to it in the news or social media. Their sense that people were affected equally may therefore have been influenced by the political narrative of pulling together as a country, rather than evidence of how others are affected.

In contrast, those living with the greatest impacts of austerity were less likely to speak of it in terms of austerity being for everyone. One participant from the inactive anti-austerity group who was experiencing financial and health struggles, Jane, was significantly affected by changes to local services. She demonstrated greater knowledge about austerity as well as greater scepticism about the fairness of it:

There's a lot of people out there that have been affected. I can name a few that's been really hit by it. People with families. I mean, they're mostly the ones that get really hit by them. You can see what it is on television, you can see people are struggling, even with getting a job nowadays. [...] I can struggle, as I said, I can struggle. It's a struggle now at times, but there's more struggling for elderly people and people with families and that. [...] I don't think it's actually right that they knock pensioners and disabled people. They knock us very hard, I can see that. I mean they don't consider people like us.

For this participant and many others living on low incomes, the narrative of being 'in it together' appears to have been ineffective. The lived reality of austerity, particularly cuts to benefits and social care, undermines the idea that reductions in services are experienced equally by society. Such participants described it as 'unfair', 'humiliating' and pushing an 'underclass' of people to the 'margins of society'. This suggests that the stigmatising language used by the government to describe people reliant on support from the state such as benefits has undermined the narrative of being 'in it together' for these groups.

### **6.3 Opinions of austerity in principle and practice**

Having looked at what people understand by the word 'austerity', analysing whether they support or oppose it is central to understanding how their perceptions impact upon their political participation. As discussed in chapter 2, political attitudes are likely to be influenced by experiences of spending cuts (Bartels and Bermeo, 2014; Ponticelli and Voth, 2017). Whether an individual experiences loss of resources or personal grievances as a consequence of austerity will impact how they view and respond to it (Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). This section examines how different people have responded to austerity and how this is influenced by their personal circumstances.

A key theme in the way people spoke about the cuts was that many made a distinction between whether they agreed with them in principle or in practice. I began by asking participants what their opinion of austerity was, but they frequently expressed ambivalence, with many people saying they both did and did not agree with the cuts. Exploring this deeper, it was clear that for many people the argument that spending needed to be reduced was very different to the lived reality of the cuts. Disagreement with the way austerity had been implemented often did not significantly undermine support for the idea of spending reductions.

It was common for participants from all but the 'actively anti-austerity' group to express support for cuts in principle because they felt that they were necessary either for the economy as a whole or in specific areas of government spending. For the pro-austerity group, cuts were seen as a



positive both in terms of the way they were justified and also how they had been implemented. In contrast, all but one from the actively anti-austerity group objected to austerity in both terms. The exception was Elisabeth, who was strongly opposed to austerity, but this was primarily based on the unfair way it had been carried out. She said,

the sentiment behind it is a positive sentiment about not spending what you haven't got. What it means to me, as far as Tory austerity over the last few years is concerned, is actually restricting spending on areas of society that need it most.

Similarly, for many among the austerity sceptics and, perhaps surprisingly, the inactively anti-austerity group, there was an important distinction between the principle and the practice of austerity. Many were critical of the implementation of cuts, having observed the negative consequences for themselves and others, but still felt that cuts were justified from an economic perspective. As Michael from the austerity sceptic group put it, "I find a lot of it quite uncomfortable. But I also think aspects of it are inevitable, given the financial position the country's been in."

Austerity sceptic Melissa, who had struggled due to benefit cuts and inadequate mental health support, was critical of the way cuts had been implemented. Despite this, she was hesitant to critique the necessity of cuts, saying, "I don't understand the money side of things too much, so I get that if the money is not there it's not there." Therefore, even some of those who were critical of austerity appeared to have accepted that cuts were needed. 'Austerity sceptic' Tom expressed this conflict when he said, "I get it, but at the same time, I don't think it's necessary. But I do think it's necessary. But I don't."

Participants' use of phrases such as 'inevitable' and 'cuts need to be made' strongly reflects the dialogue used by the government, particularly in 2010 when austerity was first introduced. It is interesting that it was not just those who are supportive of austerity that talk about it in terms of being necessary, because this suggests that the way the government chose to justify austerity has resonated with the public. Only the most politically active participants, from the actively anti-austerity group, who were also most consistently critical of austerity, spoke of it as a political choice. Robert, from the actively anti-austerity group, stated, "blame solely has to be laid as far as I can see at the hands of the government. Because it's, as I see it, it wasn't a political necessity, it's a political choice to implement austerity".

Some spoke of cuts as necessary and gave specific examples of excessive spending, however often such participants with professional experience of public services still felt that cuts had gone too far. Nicole, an austerity sceptic who had described wasteful spending she had seen while working in social services for a local authority, said:

I do think some of the cuts have been necessary in the welfare side of things, in some ways. I do think some things were crazier we spent on, but then they've cut everything so much now, we've got working people living out of food banks and bins. So, yeah. I just, you know, austerity feels like quite unfair, actually.

This quotation reflects a common argument from many of the interviews. While most participants supported the idea of spending cuts, many were critical of the way they had been implemented, claiming they had gone too far or cuts had been made to the wrong budgets. A former social worker argued that:

Politically I know there's debts and people have to tighten their purse strings and things but I think the priorities this government, I think they're just... I think they're not, they're not looking at the most vulnerable people in society.

This finding strengthens the argument that the narrative of cuts being inevitable has been very effective in influencing how people see them. Despite having strong objections to austerity, many people still prefaced criticisms of the cuts with a claim that they are necessary.

Those who agreed with austerity in principle but objected to its implementation were on the whole unable to name any aspect of government spending where they would prefer to have seen cuts. Some people, typically pro-austerity, mentioned MPs' salaries and a few criticised the amount that the country spends on foreign aid, but showed little awareness of the amount of money that would be required to protect other budgets. Again, the idea that austerity is essential appears to be pervasive here. Many participants were willing to accept that cuts needed to be made, even though they were unable to identify areas of spending that could be reduced. This further suggests that the government narrative that they implemented austerity policies because they 'have to' has been very effective.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the British public still accept that austerity was necessary, but many think it has been unfairly implemented. There is a clear distinction between pro-austerity participants, who support austerity both in principle and in practice, and the other three groups who are more likely to argue that cuts have gone too far, have been unfairly distributed or were never needed. The active and inactive anti-austerity groups are both very critical of austerity, with the biggest distinction between these groups being their political participation, which will be discussed in chapter 7.

## 6.4 Responsibility for austerity

Having examined attitudes towards the cuts and the way they have been implemented, it is now important to look at where participants ascribe responsibility for austerity. This question was included in the interviews because opinion polls up to 2015 asked respondents whether they believed the Labour party or Conservative party were responsible for austerity (Dahlgreen, 2015). As discussed in chapter 2, part of the government's narrative around austerity included speaking of the deficit as 'Labour's debt', which encouraged people to blame Labour's public spending for the need for austerity (Clarke and Newman, 2012). Polls suggest that people more often believed Labour were responsible for the cuts than the Conservatives until 2015 (Dahlgreen, 2015). However, given that attitudes appeared to have changed by 2016, it was pertinent to explore where responsibility for cuts was placed two to three years after polling on this question ended.

The openness of this question meant there was variation in how people chose to answer, in that some spoke of who was accountable for the need for austerity, while others discussed who was responsible for its implementation. Discussions of the role of the Labour party or the banking industry typically centred around the original need for austerity, whereas references to the post-2010 government unsurprisingly focused on their role in the choice to implement austerity or the way it had been implemented.

Before I explore the answers in depth, one general observation from this question was the range of groups or individuals that participants named. The actively anti-austerity group, typically the most politically-informed and critical participants, were most likely to name multiple responsible groups. All named the Conservative government as responsible, but they also frequently named the Labour party, banks and other national or international bodies. In contrast, most of the inactive anti-austerity group, who were typically less politically engaged, mentioned only the government. There was more variation among the other participants, but it was only participants from the active group who listed more than three groups as responsible.

### 6.4.1 Conservatives or Labour?

When asked who was responsible for austerity, by far the most common answer was the post-2010 government or the Conservative party specifically. Some answers laid blame with the Conservatives, such as austerity sceptic Melissa, who answered:

I think the Tory government, I think their priorities, to me, are more targeted at people who've got money. And the way they tax people and things, I think yeah, I think their priority is making sure they're alright.

In contrast, pro-austerity participant Sandeep saw Conservative responsibility for cuts as a positive:

The government needs to a) raise the taxes and b) cutting down the spending, so that they find the right balance on the spending sheet. And that's what they are doing I think.

Pro-austerity participants naming the government is not a surprise – for them responsibility was a positive attribution of being in charge of implementing cuts, rather than blame for any negative aspects. However, it appears contradictory that austerity sceptics attributed responsibility for austerity to the government despite many saying they felt cuts were necessary. If they believe that spending on public services needs to be cut, it might have been expected that they would blame Blair and Brown's Labour governments for this need to cut spending.

A possible explanation for this contradiction is that, in blaming banks and the rest of the private sector for the UK's budget deficit, people do not necessarily accept the argument that excessive public spending is to blame, but nonetheless do not see an alternative solution to spending cuts. These findings match opinion poll data which suggests that the public believes that spending cuts are necessary (Dahlgreen, 2016), and that the shift in late 2015 away from blaming Labour for the cuts has endured (Dahlgreen, 2015).

When asked who was responsible for austerity, most of the people who mentioned the Conservative party (or specific Conservative politicians) did not also mention the Labour party. Indeed, the data overall suggests that the idea that austerity was necessary due to profligate spending by the Labour party is not widely accepted. A significant minority of participants did mention the previous Labour government when asked who was responsible for the cuts. However, what was noticeable about this minority was that over half were either actively or inactively anti-austerity. This means that a very small proportion of austerity sceptics mentioned Labour and, in fact, the majority of people who did mention Labour were actively anti-austerity. These participants were more critical of what they saw as New Labour's neoliberal approach or that they didn't do more to counter the argument for austerity, rather than any profligate spending. James argued that "I think at that time when austerity came out Labour were pretty mealy mouthed about the whole thing. And in fact, they accepted the premise of it, but they said, oh we'll just cut less."

While the role of the last Labour government was not significant for many of the participants, one more unexpected answer to the question about responsibility was the role of current Labour councils. There is little evidence that those participants who held local Labour councillors responsible did so as a result of the Conservatives' narrative around Labour, as this answer came only from actively anti-austerity participants. These respondents did not blame councils for

profligate spending or 'Labour's debt' but, in fact, the opposite: councils' failure to refuse to implement the cuts handed down from central government. One said, "to some extent I also blame Labour because, especially at a local level, there's not been much resistance at all." Another participant described Labour councils who have implemented cuts as 'an absolute disgrace'.

Strikingly, no one mentioned the Liberal Democrat government in response to this question, apart from Sarah, who made a passing reference to the 'ConDem government'. Indeed, the party was brought up by hardly any participants in relation to austerity at any point, only in the context of more general questions about voting or party membership. This suggests that the Liberal Democrats are not seen as responsible for austerity except only in the most periphery sense for a few.

#### **6.4.2 The role of the banks**

Political bodies were by far the most commonly cited organisations when discussing responsibility for austerity, however another key group was the banking industry. A comparatively small number of participants mentioned banks or banking regulators as responsible, which is surprising given their role in the financial crisis and their subsequent bailouts that substantially increased the budget deficit (Oliveira, 2018). It may be that, while people no longer widely hold the Labour government responsible for austerity, the narrative shift away from the role of the banks towards Labour's public spending record has diverted attention away from the banks (Clarke and Newman, 2012). However, as discussed above, few attributed responsibility to Labour, which suggests that in the long term the government's narrative was more successful in diverting attention away from the banks than it was in drawing it to Labour.

This shift in attitudes may have broader implications for who the public hold responsible for issues in hindsight. By increasing the salience of particular aspects of an issue, in this case Labour's public service spending rather than bank bailouts, politicians can influence which attitudes will prevail. However, it may in fact be easier to negatively influence attitudes (i.e. to downplay the role of a particular person or group) than to actively establish blame. Indeed, given the frequency with which responsibility was placed with the Conservative government, it appears very difficult for the party introducing a policy to escape responsibility for it, regardless of what came before.

Nonetheless, there were participants who raised the role of the banks in austerity. When asked who was responsible, Steven, an austerity sceptic, answered:

The whole system. The whole capitalist system. The whole system of banks, the International Monetary Fund, the big banks in Europe and America. The banks are responsible for austerity. The system basically.

For this participant, money was a significant concern. He spoke at length about debt and his concerns that both the government and individuals were borrowing significant sums of money. He repeated that he was not an expert and did not understand austerity, despite giving detailed answers about the economy. There was a strong sense from Steven that the banking sector was difficult to understand or access. When asked whether he supported or opposed austerity, he said, “these people that run the banks, I’ve never met them. They’d probably never talk to me so I’ve got no idea.” It is possible that this sense that banks are unreachable is the reason some of the other participants did not mention them, as it is, understandably, harder to hold banks responsible if their role is unclear.

Interestingly, none of the inactive anti-austerity participants mentioned the banks when asked who was responsible. Maria from this group mentioned ‘big business’ but did not explicitly mention the banks. She responded:

The Tories and big businesses. Because they work together, they work together. I mean, when you’ve got big companies who are earning billions of pounds and not having to pay tax, and then ordinary people with very little money are having to pay so much tax, it’s not right at all. Yeah. So yeah, I blame them.

As her answer focuses on taxation, this indicates that she probably isn’t referring to the banking crisis but instead means large corporations who avoid tax, which may or may not include banks. It is interesting that none of the inactive anti-austerity participants focused on the events leading up to the start of austerity, in that they didn’t discuss the financial crisis nor Labour’s time in government. Furthermore, all these participants held the Conservative government responsible for austerity, which suggests their focus is on the decision to implement austerity and subsequent events. One reason for this may be the demonising language that the government used to speak of benefits claimants and vulnerable people, who often fall into this category. Many of these participants spoke of feeling targeted by cuts, which may focus their attention on the negative consequences of austerity and the decision to implement it when asked who was responsible for it. For example, when discussing austerity, Maria said:

As always, the Tory party want to, they want to try and make money or save money or whatever so they punish the vulnerable, they blame the vulnerable... Because there’s more people, instead of doing the right things which would be to get that money from

the areas where they could, like from the rich, the very, very rich. They won't do that because they wouldn't get votes.

This goes back to the argument discussed in section 6.2.2 that the narrative of being 'in it together' has not been effective for the most vulnerable groups. These participants, all of whom were or had previously been in receipt of benefits, often expressed that they felt unfairly targeted by cuts. In combination with the government's 'scroungers' and 'sick-note Britain' narratives (Garthwaite, 2014), it is likely that feeling demonised has led to anger at the government which has dominated inactive anti-austerity perspectives of austerity.

### 6.4.3 The legacy of Margaret Thatcher

One unexpected answer to the question of who was responsible for austerity was Margaret Thatcher. While only two participants directly named her as having a role in austerity, a number of others spoke of how the Conservative attitudes underlying austerity go back to Thatcher.

The most detailed argument for Thatcher's responsibility for austerity came from Matthew who argued that it is in the Conservative's DNA to cut, which is partly rooted in Thatcher who "made selfishness acceptable". When pressed on her role in austerity, he argued that "Conservative party doctrine is a new form of Thatcherism" and that she is indirectly responsible due to the culture change she created towards individualism.

The idea that the attitudes and policies of the government stem from Margaret Thatcher was echoed by others. Inactive anti-austerity participant Jane said:

I mean it's all down to the council and the government. The government mainly. I mean, what's her name? Maggie Thatcher. She caused all this at the beginning. Then it's all followed up and it's got worse. I know a lot of people think that as well, people I have spoken to and that feels the same.

In a similar vein, Chloe from Salford suggested that a lot of the problems occurring now have been exacerbated by the changes made under Thatcher. For example, the situation for those unable to afford to rent privately due to benefits changes is made worse by Thatcher's policy of selling off council houses, which created large waiting lists for social housing. Laura from Sheffield spoke more generally of how the Conservatives' "love of cutting public services and their wanting to privatise things" goes 'back to Thatcher times.'

Others did not directly attribute austerity to Thatcher but spoke of how the current political situation has similarities with her time in government. Austerity sceptic Natalie, from Salford, spoke of how austerity is reminiscent of Thatcher's era:

I remember, kind of, in the 80s when you'd see loads and loads of homeless people and then it kind of, well it didn't disappear, but it wasn't noticeable. Now it's really noticeable. [...] And they're kind of begging from people who don't have anything. You know... You see people living in tents and things like that. It's so much worse. It's kind of come full circle. From the, kind of, Thatcher days to now. And I think it's gonna get worse.

Evidently, it varied whether participants directly attributed responsibility for austerity to Margaret Thatcher or whether today's austerity simply reminded them of Britain under her government. It does, however, seem clear that a number of people believe she paved the way for austerity to at least some degree. Although David Cameron did attempt to distance himself from Thatcher in some ways, particularly as Leader of the Opposition before 2010, scholars have identified similarities in their approaches. Some argue that neoliberalism and individualism under Thatcher paved the way for the further rolling back of the state that happened under Cameron through austerity (Evans, 2010; Pantazis, 2016).

These discussions of Margaret Thatcher were all the more striking because other participants also raised her, entirely unprompted, in answering other questions. For example, when I asked Deborah, a Conservative voter, how she saw the next three years going, she spoke of her concerns about a lack of strong leadership in politics. She went on:

I used to really love Maggie Thatcher. But a lot of what she did, I was like no no no, but do you know what, I think she stood for... She didn't say something and do something else. Or certainly to my viewpoint, and I'm sure they all feed us info but she was more believable.

Similarly, while talking about having previously been a Conservative voter, Sandra said of Thatcher that "she knew what she wanted" and "you knew what she stood for."

As Richard Vinen (2009, p. 1) writes, "there was something about Margaret Thatcher's premiership that cut deeply into the personal lives of many British people." A poll from 2019, conducted 40 years after she was first elected as prime minister, indicates that the public sees her as Britain's greatest post-war prime minister, over Winston Churchill and with a significant lead over third placed Tony Blair (Smith, 2019). This shows that not only is Margaret Thatcher seen as a significant leader in British history, she is still revered by a significant proportion of the population. Many also regard her years in power as having made irrevocable changes to British politics and perhaps even the British psyche. Hadley and Ho (2010, p. 2) argue that "Thatcher and the phenomenon of Thatcherism [...] function as a symbolic "wound" in the contemporary imagination, a palpable point where things can be said to have irrecoverably changed."



That continued significance of Thatcher in Britain is certainly borne out in this interview data. Her importance in austerity specifically is also not to be underestimated as, regardless of whether she *should* be held partially responsible, it is clear that many people associate the attitudes and policies of her time with those of post-2010 politics. That the number of people who spoke about Thatcher in relation to austerity is comparable to the number who spoke about the financial crisis and New Labour is particularly striking. In many ways it reemphasises the level of responsibility for austerity that participants place on the Conservatives, because even from a historical perspective Thatcher is mentioned with a comparable frequency to Labour.

## 6.5 Conclusion

The key message from this chapter is that the government's narrative around austerity has been largely, but not wholly, effective in influencing how the public think about austerity. The most successful narrative device has been to speak of austerity as necessary, through phrases such as "we are not doing this because we want to, driven by theory or ideology. We are doing this because we have to" (Cameron, 2010). The majority of participants accept that cuts needed to be made, with the exception of the actively anti-austerity group, who were significantly more likely to speak of cuts as a political choice. However, many of those from the inactive anti-austerity and austerity sceptic groups were critical of the way cuts had been implemented, with many arguing that they had gone too far or had unfairly targeted the vulnerable.

Many participants made a distinction between the idea or need for cuts and the way they had been implemented. This distinction between austerity in principle and practice represents a key difference between the participant groups. Inactive anti-austerity and austerity sceptic groups typically agreed with its need but not its implementation, whereas the pro-austerity group supported both the principle and practice and the actively anti-austerity group opposed both. This shows that the government's narrative has affected people differently, according to their personal circumstances and level of political engagement. Typically, the greater the knowledge of austerity and its effect on others, the more likely people were to oppose it.

When it came to asking participants about who they felt was responsible, the answers were interesting and often surprising. Many attributed responsibility to the Conservative government. In the case of pro-austerity participants this was a positive attribution for undertaking a sensible fiscal approach. For other participants this was much more negative, with the Conservatives instead being blamed for the negative consequences of cuts to services. Labour were held responsible for the need for cuts to only a very limited degree. A surprisingly small number of people spoke of excessive public spending as the cause of the cuts.

Perhaps the most interesting finding was the number of respondents who named Margaret Thatcher as the source of the Conservative attitudes underlying austerity. Some went as far as holding her partially responsible for austerity. This highlights the importance of Thatcher to many living in Britain today and the strength with which she is associated with the attitudes and policies with those of the recent Conservative governments.

## Chapter 7 Austerity and Political Participation

Chapter 6 argued that public understanding and opinions of austerity have been influenced by individual experiences of cuts and government discourse. Building on these arguments, this chapter is concerned with how people's attitudes towards cuts influence their political participation<sup>6</sup>.

Based on civic voluntarism, chapter 2 argued that we could expect to find a muted political response to austerity because those who are most affected by cuts will lack the resources to participate. Resources are key to political participation because actions such as voting, protesting or political party membership rely on participants having sufficient time, money and good health (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Lijphart, 1997; Perea, 2002; Mattila *et al.*, 2013; Gollust and Rahn, 2015). With austerity leading to increased health inequalities, reduced benefits payments and financial instability (McGrath, Griffin and Mundy, 2015; Mckenzie, 2015; BMA board of science, 2016; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Hall, 2019b) I argued that many people are likely to have found themselves less able to participate in politics.

Furthermore, based on grievance theory, those less affected by cuts will not act either in support or opposition to cuts because they do not have a grievance to communicate (Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). The cuts have been disproportionately felt by those in poor areas, living on benefits and/or with disabilities (Duffy, 2013; Garthwaite, 2014; Beatty and Fothergill, 2016). Yet, as shown in chapters Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, there are many who have been relatively protected from cuts due to greater resources and lower reliance on public services. As a result, these people are much less likely to feel any grievance related to austerity and therefore unlikely to either actively support or oppose it as a policy.

Finally, policy feedback theory tells us that public policy can provoke or depress political participation (Béland, 2010). Of particular relevance to austerity is the argument that the narratives used by political elites influences the way that members of the public think about policies. Attitudes to policies then have consequences for broader attitudes to politics, including political trust and self-efficacy (Przeworski, 1985; Skocpol, 1995).

As shown in Chapters Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, austerity has had an asymmetric impact, resulting in declining resources for some but little effect on others, along with a widely accepted government narrative in support of it. Therefore, together, these theories suggest that a

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<sup>6</sup> Sections 7.4, 7.6 and 7.7 **Error! Reference source not found.** are based on my article 'The futility of participation: Austerity and public reluctance to oppose it' (Harrison, 2021b) although additional details and data have been added.

controversial and all-encompassing policy such as austerity will nonetheless fail to provoke widespread or sustained political participation. This chapter therefore addresses the extent to which the public have participated in response to austerity.

The chapter begins with a reminder of the participant typology from chapter 6, providing details of each group's political participation. It then takes a broad look at how politically active the interview participants were and their most common forms of participation to facilitate comparison with their austerity-related participation. The remainder of the chapter then focuses on austerity, exploring the data using key themes from the literature review. It begins by considering the role of resources in austerity-related political participation, analysing how those with limited and declining resources have been inhibited from opposing the cuts. Section 7.4 examines how the government's narrative choices, as discussed in chapter 6, have affected people's propensity to participate in response to the cuts. Drawing on the arguments from section 2.3.4 that austerity may have exacerbated pre-existing dissatisfaction with democracy, section 7.5 explores whether austerity has increased distrust in politicians.

The following two sections then focus on those who are supportive of austerity, and the extent to which they have expressed that support, and those who actively oppose it. Throughout these analyses, I look at how personal circumstances influence participation, to ascertain the extent to which differing impacts of austerity on individuals influence their responses. The first of these sections draws on grievance theory, examining the extent to which a lack of personal grievance with austerity undermines the desire to express either support or opposition for it. The latter looks at the outliers – those who have actively opposed austerity – and argues that, despite austerity being a significant focus for these participants, their overall high levels of participation suggest that austerity is just one of many issues that mobilise them. Finally, in section 7.8 I conclude, arguing that the impact of cuts on individuals' resources and personal experiences of public services, as well as the influence of government narratives, combine to undermine both active resistance and support of austerity.

## **7.1 Participant typology**

Before exploring the impact of austerity on political participation, it is valuable to first return to the typology described in section 6.1 to examine in more detail how participation varies between the groups on a more general level. Table 3 provides a simplified version of the typology table presented in section 6.1 but with additional information on participation.

Table 3: Participant typology - political participation

	<b>Pro-austerity</b>	<b>Austerity sceptic</b>	<b>Inactive anti-austerity</b>	<b>Actively anti-austerity</b>
<b>Personal impact</b>	Low	Low to medium	High	Low to medium
<b>Awareness of impact on others</b>	Low	Medium to high	High	High
<b>Attitude to austerity</b>	Support austerity in principle and in practice	Most support principle but none in practice	Some support principle but none in practice	Oppose principle and in practice
<b>Political activity</b>	Somewhat active	Somewhat active	Somewhat active	Highly active
<b>Typical forms of participation</b>	Voting, signing petitions	Voting, signing petitions	Voting, signing petitions	Voting, protesting, political party membership
<b>Participatory response to austerity</b>	Low to none – no motivation due to satisfaction with austerity	Low to none – mixed feelings about austerity and/or feelings of inefficacy	None – unable or unwilling due to lack of resources and/or feelings of inefficacy	High – motivated by negative opinion of austerity

There was little to differentiate between the four groups in terms of their general levels of participation, except for the actively anti-austerity group who were significantly more politically active than the others. Many from this group were active members of political parties, although unsurprisingly never the Conservative party, and were either first motivated to join as a direct result of austerity or subsequently became active on the issue. Very few participants were politically inactive, but those that were inactive were evenly distributed across the pro-austerity, austerity sceptic and inactive anti-austerity groups.

The biggest differentiation between these three groups were those discussed in previous chapters: their personal experiences of cuts and their attitudes to austerity. However, while the austerity-related political participation of these groups is ultimately similar in being low to none, the reasons for their inaction vary across the groups. The pro-austerity group had little motivation to participate in politics in response to austerity, other than in one case to vote Conservative, due to their satisfaction with the policy. Austerity sceptics were unlikely to participate in response to austerity due to conflicted feelings about whether spending cuts were a good policy. Many also felt they lacked the time to engage in politics beyond voting or signing petitions due to their work

or caring commitments. Inactive anti-austerity participants, meanwhile, were often either unable or unwilling to participate in politics due to a lack of resources and scepticism about the benefits of doing so. There was a strong sense from this group that politicians would not listen anyway.

It is worth noting that participants do not always fit exactly into these groups. For example, party membership was significantly more common among the 'actively anti-austerity' group, but not exclusive to this group. Participants Mark and Michael were both members of the Liberal Democrats but I classified them as 'austerity sceptics' because both exhibited limited reliance on public services, little personal impact of cuts and very few examples of political resistance to austerity.

## 7.2 General participation

Following the overview of the typology groups, this section explores the extent to which my interviewees participate in politics. By examining how people engage in politics in general, we can gauge two important points. The first is that by exploring whether people participate in politics we can determine whether it is plausible that they might choose to actively support or oppose austerity. For example, if my research participants, or indeed a particular group within them, are not politically active, it seems unlikely that they would engage in response to austerity specifically. Furthermore, for those who do participate in politics, by exploring the ways in which they engage, we can establish the ways we might expect them to take action to support or oppose austerity.

### 7.2.1 Voting

Almost all the participants I interviewed said they voted in most, if not all, elections. A couple of people said that they do not necessarily vote for a politician but may sometimes spoil ballots, but this is still political participation in a meaningful sense. Pro-austerity Sandeep was the only person who spoke of being too busy to vote in recent elections, citing his work and study commitments as getting in the way. There was a sense of political apathy from Sandeep, as when I asked if he considered himself politically active, he said, "no, in recent years, no. Pretty much into my own bubble." He spoke of having engaged with politics 'briefly' around the 2010 election when Nick Clegg was standing in his Sheffield constituency, but this appears to have been limited to discussions with colleagues about politics.

Although others expressed concerns or frustration about politics, no one else that I spoke to appeared apathetic as such. Those who were inactive were typically so out of a feeling of futility or inefficacy rather than lack of interest. For example, Megan from Salford told me that she had not voted for about four years. When I asked why, she said:

I just don't trust any political party. The promises they make they never come through. They'll say what they need to say to get in power and after that they just basically do what they want.

Megan expressed strong political views and demonstrated knowledge of the political situation, which suggests that rather than apathy, Megan's unwillingness to participate stems from alienation. This finding follows the arguments of Hay and Stoker (2009), among others, that it is disenchantment from politics that explains the public's withdrawal from participation rather than apathy (see also Valgarðsson, 2019).

However, only three participants said that they did not vote or only sometimes voted, which suggests an unusually politically active sample, not reflective of general election turnout of 65 to 69 per cent in the last 10 years (McInnes, 2020). These participants were from the pro-austerity, austerity sceptic and inactive anti-austerity groups, suggesting no meaningful difference between the groups in terms of voting. However, it is not surprising that all of the actively anti-austerity participants did vote.

When asked why they voted, most people framed their answers in terms of a sense of obligation, with one participant believing she had to vote by law. Although some people did discuss voting to influence the outcome of an election, strikingly an equal number of people claimed that voting gives citizens the right to complain. There is good reason for this rationale, as argued by Lomasky and Brennan (2000, pp. 81–2):

...someone who chooses to be absent from the polls thereby expresses detachment from the enterprise, if not indeed active disdain. The doings of the polity are not his affair, he proclaims through his absence. It can go on without him—and he very well without it. That which is a matter of profound significance to his neighbors does not merit the allocation of even a few minutes of token symbolic support. It is for this reason that one who fails to vote imperils any right subsequently to complain about the government—not in the technical sense of being legally barred from doing so, but as an implication of common decency.

The sense of common decency is a fitting summary of how participants described people who choose not to vote. There was a sense that it is rude for people to complain about the political situation if they have chosen not to participate in elections. For example, Deborah said:

I don't think anybody has the right to moan about anything if they don't exercise their vote. These people that say it's a waste of time, 'blah blah blah', but I think they're very wrong. I don't think they have the right to comment.

Similarly, Dan from Sheffield described voting as “the bare minimum effort” and said that if you do not vote “you don’t have a leg to stand on really in my view”. When asked how he would respond to someone who complained but did not vote he said, “go and have your say and, where you are supposed to, and then we’ll talk.”

Some participants explicitly argued that complaining was only acceptable if you had tried to change the situation. Laura from Sheffield explained that her sister-in-law has never voted but still complains about the political situation. She added, “I don’t listen to her because I think, if you’re not going to vote, how are you going to change anything?” It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that of those who claimed that voting is necessary for the right to complain, over half did not mention influencing the outcome of the election when asked their motivation for voting. This may imply that for these people the primary aim of voting is to complain, or at least to be justified in doing so.

This analysis may be overly cynical, however. It is not a given that voting in order to have the right to complain means that the voter *will* complain, simply that they can, should they wish to. A number of people expressed frustration that no political parties or indeed the political system itself were ideal, but they instead vote for the least bad option. As such, they may reasonably anticipate having something to complain about because they know in advance that they will not fully support whoever is elected. Michael from Hampshire argued:

I might not think [the decision-making process is] adequate, but I think it’s really important that we participate in that. And I don’t see we’ve got any right to complain if we haven’t participated, even if we’re picking from two or three inadequate options, we still ought to pick the most adequate of what we are being offered. Rather than just opting out and complaining about whatever happens.

This indicates that there is still a duty to participate, even if you do not fully support any one candidate because if you do not there is a risk that the result will be your least preferred option. Similarly, Christina in Sheffield felt that people should still take the chance to influence the outcome of the election, even if it was unlikely to change. She explained:

there’s no point in sitting there and moaning and saying, oh [complaining noise]; yes, as one individual you can’t change the world but if everybody sat and thought like that and there was all that apathy then nothing would ever get changed would it?

It is remarkable how frequently the idea that voting gives citizens a right to complain was raised in the interviews, because it is a motivation that is little discussed by political scientists. Aside from Lomasky and Brennan’s work discussed above I am not aware of any other direct discussions of this topic. In Henn and Foard’s (2014) survey of young people, they asked the extent to which



participants agreed with the statement “I would only consider I have the right to complain about the government if I voted in the General Election”. However, in their paper there is no engagement with why this was asked or what it shows, beyond being loosely associated with the idea of voting as a civic duty.

Complaint is discussed more often in a much broader sense in relation to political participation. For example, Maciej Kowalewski (2019) links the idea of complaint to public dissatisfaction with politics and makes a distinction between inactive complaining and instrumental complaining. The former is ritualistic and has no other end, while for the latter “the essential element is to make public the private complaint” (Kowalewski, 2019, p. 457). Official complaints, i.e. those which are directed at institutions through formal channels, are a clear example of instrumental complaining. These complaints can often be a form of political participation, particularly in authoritarian regimes where more conventional participation can be more difficult. Formal complaint is specifically done with the goal of effecting change and can be successful in doing so (Henry, 2012; Zeng, Yuan and Feiock, 2019). However, these papers focus on complaint as participation, rather than voting to justify complaint. Complaint clearly has an important role to play in political participation, so the role of voting in the ‘right to complain’ is potentially a new avenue for research.

### **7.2.2 Other forms of participation**

After voting, signing petitions was the next most common form of participation, even among those who did not routinely vote. Many people expressed a degree of scepticism about whether petitions had any real influence, with Chloe asking “do they really work? Do they really have any sort of impact? Or is, you know, am I just doing a load of clicks just for the sake of it? I don’t know.” However, the low cost to participating in this way appeared to balance the low chance of success, so the method remained popular. As one participant said, “it’s worth trying.”

A number of participants attended demonstrations or had done in the past, although again many raised questions about the extent to which they bring about change. Sophie from London described how in the past she had attended a lot of protests and sit ins but had stopped since she had her daughter. She explained, “I just don’t go on marches anymore because it’s something that politicians are doing that feels so depressing and [...] I just feel exhausted, like I can’t do anything, I can’t change anything.” Others were more optimistic though, with a few mentioning having attended recent protests against Donald Trump’s visit to the UK or Brexit marches. Some spoke of the success they had experienced with protests, such as Denise in Salford. She said, “I did a couple of marches against the closure of our maternity unit in Salford. We now have, for pretty safe births, we now have a birthing unit in Salford, which is great.” However, the majority of

participants said they either had never attended a demonstration or had not done so for a long time. Some said they would like to engage in protests more, but childcare was frequently cited as an issue, particularly for women. Nicole in Hampshire, for example, explained that she would like to get more involved when her children are older.

Around a quarter of the participants were members of political parties, which suggests they were significantly overrepresented in the sample. In 2019 just 1.7 per cent of the British population were members of the Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat parties (Audickas, Dempsey and Loft, 2019). The majority of participants who were members of political parties came from the actively anti-austerity group, although a small proportion of the austerity sceptics were also party members. Just less than half of these participants were members of the Labour party, the rest were variously from the Liberal Democrats, Greens and Socialist parties. No participants were members of the Conservative party. Given that Conservative members make up less than 0.5 per cent of the British population (Audickas, Dempsey and Loft, 2019) it is not unrepresentative that there were no Conservatives in the sample. However, given the substantial overrepresentation of Labour members, it may be the case that participants from parties that were more critical of austerity were more likely to volunteer to take part.

Overall, all the research participants engaged in at least one form of political participation, although the extent of their activities varied considerably by group. The actively anti-austerity participants were highly politically active, engaging in voting, petitions, protesting, political parties, campaign groups and, in some cases, standing for office. In contrast, the inactive anti-austerity group demonstrated limited political activity, typically voting and signing petitions but with little motivation or resources for further participation. The pro-austerity and austerity groups were somewhat more active, but only in very limited ways, in that they were more likely to contact a politician or post about politics on social media.

Examining the general participation levels of interviewees provides important context for understanding their engagement (or lack thereof) with austerity. Given that, aside from a few exceptions, the interview participants were at least somewhat politically active, it is plausible that a significant proportion would engage with austerity as an issue. These data also indicate that it is through voting and signing petitions that people are most likely to engage with politics. We therefore might expect to find these the most common means through which people might support or oppose austerity. The remainder of the chapter will therefore explore the extent to which these patterns are found when looking at specifically austerity-related participation.

### 7.3 Civic voluntarism: the role of resources in austerity-related participation

The first theory discussed in chapter 2 connecting political participation and austerity was civic voluntarism, which argues that resources are necessary to participate (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). This section explores how the loss or reduction in public services has affected the resources that the most vulnerable people have and what impact this has had on their political participation.

As predicted by the theory of civic voluntarism, many people are prevented from taking action by the circumstances that put them most at risk under austerity. For example, for some participants parenthood had increased their reliance upon the state due to their need for physical and mental health support, as well as practical support with skills such as breastfeeding. As discussed in section 5.2.3, many services previously provided for parents such as health visitors and breastfeeding support have either been reduced or withdrawn entirely under austerity. This means that many parents are more vulnerable to the spending cuts. Yet, Nicole, a young parent, who described herself as political, spoke of how childcare makes it difficult to participate in politics as much as she would like. She said, "I've got enough to do really. It's not like I don't care, I just haven't got time really at the moment". As such, not only does parenthood put people at greater risk of the effects of austerity, it can also reduce people's ability to participate. This means that spending cuts, whether deliberately or not, are targeted at those who are least able to respond through political participation.

Adriana described her very high levels of political activism, including standing as a local councillor on an explicitly anti-cuts platform and engaging in union activities. However, she does so at no insignificant risk because she expressed concern that if her employer found out about her political activism it could get her blacklisted from work across her industry. This participant is unusual in her determination to participate nonetheless, as for those in precarious employment or working in certain industries such dismissal and blacklisting is a real risk (Darlington, 2002; Gall, 2009, 2012). Although for this participant the risk to employment security did not prevent her from participating, it is very plausible that this is a significant barrier for other people in such fields. For those in low paid and precarious employment, expressing opposition to austerity through political activism may simply not be an option. Again, this demonstrates how those who are often most vulnerable to austerity are also less able to speak out against it.

However, not only does austerity most significantly affect those who are less able to participate, its negative impacts also often exacerbate the difficulties that prevent them participating in politics. One participant became depressed due to the financial difficulties she faced as a result of

being declined Universal Credit following the benefits changes. Having successfully appealed this decision, her now improving mental health allows her to be more politically active. Yet, she spoke of how her struggles prevented her from taking action previously:

I get fired up because in the past I've been so low that I couldn't get fired up. Because you just want to kill yourself. And I don't think they realise the effect it has on individuals, they really don't.

This is a particularly stark example of how the impact of austerity on mental health plays a role in preventing people from participating in politics. Sadly, research suggests it is not unique as the rollout of Universal Credit has been linked with growing depression and suicide among claimants (Alston, 2018; Cheetham, Moffatt and Addison, 2018). Mental health struggles can be a significant barrier to political participation and good mental health should be considered a resource important to participation in the same way that time and money are. Conditions such as depression are associated with decreased voter turnout and other political participation (Ojeda, 2015). The impact of cuts on mental wellbeing for vulnerable people is thus an important demonstration of how austerity can inhibit participation.

Despite these participants describing how they have expressed opposition, it was predominantly those who were already politically active that had opposed cuts. While austerity alone was rarely the instigation for political participation, it is interesting and somewhat unexpected that a number of participants were nonetheless motivated by it. Despite this, it is still the predominant pattern among these participants that those who are little affected by austerity are not motivated to participate either in support or opposition of it. For those who are affected, it is also true that either they participate very little in general or are limited in how they can participate when struggling under the negative consequences of the cuts. Even where austerity doesn't directly inhibit political participation, those who are most at risk from cuts to public services are also those who are less politically active in general. This suggests that broadly the theories put forward in Chapter 2 are reflected in this data.

## **7.4 Policy feedback: the role of narrative in austerity-related participation**

An important question of this research is how the government's narrative choices have influenced levels of political participation in response to austerity. The government presented austerity as necessary, fair and akin to common sense notions of household budgeting (Stanley, 2013; Konzelmann, 2014; Seabrooke and Thomsen, 2016). Policy feedback theory tells us that narrative devices such as these are likely to affect how people see their own political efficacy and therefore

affect their propensity to participate in politics (Przeworski, 1985; Skocpol, 1995). The evidence from chapter Chapter 6 suggests that, while generally effective, these narratives have had a variable influence on attitudes according to individuals' personal circumstances. Taking this analysis further, this section explores how the impact of these narratives on political participation also varies.

#### 7.4.1 Futility of opposing cuts

It is difficult to directly attribute motivation to participate in politics, or lack thereof, directly to government narrative choices. However, there are indications that the way the government has chosen to speak about policy decisions has, in some cases, suppressed participation. As discussed in section 6.3, many 'austerity sceptic' and 'inactive anti-austerity' participants spoke of their frustration at the way cuts had been implemented, but nonetheless accepted that cuts had to be made. As such, for many this made political participation with the aim of objecting to cuts seem pointless.

Multiple participants spoke of a feeling of hopelessness because of "a lack of confidence that change was possible" due to a sense that the government would not listen. Some participants spoke of a 'gap' between the government and the people, expressing a desire for better communication between the two. There was a clear sense that many people did not feel heard by those in power, particularly in relation to issues about which they have expertise, for example from being front-line workers. Many participants expressed that political participation is futile because the government is not interested in listening. When asked 'have you ever done anything to express opposition towards [austerity]?' Jane, an inactive anti-austerity participant, said:

No, no I haven't because I look at it, you can have, you can say what you say, but at the end of the day they [politicians]'ve already got the answers. It doesn't matter whether you have a rally or whatever, whatever that is, it doesn't matter, you can write things and send it to them but it doesn't matter to us because they've already made their minds up.

The idea that the cuts are inevitable and that participation in politics would not achieve anything was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews. Another inactive anti-austerity participant, Megan, said:

I just don't think your voice will be heard. I just think you'll be one of millions that are absolutely screaming at the moment and no one is listening to them. I just don't think anything will be done until possibly someone else's in power and even then it's gonna take a long time to turn it around.

Both of these participants had personal experience of the negative consequences of cuts to services. As shown by the 'inactive anti-austerity' group in Table 3, it is those who are most badly affected by austerity that are more likely to feel that participation in response to it is pointless.

As argued previously, the narrative around being 'in it together' has not been effective amongst those for whom cuts have been most detrimental. However, the idea that cuts were necessary and 'had' to be implemented may have contributed to the sense of inevitability that many participants, particularly those from the inactive anti-austerity group, expressed. Another participant said, "In any sort of changes to spending, I don't think there's any hope. I really don't [...] we don't have any power." The government's argument that there is no other possible response to national debt beyond spending cuts is likely to have discouraged such people from trying to oppose the cuts.

#### **7.4.2 Lack of information about austerity**

While some participants had strong views on the effectiveness of opposing cuts, others were less able to articulate why they had not engaged with the issue through political participation. One reason for this hesitance was due to a lack of knowledge about austerity. As discussed in chapter 4, when asked what they understood by the word austerity, many responded hesitantly or stated that they were unsure.

When I asked one participant, Paul, whether he had done anything to oppose austerity, he answered, "no. Apart from swearing at the coalition government quite regularly. I think the way that it's got a bad press, that it's still being rolled out, I think that shows that it's a calculated political move." However, when I asked him why he had not opposed the cuts, he instead objected to the lack of a clear definition of austerity, even telling me as the interviewer that I should have come up with one. It may be that he felt defensive at what he may have seen as a suggestion that he *should* have done something to oppose it, although his tone did not imply defensiveness. Alternatively, his change of subject to the definition of austerity could suggest that the reason he has not opposed it is due to a lack of confidence in his knowledge of what austerity is.

For many interview participants, lack of information about austerity provoked a sense of powerlessness, both in taking action to support or oppose cuts, because they lacked the political self-efficacy. Even those who were not overtly critical of austerity expressed concerns about the way the government communicated the policy. When asked who she thought was responsible for the spending cuts, austerity sceptic Deborah, initially responded, "I think the government probably to a great extent because I'm sure they know an awful lot more than we are ever privy to." She later added:

I think sometimes we get given smokescreens [...] I think the government are very cautious and they just drip feed a little bit of information. I don't think we get enough to make an informed decision on a lot of things. [...] But I do feel powerless as an individual to know what to do.

The sense of powerlessness expressed here suggests that the ambiguous and simplistic language chosen by politicians has created, or at least contributed to, a level of distrust that can be disabling for people when it comes to political participation. This provides powerful evidence for policy feedback's claims that policies and the way elites talk about them plays a role in attitudes to those policies specifically, but also more generalised attitudes to politics (Przeworski, 1985; Skocpol, 1995).

## **7.5 Dissatisfaction with democracy: austerity as part of generalised distrust in politics**

The evidence so far suggests that government narratives and pressure on resources have, at least in part, prompted the negative attitudes towards the efficacy of participation in response to cuts. However, it is also important to situate austerity in the broader political landscape. While cuts appear to undermine trust in politics in general, as suggested by policy feedback, so too does pre-existing generalised distrust in politics undermine the desire to participate in response to austerity specifically.

As discussed in chapter 2, there is a vast body of literature arguing that disaffection with politics in general is growing and suppressing political participation (see, e.g., Crouch, 2000; Norris, 2011; Mair, 2013). While nearly all the interviewees participated in politics, usually through voting and signing petitions (as discussed in section 7.1), many felt that political participation they did engage in did not achieve much. As such, this perceived lack of efficacy undermined their unwillingness to do more. It is therefore important to acknowledge that many participants were not that politically engaged on *any* topic, in part due to lack of trust in politics beyond just austerity.

Distrust of government was widespread among participants, even those who regularly vote. Certain parties were singled out for criticism – austerity sceptic Deborah said that 'in her heart' she felt most aligned to the Liberal Democrats "but I don't see them as a party that's very engaged, really together and have the ability to do anything." Instead, she typically votes Conservative. However, many other participants felt that the Conservative party, and sometimes politicians from other parties, were only interested in looking out for themselves or people like them. Angela from Sheffield's attitude to politicians was typical of this:

I firmly believe – I mean all politicians really, but certainly the Tories, have never done anything good for this country in the last couple of decades. Not for people like me, you know, not for ordinary people that's on minimum wage or on benefits and that. They look after their own.

Similarly, an inactive anti-austerity participant said that the Conservatives' main priority is preserving electoral support, which means that when they need to raise public funds they take from the vulnerable rather than the rich. Many actively anti-austerity participants also echoed this highly critical view of the Conservative party.

Others were less cynical but still expressed negative associations with the party. Austerity sceptic Laura from Sheffield spoke of her impression that Conservatives spend less time visiting public services than Labour and when they do "it looks a façade, it looks false". She added that Labour "are amongst the people and go out and want to be involved and listen. I don't see that with the Conservatives at the moment."

However, it was also common for participants to be disparaging of the Labour Party, including those who were Labour voters. At the time of the interviews Jeremy Corbyn was leader of the Labour Party and almost all comments about him personally were critical. The most common complaint about Corbyn's leadership was that the party had moved too far to the left. One participant said that the Labour party under Corbyn had "gone super far left, to the point where it might not be sustainable." Another described Corbyn as "more of a Marxist, you know, a trot." However, other participants instead criticised his Brexit stance, saying "I'm not sure I'll vote Labour because if they remain on the fence, I will be voting for a remain group, whoever that may be. Because I'm definitely, definitely pro-remain and Labour is just sitting on the fence at the moment."

In contrast, Adriana, an actively anti-austerity participant, criticised Corbyn for allowing Labour councils to implement cuts, accusing him of trying to "keep the Blairites happy". Another said that she had joined the Labour party in the hope that they would "push towards the left" but moved to the Green party because she "was disappointed by the way that things moved forward". I interpreted this to mean that she left because the party did not move far enough to the left.

For those who were Labour voters, or were strongly opposed to voting Conservative, this lack of confidence in Corbyn as leader left some in a dilemma over who to vote for. More than one participant expressed a conflict between supporting their local Labour MP and appearing to support the leadership. Austerity sceptic Liz said, "I do find it hard to vote for [my local MP] because he's Labour and it's Jeremy Corbyn, because [Corbyn] might think it's a vote for him, because it bloody well isn't."



Interestingly, despite these critiques of the major parties, the data provides no evidence of support for populist parties or policies. This is contrary to the argument of Peter Mair (2013) who argues that significant levels of distrust in government can lead to support for populism. One exception is that some participants expressed concerns about immigration and money spent on foreign aid, although it was more remarkable how few people mentioned such issues given their prevalence in the media. Many scholars argue that support for populism is most often associated with low socioeconomic status, low education and unemployment (Rydgren, 2007; Hawkins, Riding and Mudde, 2012; Rydgren and Ruth, 2013). However, even in the areas with the highest deprivation, Salford and Sheffield, there was little evidence of these views.

Participants were also highly critical of politicians more generally, claiming they do not keep their word, conceal information, snipe at one another rather than dealing with important issues and infight. This generalised distrust is disabling for many; as Michael said:

I don't think they [politicians] are being evil but I often think they're being unimaginative and not quite open and honest with the public about saying, 'look, these are the choices, do that or this, spend here, in that case you can't spend there'. [...] But I think most people, a lot of people I know, feel quite powerless in that decision-making process.

Some participants spoke of a desire to completely change the way politics worked in the UK. A few participants expressed a wish for greater involvement of the general public in policy decisions and public consultations, ideas which were reminiscent of the approaches used in deliberative democracy (see Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Ryan & Smith, 2014). For example, Julie from Hampshire said,

You've got the government here and the people here and there doesn't seem to be anything in between. And I think it needs to be more person centred, we need more men off the street and women off the street actually giving their opinion. And not just giving their opinion but being allowed to be part of the decision-making.

Such participants were keen to have a voice in policymaking and felt that if there was a forum in which people could speak to those in power and share their views that better decisions might be made. However, the current lack of such a forum means that some feel they have no avenue to participate in decision-making, leading to greater disconnect from the political elite. As discussed in section 2.3.4, Pippa Norris (2011) argues that the public's expectations of democracy are rising, which is leading to greater dissatisfaction as politics fails to meet those expectations. This matches the criticisms raised by the participants who felt that they should have more of a say in decision-making. Their frustrations at not being listened to are born out of the expectation that

they should have opportunities to be more actively involved in the policy process, which indicates high expectations of democracy.

Rather than engaging more in politics as it exists now, some participants sought more extensive changes to the political system. Megan from Salford spoke of wishing for a new political party.

Yeah I just think [the parties are] all as bad as each other now. I think we need a new party, like, maybe made from younger people or something like, I don't know. But something needs to happen, we need something new. I think everything is really outdated now, I think we need something new that people can put their trust in.

Austerity sceptic Steven had a more radical approach. He said, "I don't trust any of them now. I actually think the world would be a better place if we got rid of all of them. People could run their own affairs." Like those advocating for greater participatory opportunities, he felt that part of the issue was the disconnect between the government and the public. He argued, "I think democracy doesn't work unless you actually meet the person face-to-face. If you get some leaflet through the door from some person you've never met before, never spoken to, what's the point in voting for someone you've never seen?" Although his suggestion of getting rid of politicians was more extreme than many others the reasons behind his idea echoed the sentiments of many other participants.

For many, these negative attitudes towards politicians translate into a lack of motivation to participate in politics. When I asked austerity sceptic Zahra whether she had ever thought of joining a political party, she said "No. Like I said, I'm not that into politics. I find it all a bit too corrupt if I'm honest." Dan, meanwhile, spoke of how his disillusionment with politics in Britain was such that he would consider leaving the country if it weren't for his family living here. This was in part due to Brexit but he also blamed his desire to leave on "self-serving politicians".

Sophie from London also felt disillusioned from politics, to the extent that she had given up many forms of political participation despite previously being very active. She explained:

I just don't go on marches anymore because it's something that politicians are doing that feels so depressing and I think I've sort of reached, become one of those people that's just, I just feel exhausted, like I can't do anything, I can't change anything and I'm not even interested in talking about it or debating it or anything because I just hate the whole system. I think that's where I've got to.

Sophie's disengagement meant that, while her attitudes to cuts generally were very negative, she could not speak in detail about austerity as she said she was no longer interested in following the news. As a result, her critical view of austerity did not translate into political activity because of

her broader disillusionment with the political process, demonstrating how a general cynicism about politics reduces activism specifically in response to austerity.

Another clear example of cynicism about politics came from asking participants about how they anticipated the next three to four years going, should there be no general election before 2022. All participants<sup>7</sup> expressed highly negative expectations for the future, along with a great deal of uncertainty due to the volatile nature of politics. Initial responses to the question included answers such as “scary”, “downhill” and “it’s the kind of time you want to stick your head in your hands, isn’t it?” This sense of worry about the future, in combination with the strong feeling among many participants that no political party represents them, is likely to ultimately undermine willingness to participate in general.

The distrust in government and disconnect from decision-makers found in this data largely reflects the themes found across political science to explain declining participation across recent decades. Cynicism about politics is clearly widespread and, arguably, goes beyond its failure to meet the high expectations of citizens suggested by Norris. As demonstrated above, beyond feeling that engaging in politics would not achieve enough, many people felt that participation would achieve nothing at all. To a significant extent, then, participation in response to austerity is likely to have been a casualty of the public’s wider disillusionment with politics and lack of faith that participation will achieve change.

## **7.6 Grievance theory and support for austerity**

Of course, not all participants were critical of austerity. The focus of this research is largely on the negative consequences of austerity and, therefore, whether there has been public resistance to the policy. However, as discussed earlier, the impact of cuts has been asymmetric across the country meaning that there is a significant proportion of people for whom the impacts have been small or virtually non-existent. In Chapter 6 I argued that those who were least affected typically had less detailed knowledge of austerity and its negative impacts and were more likely to be in favour of it as a policy.

For those who were in favour of the spending cuts, there was nonetheless little appetite for political participation. The ‘pro-austerity’ participants, who were clear that they were in favour of austerity, had done very little to express support for it. Grievance theory argues that discontent caused by external shocks, particularly economic shocks, can promote political participation as

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<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the first three participants who were not asked because this question was a later addition.

people are driven to express their grievances (Kriesi, 2014). Even if one isn't personally affected by a political issue, some knowledge of the issue is important to be motivated to act (Scheufele, Skanakan and Kim, 2002). For some, therefore, the lack of personal grievance with the political situation and lack of awareness about it meant that they had no motivation to express their views.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the pro-austerity participants showed little awareness of the struggles that some people have faced. Indeed, there was even scepticism about how bad things had been. For example, despite herself living on a relatively low income, Christina in Sheffield was very critical of those who were facing difficulties:

I think there are some people that possibly, they think they are affected by it, but they are probably not so much. And I think some of it comes down to your personal take on it. You know, I understand that I only have a finite amount of money that comes in each month and that's what I've got. I am not a natural person that wants to be in a lot of debt, you know, and things. Whereas, there's some people that I know that run up credit card bills and all sorts and they have no intention of paying it back.

This quotation indicates a strong sense of blame towards those who have been affected by the cuts and, like other participants, she conflates austerity with household budgeting. This attitude has contributed to her support of austerity as a policy. When asked if she felt the cuts were the right decision, she said, "yes, something has got to give somewhere, hasn't it?" However, Christina had not taken action to actively support austerity which is likely to be because she did not have any grievances to communicate.

These attitudes were broadly reflective of the wider group, who typically had very little to say regarding political participation directly relating to cuts. When I asked Linda and David from Hampshire, who I interviewed together, whether they had ever done anything to express their support for austerity in a political way they responded:

Linda: No.

David: Not politically, we said to our children, you know, budget, do it sensibly. We encourage them to...

Linda: Don't spend beyond your means.

It is interesting that they mentioned discussions with their children, however it appeared that they were referring to household budgeting rather than political issues. It was clear, though, that they had little motivation to take political action.

There were just a couple of exceptions to this theme of non-participation. When asked if austerity had ever played a part in who he voted for, David said, “fractionally. You know you want to vote for somebody responsible enough to have a budget”. However, no one else mentioned voting specifically to support austerity. Another exception was that Christina in Sheffield mentioned having signed petitions to *oppose* spending cuts, such as cuts to free TV licenses for older people. This shows that even those most supportive of the cuts do not necessarily agree with every aspect of it, which is unsurprising given the way the policy has touched almost every aspect of government. It would be unusual for a member of the public to support every individual policy change. However, there was no other evidence of active opposition to cuts within this group.

Most of these participants were politically active to at least the extent of regularly voting. Two were formerly polling clerks and one had previously been an ‘armchair supporter’ of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Christina was the most politically active, as she had a role as a Parish councillor, however she did not see this as an inherently political role. Speaking about running as an independent, she said, “we are trying to have no politics at all. That is our main strive to keep the politics out at a parish level.” She did not speak about austerity in this context and it did not appear to play any role in her goals as a councillor.

The other members of this group gave only limited examples of their participation and my interpretation was that they were not highly politically active. That none of these participants explicitly expressed support for austerity through political participation is therefore not surprising because they lacked any significant predisposition to participate. An issue on which they felt positively towards government policy was unlikely to provoke participation.

Sandeep differed slightly from the other pro-austerity participants because he did not participate in politics in any way. He spoke of being too busy to for political activity of any kind, including voting. When asked if he followed politics and changes in the country, he mentioned following the progress of Brexit but “other than that I have no idea what is going on with politics.” As was typical of this group, though, he stated that he agreed with austerity both in principle and in practice but, as expected, had never done anything to express support for it.

This lack of motivation to express active support for austerity is unsurprising as people who are less dependent on public services are likely to be both less personally affected and less aware of cuts. For example, in the case of Linda and David, both were content with how they saw spending cuts being enacted, apart from minor concerns about MPs’ pay rises. Sandeep expressed general satisfaction with public services and was not aware of any impact on people he knew. He said, “I do not have much idea because other than going to the public services like councils and parks and libraries and NHS I don’t have other idea [sic] how [austerity] would impact on the day-to-day life of the public.”

As discussed in Chapter 6, these participants had broadly accepted the government's justification for cuts and had little experience of its negative consequences. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that they were content with what they understood by austerity and therefore had no motivation to be active on the issue. These data thus support the thesis that lack of awareness and personal impact is integral to lack of participation in response to austerity for those who are not opposed to it.

## 7.7 Austerity mobilisation

It is important to acknowledge that, despite the relatively muted response, there are people who have been mobilised by austerity. The 'actively anti-austerity' group from the interviews in this research represent a small but significant proportion of the participants. Many of them were already politically active and have taken up austerity as a focus in their activism, while others were mobilised by austerity to participate in politics for the first time. Age is a key factor, as for younger participants austerity was introduced at a time when they were first becoming politically aware. Sarah said:

[When I started university] I considered myself to be politically aware but I wasn't really engaged in any politics directly and then after the election in 2010 I was immediately unhappy with what kind of what policies I saw coming up but I didn't really know how to express that. And it was the student demonstrations of November 2010 that was like my first time I was able to like express my frustration and anger. But it wasn't just about fees it was about kind of everything and then through that I then met a political socialist student group and became really active for a few years.

The story for Amy in London was similar. She had participated in protests about austerity while at university and then had joined a political party, in this case Labour, in order to sustain the momentum of her activism after she graduated. For these participants, austerity came at a time when politics was taking on a new relevance in their lives and they saw more a significant personal impact from austerity than some of the older members of this group. For Sarah, the resource that made a significant difference in her political awareness, education, was also the cause of her personal exposure to austerity, namely university tuition fee rises.

For some older participants, politics had long been an interest before austerity was introduced so, while austerity did not mobilise them for the first time, they were predisposed to participate in response to it. Robert was a typical example of this. A member of the Labour party, he had previously stood for election as a councillor and was a member of a range of different activist groups and organisations. While austerity was a clear concern for him and a topic on which he

was very knowledgeable, he also spoke in detail on various political issues, with Brexit a particular interest. When asked how he had heard about austerity, he mentioned political programmes, but he separately gave examples of the impact of austerity on people he knew. These examples were mostly of people he had met through his activism, which suggests he had also learnt about austerity through political participation he already undertook, as opposed to his personal experience motivating his activism. Like Robert, for many of the older politically active participants, austerity was not a mobilising issue per se, but nonetheless an important topic that either added to or sustained their prior activism.

Nearly all the actively anti-austerity participants were members of political parties, mostly commonly the Labour Party although there were also a number from the Socialist Party. Some had joined political parties at least in part because of austerity. James from London was critical of the Labour Party's stance on austerity under Ed Miliband but subsequently joined the party under Jeremy Corbyn "largely because of austerity".

None of the actively anti-austerity group expressed support for the Conservative party and unsurprisingly many criticised the party or specific Conservative politicians. One participant said:

Tories are terrible. They are total puppets to the rich and to the big bosses, business owners, they make them do that because they just say, if you don't bail out the banks for us, we will leave [...] And I think most of the government at the minute is part of that elite because lots of them have personal interests in, business interests in all these things.

This disdain for Conservative governments was typical of these participants, who often accused Conservative politicians of having vested interests in austerity. For example, while discussing the bedroom tax, Adriana said:

The vast majority of the Tory party are landlords. They have direct interest in housing benefits to keep this whole system going. But they're just, they basically just, the taxpayer is basically just constantly giving them money and they put it in their own pockets.

While this comment relates to one specific aspect of the reforms, members of the actively anti-austerity group were also very critical of the Conservative government's approach more broadly. There was a strong sense that the party looks out for itself and its wealthier voters, but neglects those on lower incomes. Angela from Sheffield explained:

Tories have never done anything good for this country in the last couple of decades. Not for people like me, you know, not for ordinary people that's on minimum wage or on

benefits and that. They look after their own and that's on like quarter of a million-pound salaries.

These sentiments were echoed by participants across other groups, such as Nicole who said, "the Tories tend to make everyone, you know, make people poor and almost punish you for being poor a little bit." Another participant said, "I think [the Conservatives'] priority is making sure they're alright."

The actively anti-austerity participants were nonetheless more likely to directly criticise the Conservatives for their role in austerity. However, it was also quite common for the most active participants to criticise Labour for their role in the spending cuts. When I asked Sarah who she thought was responsible for austerity, she primarily talked about the Conservatives, but added "to some extent I also blame Labour because, especially at a local level, there's not been much resistance at all." Other respondents also argued that Labour should have refused to implement the cuts, especially at council level. On a similar theme, Robert, who largely laid blame with the Conservative government for austerity, did also criticise the New Labour governments for failing to place more controls on the financial sector and curb privatisation of public services.

Interestingly, few of the actively anti-austerity participants spoke of the role of the Liberal Democrats in austerity beyond passing references to the coalition government. Their apparent lack of significance may be because participants simply do not associate the Liberal Democrats with austerity or it may be that they place significantly more blame with the Conservatives so focused on discussing them instead. However it is surprising that those critical of austerity did not name the Liberal Democrats as responsible for cuts when they were in government at their implementation.

The main exception to this apathy towards the Liberal Democrats among this group was Adhit, who was an active member of the Liberal Democrat party. When asked about the Liberal Democrat's role in austerity as part of the coalition government, Adhit argued that they had helped to temper the Conservatives but had struggled to have enough of a voice, which he described as "a big drawback". It was interesting that he joined the party directly in response to them going into coalition. He argued that "had [the Lib Dems] not joined the coalition that means, of course another election, so the country, which we were already poor, so that increases [my] support for them". Of all the 'actively anti-austerity participants', Adhit was the only one to express some agreement with the need for cuts but was very critical of the way they had been implemented. I interpreted this disagreement with the way austerity had been implemented as driving his activism, which took the form of attending marches, signing petitions and posting on social media, including to contact politicians and journalists.



The most politically active participant was Adriana, who spoke of how she had set up a branch of a political party in her area because there had previously not been one there. Her own experience of cuts to mental health services and her ex-husband's experiences of homelessness motivated her to participate and she subsequently stood in local council elections on a 'no cuts' platform. Her participation is particularly striking because she spoke of the significant personal risk it places upon her employment. She spoke of blacklisting in her industry, which she fears could happen to her if her employers found out she is politically active. She argued passionately that participation is worth the risk:

I'm not gonna shut up because it might jeopardise my job. I mean, to me, this is so important that if I know what's going on, if I can see what's going on, then I have to do what I can to change it and talk to people about it and to try to encourage people to also do the same and start reading and talking to each other and get organised. Because that's the only way, by organising ourselves, just any, all people, that's the only way we can get some control over this because that's the only way. There is no other option, you know. That's, for me, that's really, really important for my children's future. That is, I really feel that strong. I feel, if I don't do anything I'm not a good parent. To me this is for my children. I do this for them.

Like most of the 'actively anti-austerity' participants, Adriana also frequently participated in protests against cuts. The student demonstrations against cuts to tuition fees were the first experience of activism for one participant, Sarah. Robert mentioned attending demonstrations by the group Disabled People Against Cuts in response to the fitness for work tests under universal credit, which he described as "brutal". Others focused their efforts on local campaigning against cuts, including protests against local service closures. For example, Angela in Sheffield described protesting against the closure of local bus services:

We had about five or six months where we were literally laying in front of the buses, holding people accountable. Hanging sheets outside our window with messages on about the local council. And, yeah, I've done quite a few things over the years like that.

Aside from protesting and party membership, the most common forms of political participation among the politically active participants were signing petitions, posting about politics on social media and attending political meetings. Sarah from Hampshire had been a member of an anti-cuts group and a socialist students group while at university and explained how austerity was a key focus at events she attended:

during that period it was all those sorts of meetings really that [austerity] was talked about. And then I went to a few council budget setting meetings and again where it was

kind of referenced and talked about in those. So like formal and informal political meetings.

All the actively anti-austerity participants voted in every election for which they were eligible. Many were also members of trade unions and participated in strikes and other union activities. Even those who were less politically active, such as Natalie in Salford, mentioned having always been a union member, saying “I’d go on strikes and stuff whenever redundancies were talked about, things like that.”

However, even those who were mobilised by austerity spoke of the frustrations at the lack of change they saw. Sarah, had been mobilised by the introduction of austerity policies but spoke of how “a lack of confidence that change was possible” meant student protest attendance fell while police presence significantly increased. She described how she became demoralised and withdrew from activism for a number of years after the initial protests:

I made a conscious choice that I wasn’t going to let that kind of experience stop me being active because I felt like that would mean that they’d won, because that was their goal, was to intimidate. But for a lot of students that did work, and that, kind of, was the end of the, kind of, fizzling out of that student movement. It is very difficult to continue being active and kind of pushing against, trying to convince people to go to demos or convince people that you know it’s possible for it to be different when you are getting more and more dwindling numbers and people seem to don’t care. So I think it was kind of that really, it just felt like it wasn’t sustained like I couldn’t sustain the energy of it.

This suggests that a lack of enthusiasm for activism or cynicism from others can undermine an individual’s desire to participate in politics. The importance of being part of a wider movement is not surprising, as research shows that social networks are highly important for sustained participation (Passy and Giugni, 2000). However, for those most inclined towards activism, the severity of the austerity’s consequences was strong enough to either sustain or draw back many to participation.

Sarah noted how big events such as the EU referendum helped reignite public enthusiasm for political engagement, which can be encouraging for those involved in political campaigning. She argued that public interest in specific political issues could in turn foster interest in other issues, such as austerity. This was directly true for Sandra, who said that she had joined the Labour Party following the rise in hate crime after the EU referendum, despite having previously been a Conservative voter. However, she said “I was initially not going to stay for very long but the austerity has annoyed me so much that I actually stuck with them”. Her anti-austerity activism included attending party meetings, leafleting for Labour and participating in institutional work to

lobby against sport funding cuts. When asked why she had turned against the Conservative Party, she said:

I think they're a complete waste of space, completely useless as far as I can see. And I think that, as far as I see, people are much worse off now than they used to be and they've just gone too far and they're just throwing people on the scrapheap. So yes, I have changed my political outlook.

This shows that for some people, austerity did cause them to critically reflect on their political participation and, in some cases, change their habits. As discussed, though, the actively anti-austerity group was only a minority of the participants and, while the largest group was those who were sceptical of the cuts, it was not common for this discontent to inspire activism.

I asked some participants how effective they thought their political parties or personal political activities were, leaving this question deliberately open to allow their own interpretation of what it meant to be 'effective'. One Labour member, Sandra, who lived in a predominantly Liberal Democrat or Conservative voting area said:

Yes they are effective but obviously they are in a big minority here. It's a bit of an uphill struggle. But yes, they're very keen. But they're quite small. So effective... I suppose it depends what you mean by effective. We are hoping to get a councillor in the next elections, but to be honest that's, if we do that we'd be doing well.

When I asked Robert about the effectiveness of his own actions he said, "well, I can't say I've personally seen any net result from what I've done, but it's a bit like a snowball effect." He went on to describe how gathering support for a cause can build momentum in a campaign and have tangible effects on policy decisions. Similarly, Melissa in Hampshire discussed her success in influencing others through her work with the Labour Party:

I find them really empowering. I don't know how effective, but people came over and took leaflets... We were chatting to them. And in my experience, it's the same with the advocacy, I find that if just one person gets the message or gets on board then I consider that effective. Because then they might go away and talk to someone else about it.

Michael, a member of the Liberal Democrats was less positive about the effectiveness of his membership but took a pragmatic approach. He felt that it was at least worth trying:

I don't think you can sit on the side-lines and do nothing. So, effective? I'm not convinced. But if you can't do nothing you've got to do what's available to you, and so joining in on campaigns, joining a party, voting, they are the things that are available to us. So, don't ignore them.

I asked this question to participants early in the research but stopped to better focus on the more central research questions. I therefore lack data on those from Salford and Sheffield where answers may have differed, but the findings were nonetheless interesting. The answers suggest those who sustain moderate to high levels of political activity – both in response to austerity and on other issues – typically set their expectations quite low. Although their ultimate aim is often to bring about policy change, the assessments of success mostly refer to small, incremental changes.

The goals of the most active participants contrast with other groups who expressed scepticism of the effectiveness of political participation on the basis of it failing to achieve larger goals. One austerity sceptic said she felt joining demonstrations was pointless because they did not get covered on the main TV news programmes, whereas none of the more politically active people mentioned news coverage. Meanwhile, other less active people felt the government should be doing more to reach out to them. This implies that the most active people are more willing to actively seek out participation opportunities and have more moderate expectations of the outcomes and media coverage of their action.

## **7.8 Conclusion**

Despite the limited but important evidence of political responses to austerity from the public, the data suggest that austerity-related participation is very limited in the UK. Only the most politically active individuals have taken significant action to resist the spending cuts and it is common for these people to also be active on a broad range of other issues. As predicted in chapter 2, people who are in favour of austerity typically have little reason to participate as they have no grievance to communicate and are content with what they observe of the cuts. However, this pro-austerity group typically have little experience of the most damaging cuts.

For those who have been personally negatively affected, most feel unable to oppose the cuts due to a lack of resources, time and money, but also mental and physical health. There is also a strong resistance to participating as it is seen by many as pointless, either because the government will not listen, “they’ve already got their minds made up”, or because these individuals accept that cuts have to be made and cannot see an alternative. The latter view is very prevalent among the austerity sceptics, who are mostly less personally impacted by cuts, but are often more aware of its effects on others than the pro-austerity group. This group typically accept the government narrative that cuts are necessary and cannot be avoided but believe they have nonetheless gone too far or been unfairly distributed. These negative views most often fail to drive any significant political participation however, due to a lack of self-efficacy and strong cynicism about the government and politics more broadly.

These findings support Kern et al's (2015) argument that grievance theory and civic voluntarism are best used in combination to understand levels of political participation. While grievance theory's argument that people participate in politics when they have a grievance to communicate appears to be true for many, this theory overlooks the fundamental role of resources. I also argue that, following the theory of policy feedback, government narratives play a key role in shaping people's attitudes and approaches to political participation (Skocpol, 1995).

The challenge in the case of austerity, as well as potentially a great many other policies, is that an absence of a participatory response to oppose the policy does not equate to meaningful support for it. As argued by policy feedback, participatory responses, or lack thereof, can also reflect the influence that policy and the narrative surrounding it has on broader attitudes to politics and the self (Skocpol, 1995). The evidence from these interview data indicates that a great many people feel that the implementation of austerity has been deeply unfair. However, for most of these people, resistance is futile because it appears so unlikely that it will result in change and/or requires a level of time, money and wellbeing that they simply do not have. Thus, their lack of opposition to cuts often reflects both a pre-existing feeling of alienation from politics and distrust in politicians, but also a deepening of this disillusionment.

## Chapter 8 Quantitative evidence on participation

As discussed in chapter 3, this thesis takes a mixed methods approach to combine the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative data. This chapter uses quantitative analysis to triangulate the findings from the qualitative data (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Interview data has shown that austerity has failed to mobilise people in England to participate in politics and, in some cases, may have suppressed participation. I have argued that this lack of participation is likely due to three key factors: a lack of resources for some; a lack of personal grievance from others; and acceptance of government narratives that austerity is necessary and unavoidable.

These three arguments respectively draw on the theories of civic voluntarism, grievance theory and policy feedback. Civic voluntarism argues that resources such as time, money and good health are necessary for participation (Schlozman, Burns and Verba, 1994; Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Perea, 2002; Mattila *et al.*, 2013; Gollust and Rahn, 2015). In the case of austerity, those most affected by cuts have seen their resources depleted by growing financial instability and health inequalities (O'Hara, 2014; McKenzie, 2015; BMA board of science, 2016; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). Grievance theory argues that others who are less personally impacted and less aware of the impact on others will not have any grievances to express, so will not feel the need to participate (Scheufele, Skanakan and Kim, 2002; Kriesi, 2014; Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). Finally, policy feedback claims that policies and the narratives surrounding them shape attitudes both to the policies themselves, but also to politics more broadly and the individual's role in it (Przeworski, 1985; Skocpol, 1995; Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). In the case of austerity, politicians have argued that austerity is necessary and unavoidable (Cameron, 2010; Clarke and Newman, 2012; Hay, 2013), which undermines self-efficacy because political participation appears unlikely to achieve change.

Despite providing rich data to support these arguments, the interview sample was not representative of the wider population. Quantitative analysis is therefore beneficial as it enables me to draw more generalisable conclusions (Yilmaz, 2013). As such, this chapter examines the extent to which data from the British Election Study (BES) supports the argument that austerity has not provoked participation, using descriptive statistics and logistic regression. In doing so, this chapter will show that spending cuts are associated with alienation from politics but are not a strong predictor of electoral participation, supporting the findings from the qualitative data.

As discussed in section 3.7.1, the data used in this chapter were taken from the BES (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2015) and IFS (Smith, Phillips and Simpson, 2016). I used data on political attitudes and participation from wave 6 of the BES from 2015, because it includes questions about attitudes to spending cuts. After data cleansing, this dataset had a sample size of just over 18,000. Data from

the IFS were used to measure local authority spending cuts. I also used Office for National Statistics (2019) data on lower tier to upper tier local authorities to match up BES respondents with local authority spending cuts data from the IFS.

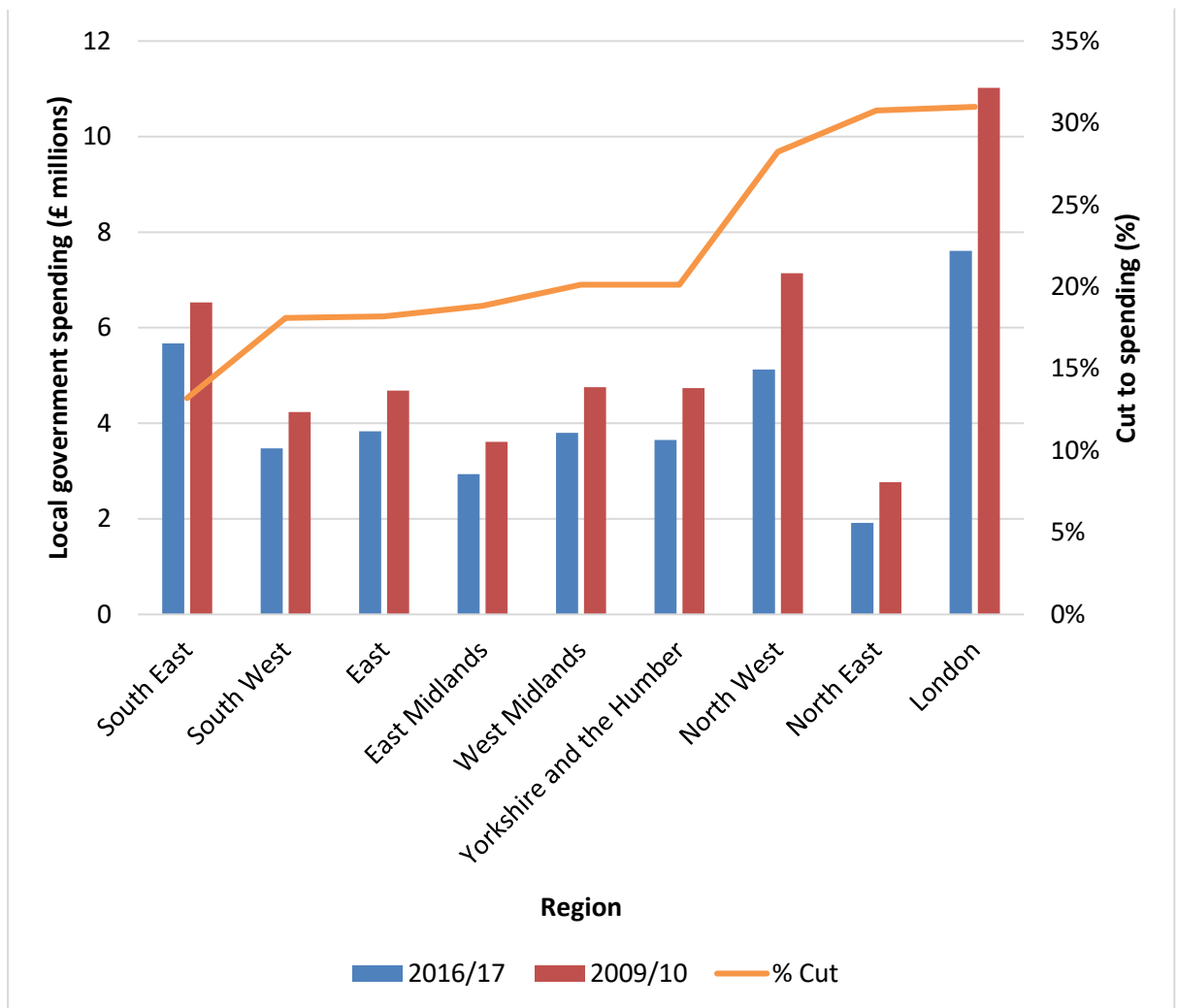
Mirroring the structure of the qualitative data analysis, this chapter begins by exploring the different experiences of spending cuts, by providing a geographical comparison of local authority cuts. The following section then analyses regional differences in attitudes to spending cuts. Section 8.3 builds on this analysis by comparing experience of cuts to political attitudes, then section 8.4 provides descriptive statistics on the impact of cuts on political participation. Section 8.5 builds on these findings by creating two regression models of turnout, as an example of political participation, designed as indicative tests to examine the role that cuts play in voting, if any. Finally, section 8.6 concludes, drawing out key findings from the quantitative data and comparing these with the results of the qualitative analysis.

## **8.1 Geographical differences in local authority spending cuts**

Geographical variation in experiences, attitudes and political participation related to cuts has been an important theme throughout the qualitative data. Broadly, participants from the least deprived areas, Hampshire, Harrow and Camden, have been less affected by austerity because their relative affluence afforded them protections from the worst of the service cuts. In particular, the ability to either travel further or pay privately to access services made a considerable difference to their experience of public spending reductions. However, there was significant variation within these areas because a small proportion of participants from each had been particularly hard hit by changes to welfare and social care. In contrast, many more people from Sheffield and Salford had experienced negative changes to a range of services in their areas. In these areas there was a smaller disparity in the extent to which people were affected by cuts and there was only one participant that I would describe as little affected.

Comparing spending cuts data on a national level is important, as these disparities can also be seen across the country. Figure 2 illustrates the clear geographical differences in the way that cuts have been implemented by local authorities. It shows the cuts by region, including the spending data from before the start of austerity in 2009/10 and those from 2016/17, as well as the overall percentage change. The regional differences are also substantial, with cuts of over 30 per cent in London and the North East compared to 13 per cent in the South East. The regional differences in spending cuts are important because this allows for easy comparison of attitudes towards the cuts across areas of the country, which will be addressed in the next section.

Figure 2: Graph of changes to local authority spending by region between 2009/10 and 2016/17

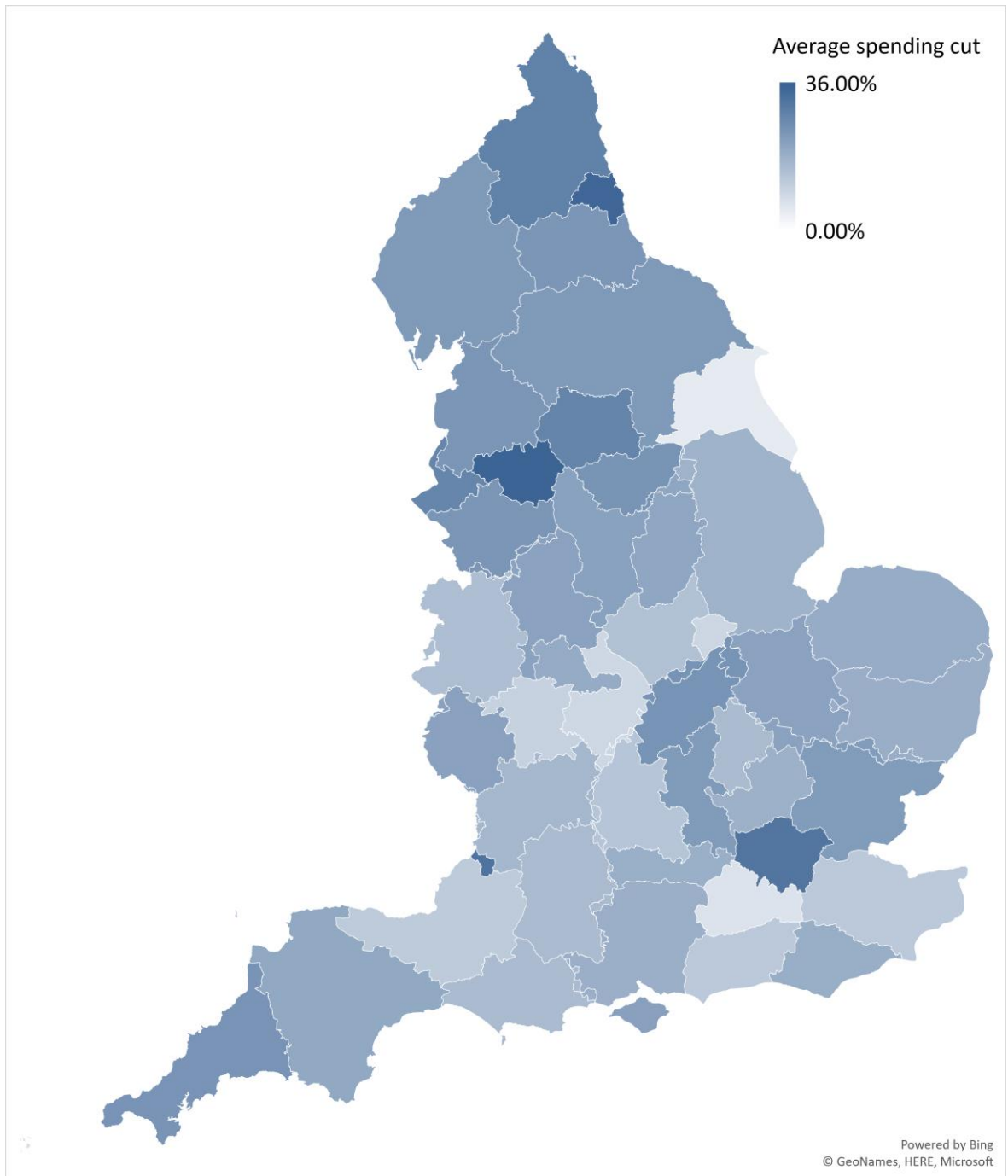


Data source: Smith, Phillips and Simpson (2016)

On a more granular level, Figure 3 illustrates the cuts on a county level. The map shows the variation in the average local authority spending cuts across counties, with many of those in the North and London significantly more affected than elsewhere. Spending in Greater Manchester, for example, was cut by over 35 per cent on average, while London saw an average cut of nearly 31 per cent. These counties offer a clear contrast with those in the South of England where cuts have typically been lower, such as Surrey where spending was cut by just over six per cent. There are, of course, exceptions to this, with the starkest contrast being the East Riding of Yorkshire which has fared much better than its Northern neighbours with a cut of around 4.5 per cent. Bristol and Cornwall, meanwhile, stand out in the South, with cuts of 32 per cent and 24 per cent respectively.



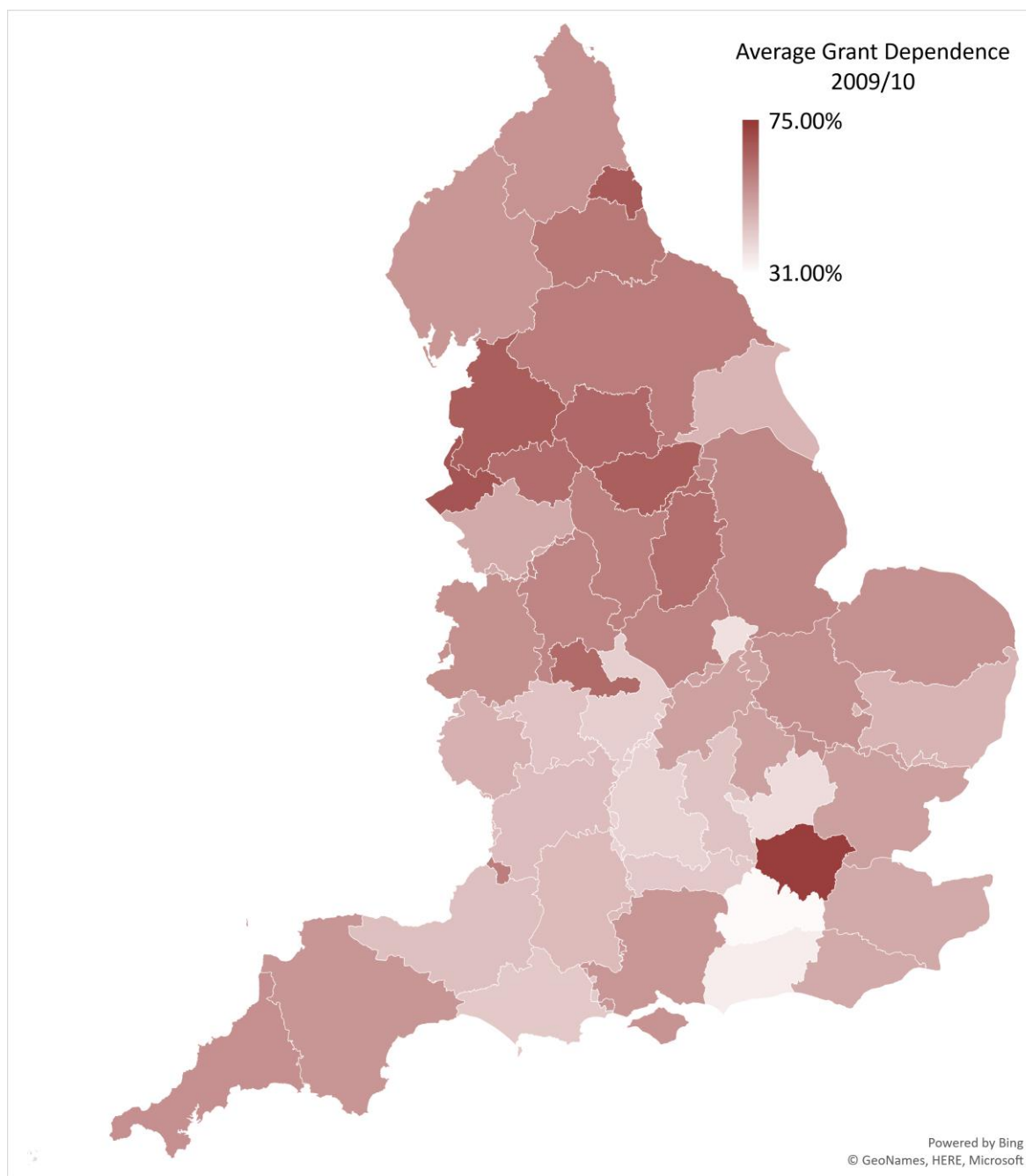
Figure 3: Map of the average local authority spending cuts by county between 2009/10 and 2016/17 in England



Data source: Smith, Phillips and Simpson (2016)

As discussed in Chapter 2, a major cause of the differences in local authority spending across the country is central government grant dependence. Disproportionate reliance on these grants in part arises from variations in demographics and the strength of local tax bases, meaning that high needs, low wealth areas tend to be among the most reliant on central government grants. London, for example, has some of the highest grant dependence, due to its high concentration of people on low incomes (Gray and Barford, 2018). Figure 4 illustrates the grant dependence of counties in 2009/10, highlighting the areas that would be most vulnerable to the spending cuts.

Figure 4: Map of the average local authority grant dependence by county in 2009/10



*Data source: Smith, Phillips and Simpson (2016)*

There is a striking resemblance in the two maps, which demonstrates the role that cuts to central government grants have had in reductions in local authority spending. Before the cuts, in 2009/10 Westminster had a grant dependence of 86 per cent and Manchester had a dependence of 78 per cent, the highest outside of London. It is no coincidence therefore that these areas had some of the highest cuts in the country. Although offering a different level of granularity, these findings broadly match those of Gray and Barford (2018).

## 8.2 Geographical differences in attitudes to spending cuts

Having examined the geographical variation in local authority cuts, it is now valuable to compare these data with BES data on attitudes towards austerity. Based on interview data, chapter 6 argued that only a small proportion of participants were fully supportive of austerity, with many expressing some degree of criticism. Respondents often made the distinction between supporting austerity in principle and in practice, with those who were less supportive of austerity almost always opposing the way cuts had been implemented. A significant proportion of interviewees did believe that cuts were a good idea in principle, however.

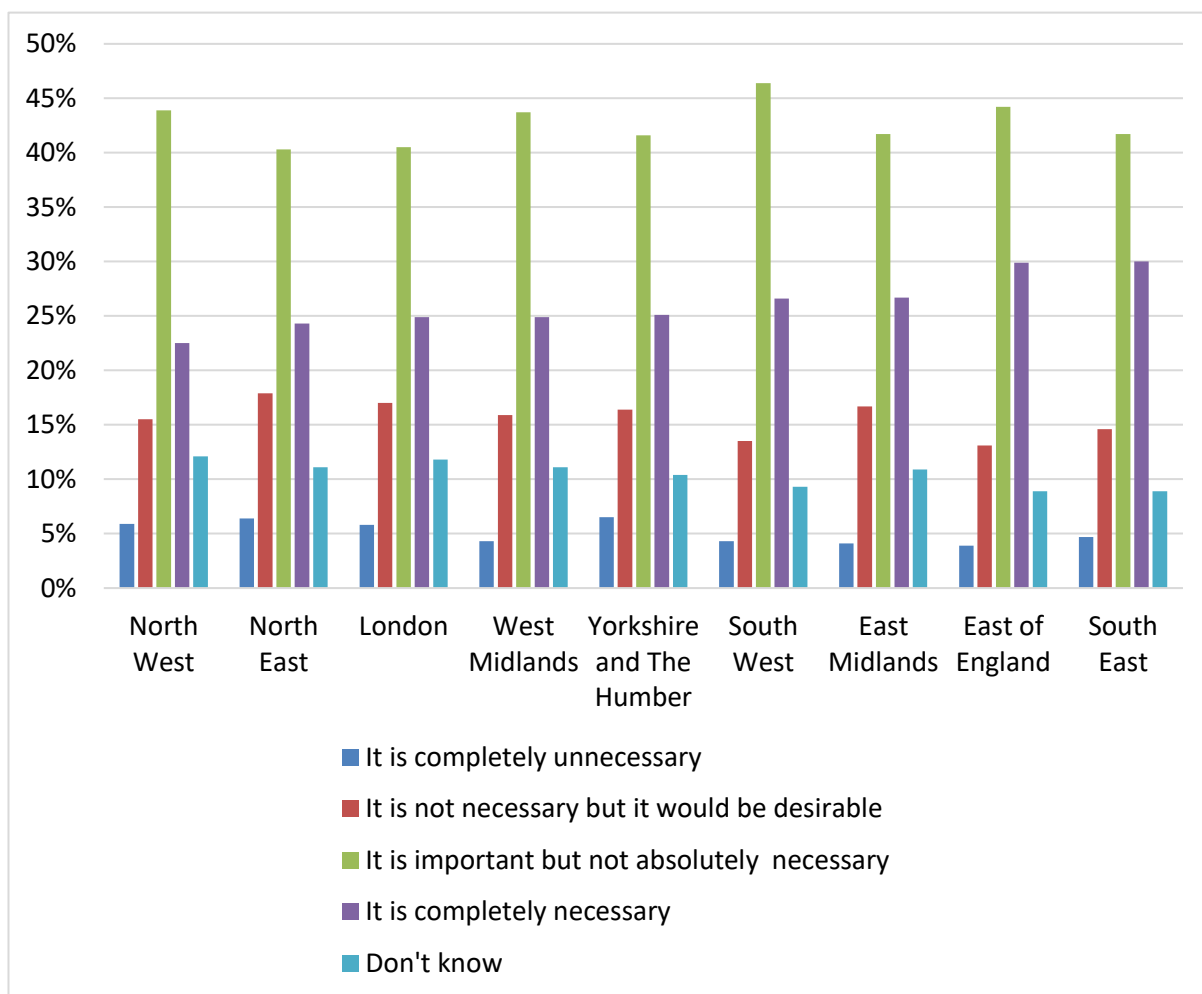
There were some geographical differences in attitudes to austerity among the participants, as those I deemed 'pro-austerity' were more often from Hampshire or London, while none came from Salford. Those most opposed to austerity typically came from Salford or, surprisingly, Hampshire, although in all cases it was those with most knowledge of austerity through personal experience or political activism who were most critical.

To test support for austerity in principle and practice, I used three key BES variables. To understand attitudes to austerity in principle, there are two questions that together help to make sense of this issue. The first is: 'how necessary do you think it is for the UK Government to eliminate the deficit over the next 3 years – that is close the gap between what the government spends and what it raises in taxes?' This question gauges support for deficit reduction but does not specifically ask about spending cuts as a means of achieving this reduction. The second question is: 'if the government does cut the deficit over the next 3 years, should it do so mainly by increasing taxes, by cutting public spending, or by a mixture of both?' This question builds on the first to establish whether respondents support spending cuts in principle as a means of reducing the deficit.

The third BES variable, which I discuss more below, asks whether 'cuts to public spending in general' have 'gone too far or not far enough?' Responses to this question are therefore a helpful way to gauge whether people feel that spending cuts have been implemented effectively.

Figure 5 shows responses by region to the first question about the necessity of deficit reduction. The first clear observation is that across the whole country the response 'it is important but not absolutely necessary' is by far the most common answer. This response suggests modest support for reducing the deficit but perhaps also some ambivalence. Across England, 42.7 per cent of people selected this response and there is strikingly little regional variation in this figure.

Figure 5: Bar chart of opinions on the necessity of deficit reduction in the next three years by region

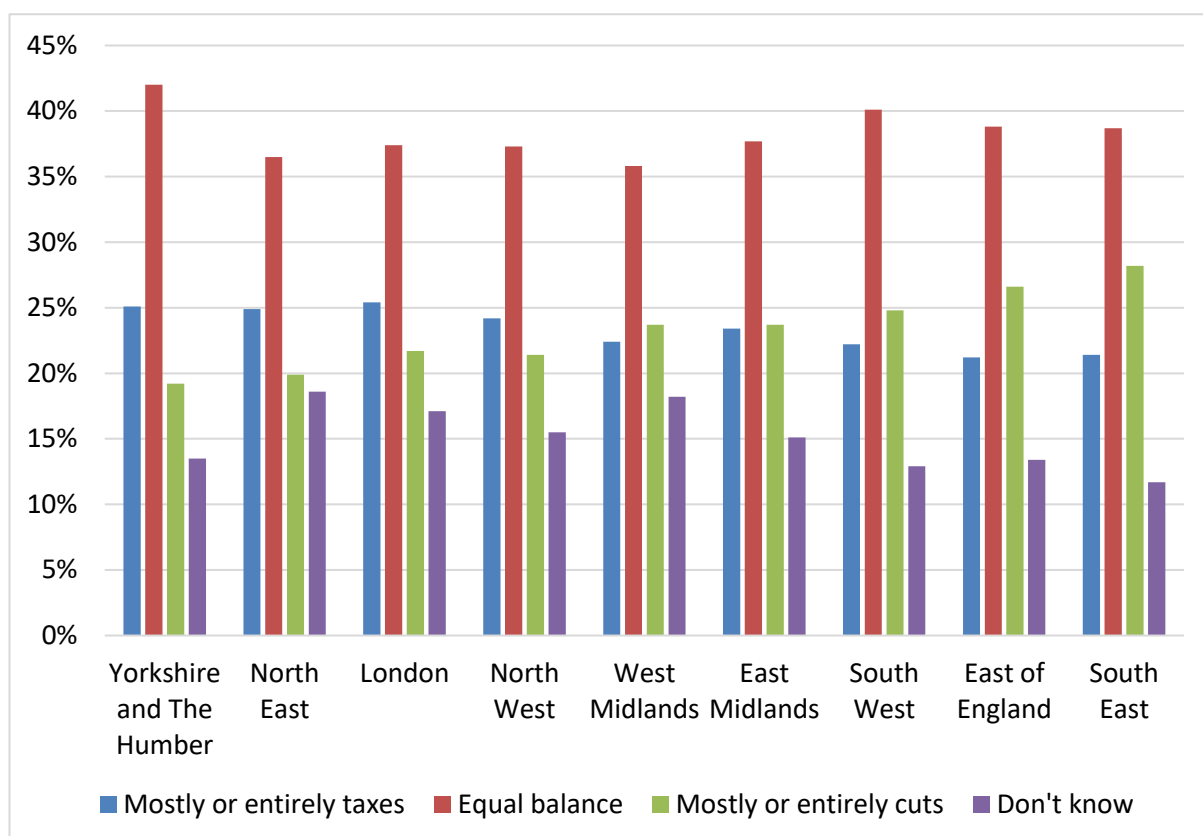


Data source: British Election Study (2015)

The other responses to the question show greater regional differences, particularly the proportion of people who feel that deficit reduction is ‘completely necessary’. In the North West, 22.5 per cent of people selected this answer, compared to 30 per cent in the South East. The pattern here broadly matches the extent of local authority cuts shown in Figure 2, where those regions with the lowest cuts are more likely to feel that deficit reduction is completely necessary. Likewise, the reverse broadly holds for those who feel deficit reduction is completely unnecessary. Only 5 per cent of respondents selected this answer across England, however, so it is more difficult to draw conclusions about variations on this scale.

Figure 6 shows responses to the second question, which asked how to reduce the deficit<sup>8</sup>. Again, there is considerable support for cuts across all regions, with only 8.6 per cent of respondents across England saying that the deficit should be reduced only by increasing taxes. It is interesting, however, that the most common answer across all regions is ‘an equal balance of spending cuts and tax increases’ because this indicates only limited support for cuts. It is clear that people do feel cuts are needed, but there is a stronger appetite for taxation than might be expected.

Figure 6: Bar chart of opinions on how to reduce deficit in next 3 years by region



Data source: British Election Study (2015)

As with support for deficit reduction, there is a general theme that those regions that have seen the highest cuts tend to be less supportive of spending cuts than those with lower cuts. In the South and East of England, people are more likely to favour more spending cuts over higher taxation, whereas in the North and London the preference is for higher taxes. Across all these graphs there are clusters of regions, where those in the North and London typically have higher cuts and more resistance to them, while those in the South and East have lower cuts and are

<sup>8</sup> I have amalgamated responses from six into four groups in order to simplify the graph and aid interpretation. The possible responses were ‘only by increasing taxes’ and ‘mainly by increasing taxes, but also by cutting spending’, which have been grouped as ‘mostly or entirely taxes’; ‘an equal balance of spending cuts and tax increases’; and ‘mainly by cutting spending, but with some tax increases’ and ‘only by cutting spending’ which have been grouped as ‘mostly or entirely cuts’.

more supportive of them. The Midlands sits between the two clusters in both levels of cuts and support for them.

What is more striking, however, is that even those areas that have been badly hit by cuts are not strongly opposed to them and still show quite a high level of support for cuts in principle. Over 62 per cent of people in all regions feel there should be at least an equal balance of cuts and taxes to reduce the deficit, if not more cuts. Likewise, even in the North East, nearly 65 per cent of people feel that deficit reduction is at least important, if not completely necessary.

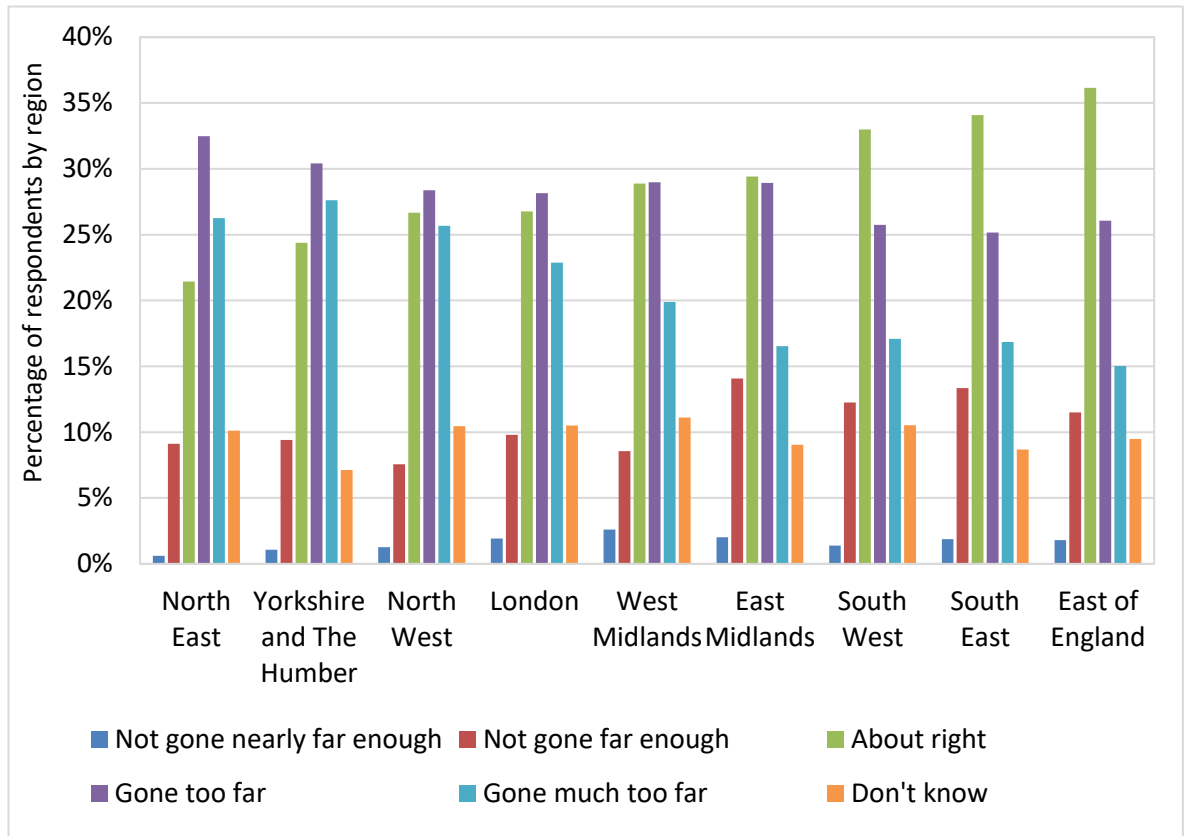
In general, therefore, the data presented in figures 5 and 6 support the findings from my qualitative research, which indicates a wide level of support for austerity in principle, even among those who object to the way it has been implemented. The majority of interview participants felt that cuts were needed to at least some extent and these statistical data echo this finding.

The question 'do you think that each of these has gone too far or not far enough?' on the topic of 'cuts to public spending in general' is a suitable proxy to understand attitudes to austerity in practice. This question does not pick out the nuances of which cuts have gone too far, which was an important distinction made by some interview participants. However, it does give a good sense of overall support for the implementation of the cuts.

The most common answer to this question was 'about right', with just shy of 30 per cent of respondents selecting this answer. 'Gone too far' was the next most common response and almost as popular, at around 28 per cent of respondents. Across the country, 42 per cent of survey respondents indicated support for the cuts through answering that the cuts had been 'about right', 'not gone far enough' or 'not gone nearly far enough'. This is considerably lower than the 77 per cent who felt that the deficit should be reduced through at least some spending cuts. In contrast, 48 per cent of respondents felt cuts had either gone too far or much too far. This suggests that on a national level there is less support for cuts in practice than for cuts in principle.

However, there were significant regional differences in responses to this answer, as illustrated in Figure 7. Respondents from the North of England and London were more likely to say that cuts had gone too far than that they were about right. In contrast, those from the South and East of England were more likely to answer that the cuts were about right.

Figure 7: Bar chart of attitudes to spending cuts by region



Data source: British Election Study (2015) and Smith, Phillips and Simpson (2016)

In the South East and East regions, nearly 50 per cent of participants responded positively towards cuts, selecting either ‘about right’, ‘not gone far enough’ or ‘not gone nearly far enough’. In the North East, less than a third selected these answers, with nearly 60 per cent answering that cuts had either ‘gone too far’ or ‘gone much too far’. The people who felt cuts needed to go further<sup>9</sup> were in the minority even in the most pro-austerity areas, such as the South East where 15 per cent of people selected these answers.

The difference in responses broadly reflect the level of local authority spending cuts seen in each region (as shown in Figure 2). Figure Figure 7 has the same regional clusters as figures Figure 5 and Figure 6, comprising of the North and London, the South and East, and the Midlands. Again, the southern regions and East of England have the lowest cuts and most favourable attitudes to austerity. The northern regions and London also have the highest cuts and are more likely to say cuts have gone too far than other regions. However, London has only the fourth most negative attitudes to the austerity despite having the highest cuts proportionately.

<sup>9</sup> Answering ‘not gone far enough’ or ‘not gone nearly far enough’.

London's somewhat less negative response may reflect the high diversity of London, particularly in terms of income inequality, where London is overrepresented at both ends of the income distribution (Agrawal and Phillips, 2020). The qualitative data corroborate this to some extent, as there was greater variation in experiences of austerity in London than in Sheffield and Salford, with some Londoners significantly more affected than others. However, participants in London were also more critical of austerity than any of the other three areas from my interviews. Only one participant there supported the way cuts had been implemented and the majority were even critical of the principle of spending cuts. This was unusual because in Sheffield, Salford and Hampshire, more than half of participants felt that austerity was necessary even though many disliked how cuts had been implemented. As such, the quantitative data on London deviates somewhat from the findings of my interviews because it suggests a decidedly more positive view of austerity. It is likely that the BES data better reflect the mix of people found across London boroughs, as I only interviewed in Camden and Harrow, and will be more representative in general.

With some exceptions, primarily the findings from London, these data do support the findings from the qualitative data that people are more likely to support austerity in principle than in practice. In addition, people from areas with higher cuts and deprivation are more likely to criticise spending cuts, and this trend is more pronounced in attitudes towards the extent of the cuts than the idea of cuts.

### **8.3 Austerity and attitudes towards politicians**

The next stage of analysis was to look at whether cuts have played a role in attitudes towards politics. The qualitative data shows that many participants were highly sceptical of politicians and their intentions, with cuts playing a clear role in this cynicism for those most affected. It was therefore pertinent to examine whether cuts play a role in attitudes towards politicians.

I selected the BES variable 'politicians don't care what people like me think' which asks respondents the extent to which they agree with that statement. This is a useful measure because it speaks both to broad questions of political trust and the issue of whether the public and government are 'in it together'. The sense of being in it together, or not, relates to how well politicians represent all people and reflect their concerns in policies. The extent to which 'politicians care what people like me think' is therefore a useful proxy for examining this issue and by combining it with spending cuts figures it is possible to assess any relationship between the two.

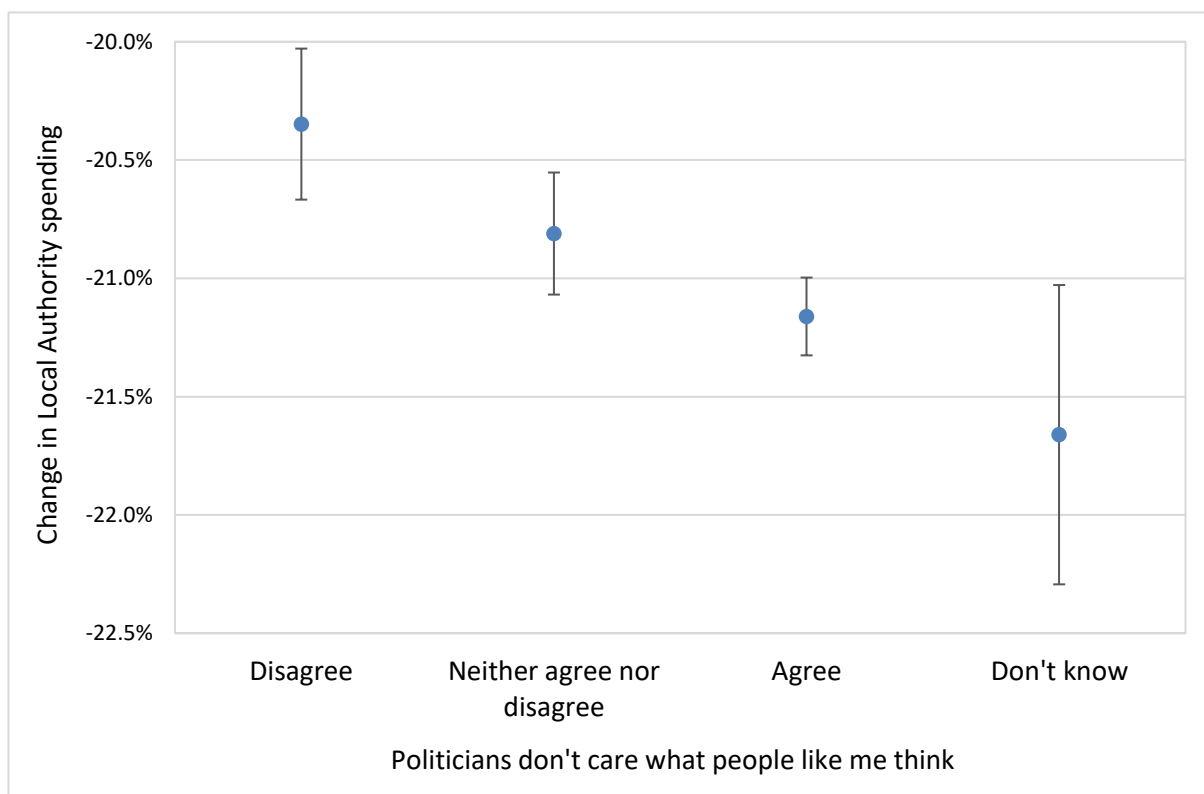


I analysed this variable in two ways: the first was to compare attitudes to politicians with local authority spending cuts and the second was to compare this variable with attitudes to cuts. Local authority spending cuts act as a measure of experience of cuts, as those with the highest cuts are more likely to be negatively affected. This is an imperfect proxy, as there are, for example, people in areas of low cuts who have been very badly affected by austerity. However, my interview data suggest that in general local cuts and deprivation together significantly influence experiences of austerity. Given that across the country there have been higher cuts in areas with higher deprivation (Berry and White, 2014), local authority cuts is an adequate proxy for experience of cuts in the descriptive statistics used here. The subsequent analysis of attitudes to cuts will then explore the relationship between cuts and political attitudes on an individual level and account for those whose views are not typical of their local area.

Figure 8 shows the mean local authority spending cut for each response to this question. The data were amalgamated into three categories – agree, neither agree nor disagree, and disagree – because, perhaps unsurprisingly, only 1.8% of respondents selected ‘strongly disagree’ to indicate they felt strongly that politicians care what people like them think. Including all the possible responses resulted in a standard error of the mean of 0.0052 for strongly disagree compared to between 0.001 and 0.002 for the other responses. This suggests that the small number of respondents in this group means the data are less robust. When the answers were aggregated, the standard error for ‘disagree’ improved to 0.0016.

There is a clear downward trend in the data which suggests that the higher the spending cuts, the less likely you are to think that politicians care what people like you think. This finding supports my interview data because it implies that people do not feel everyone is ‘in it together’ as politicians do not take into account their views.

Figure 8: Error bar chart of the mean change to local authority spending for responses to 'politicians don't care what people like me think'



Data source: British Election Study (2015) and Smith, Phillips and Simpson (2016)

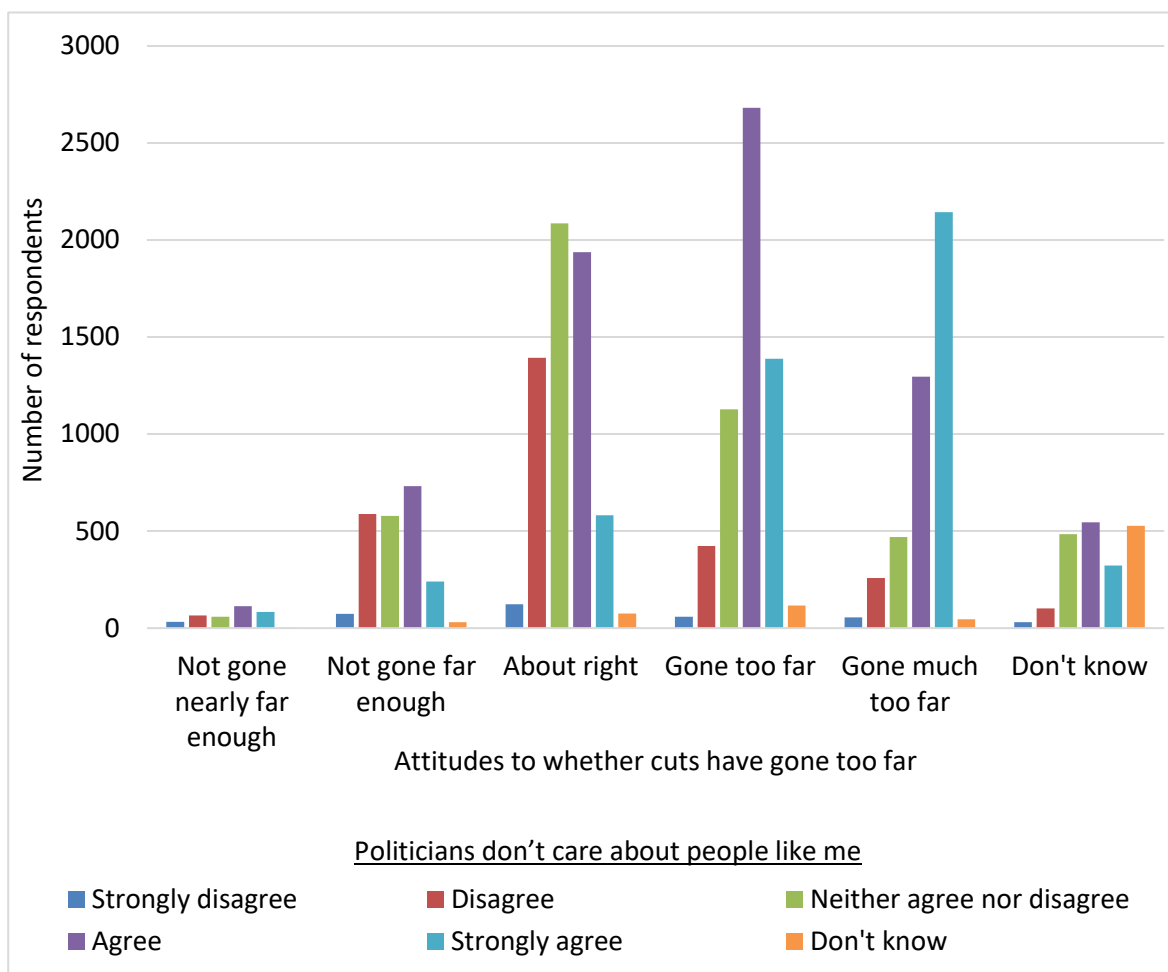
It is also interesting that the lowest score, albeit with the largest confidence interval, is for the answer 'don't know' as this may be further evidence of a detachment from politics for those in areas with the highest cuts. To say you 'don't know' whether politicians care what you think implies a lack of knowledge or interest in politics, in that it might just be something they have never thought about. Of course, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions as there are a number of reasons why people respond 'don't know' to survey questions, including uncertainty, ambivalence, inaccessibility of information and low motivation (Beatty and Herrmann, 1995).

Figure 9 shows how attitudes towards politicians vary according to attitudes to cuts. Respondents are grouped by whether they think cuts have gone too far or not far enough. Each cluster is then divided into responses to the statement 'politicians don't care about people like me'.

Only a minority of people disagree with the statement 'politicians don't care about people like me', to indicate that they think politicians do care about them. These respondents are proportionally more likely to be found in the group who feel that cuts have 'not gone nearly far enough' than any other. However, it should be noted that it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about those who feel that cuts have 'not gone nearly far enough' or who strongly disagree with the statement 'politicians don't care about people like me', due to the limited number of respondents selecting these answers. In both cases, less than 2 per cent of survey participants

selected these answers, with only 32 people selecting both answers, which undermines the robustness of these data.

Figure 9: Cluster bar chart of attitudes to cuts and attitudes to politicians



Data source: British Election Study (2015)

Nonetheless, 2,830 survey participants disagree (as opposed to *strongly* disagree) with the statement ‘politicians don’t care about people like me’ and almost half of these people felt that cuts were ‘about right’. These figures are likely to be more robust and indicate that those who are happy with the spending cuts are more likely to feel listened to by politicians.

The proportion of people who agree or strongly agree that politicians do not care about people like them is very variable across the groups. A large majority of those who believe that spending cuts have gone too far also believe that politicians do not care about people like them. 70 per cent of those who answered that cuts have ‘gone too far’ and 80 per cent of those who answered ‘gone much too far’ either agreed or strongly agreed that politicians do not care about people like them. These data suggest that people with negative views on spending cuts are more likely to feel alienated from politics. This finding matches the qualitative data, which show that those who disliked the way austerity had been implemented in practice were more likely to feel that politicians do not listen to them, particularly regarding austerity.

The graph also shows a difference between the two groups who feel cuts have gone too far. Those who feel that cuts have 'gone too far' are almost twice as likely to agree that politicians do not care about people like them (2682 respondents) than to strongly agree (1388 respondents). In contrast, those who feel that cuts have 'gone much too far' are more likely to strongly agree (2144 respondents) than agree (1296 respondents) that politicians do not care about people like them. This suggests that stronger opposition to cuts is associated with stronger alienation from politicians.

However, the data in Figure 9 are not clear-cut. Those responding that cuts have 'not gone far enough' or 'not gone nearly far enough' are more likely to agree (or strongly agree) that politicians do not care about people like them than those who feel the cuts are about right. It may be that these people do not feel listened to in part because the government has not gone far enough with spending cuts and ought to be doing more to reduce the deficit. As such, it is not simply feeling the negative effects of austerity that leads to dissatisfaction or alienation.

Overall, these data provide some evidence to support the findings from the qualitative data, that spending cuts have contributed to feelings of alienation from politics. However, the evidence is somewhat mixed. The majority of people feel that politicians do not care what people like them think and there does not appear to be a linear relationship between this variable and attitudes to whether spending cuts have gone too far. However, higher local cuts, used here as a proxy for personal experience of spending cuts, is associated with a greater likelihood of feeling that politicians do not care about people like you.

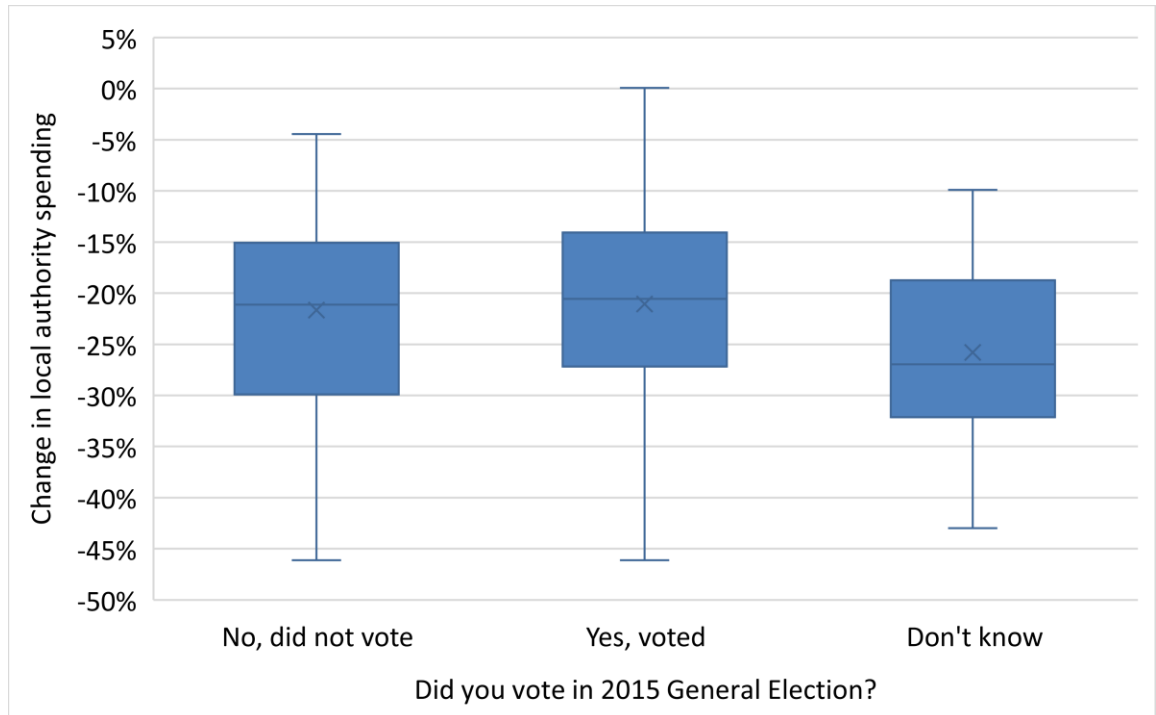
## 8.4 Spending cuts and political participation

In terms of levels of participation, descriptive statistics showed few differences for people who have experienced high or low cuts. A comparison of mean local authority cuts between those who did and did not vote in the 2015 election showed that non-participants had on average experienced higher cuts. However, this difference was very small at 21.3 per cent cuts for those who did not vote compared to 20.8 per cent for those who did. The standard deviations were also high, at just over 0.09 for both<sup>10</sup>, which suggests the results are highly dispersed and there is little difference between the two groups. These data are illustrated in Figure 10.

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<sup>10</sup> Cuts were recorded as a decimal, e.g. -0.213 for non-voters.

Figure 10: Boxplot of local authority cut by participation in 2015 general election



Data source: *British Election Study (2015) and Smith, Phillips and Simpson (2016)*

Variation in days spent discussing politics and signing of petitions were also inconclusive due to high standard deviations and only slight variations in average cut, again clustered around the 20 per cent mark. Comparison of mean spending cuts for participation such as displaying a political poster was inconclusive because only 3.4 per cent of respondents said that they had done so. There were therefore not enough data to identify a difference between the levels of cuts for participants and non-participants in this case. This was also true of other forms of participation, such as joining a demonstration or donating money to a political party or cause.

Comparing participation in the 2015 general election with attitudes to whether spending cuts had gone too far shows very little difference between the groups. Those who believe that cuts have gone too far are marginally more likely to say they did not vote, however voters are overrepresented<sup>11</sup> in every group except those selecting 'don't know'. These data therefore do not provide evidence that attitudes to cuts make a meaningful difference to propensity to vote.

The evidence from these initial statistical analyses suggests that cuts do not have a significant impact on participation levels. This matches the findings from the interview data, as they both indicate that austerity fails to motivate political participation. However, these descriptive statistics do not provide sufficient evidence alone as local authority cuts is perhaps too simple a

<sup>11</sup> Relative to the actual voter turnout of 66 per cent in England in 2015 (Audickas, Hawkins and Cracknell, 2017).

proxy for the impact of austerity. The lack of nuance possible in these analyses means that it is not possible to account for factors beyond local authority cuts in measuring the impact of austerity. For example, the qualitative data indicate that there may be cases of ‘nested deprivation’, where pockets of poverty exist within wealthier areas (Boswell *et al.*, 2020), that cannot be accounted for by these local authority level data. Individual level factors can be taken into account to more accurately identify those who are likely to have been negatively affected by austerity. For example, the interview data suggests disability and income are important factors in how much austerity affects an individual. As such, a more complex model is needed.

## 8.5 Modelling austerity and political participation

To develop a more nuanced model of political participation I selected logistic regression to predict participation based on local authority cuts and a range of demographic factors, including age, education and income. I used participation in the 2015 general election as a measure of political participation. The outcome variables were categorical and binary – voting or not voting – meaning that binary logistic regression was the most appropriate method.

I created two models of voter turnout. The first model analyses variables that my interview data showed played a significant role in experiences of austerity: local authority cuts, income and disability. This model was designed to test whether the factors that influence the personal impact of cuts also play a role in political participation. The second model builds on this by incorporating other key variables often used to predict turnout: political efficacy, age and education.

The variables in the first regression model were local authority cuts, poverty and disability. Poverty was initially measured using household income as a binary of above or below £15,000 per year, which is the closest BES income grouping to the relative poverty line in 2016/17 of £296 per week or around £15,400 per year (Department for Work and Pensions, 2018). These variables were selected to reflect the key factors affecting how big an impact austerity has had on individuals, with the binary of income acting as a proxy for poverty. The goal of the regression models was not to create important models of turnout, but instead to create indicative tests for the role of spending cuts in voting. As such, there are additional variables that would strengthen the models (see, e.g. Smets and van Ham, 2013), but due to constraints of time I limited the models to the variables I considered most important from the qualitative data.

Table 4 shows the coefficients from this model. All variables were significant at  $p < 0.05$  or better. However, the  $R^2$  values were very low, suggesting the model does little to explain variability in voting behaviour. There are two likely explanations for this. The first and most important is that it excludes other key variables in predicting voting behaviour, such as age, education and political

efficacy. The other explanation that will be explored further below is that cuts are not a good predictor of voting. This would fit with the findings from my qualitative data which suggest that austerity fails to provoke participation.

*Table 4: Model 1 – Binary logistic regression coefficients for predictors of voting in 2015 general election*

	<b>b (SE)</b>	<b>Odds Ratio</b>
<b>Disability</b>	-0.09* (0.041)	0.914
<b>Income &gt; £15k</b>	0.405** (0.042)	1.5
<b>Cuts</b>	0.546** (0.188)	1.726
<b>Constant</b>	1.244** (0.058)	3.470
<b>Cox-Snell R-squared</b>	0.005	
<b>Nagelkerke R-squared</b>	0.008	

*Note. \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01*

The odds ratios for model 1 indicate that disabled people are marginally less likely to vote than people without disabilities. This variable is significant at  $p < 0.05$ , however it is less significant than the other variables and the effect is much smaller. The odds ratio for cuts suggests that cuts have a greater influence on voting, however the standard error is high which suggests low predictive value.

For the second model I included a number of demographic factors that are known to affect voting behaviour. I created a step-wise model where the first step (model 2a) excluded cuts in order to identify a working model of voting, so that by incorporating cuts into the second step (model 2b) it is possible to see the impact that cuts had (if any) on voting.

The variables in the initial step were political efficacy, age, education and income. As discussed in Chapter 2, education and income are established factors in predicting voting as money and knowledge are key resources in participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Lijphart, 1997). Age is also important because young people are much less likely to vote than older people (Melo and Stockemer, 2014). Political efficacy is, for the purposes of this model, specific to respondents' understanding of politics. This is distinct from efficacy in terms of feeling that participation is effective, which is how it has been used earlier in this thesis. The reason for this distinction is that understanding of political issues is an important predictor of voting behaviour (Valentino, Gregorowicz and Groenendyk, 2009) but not one that my qualitative research suggests is itself affected by austerity. In contrast, the previous chapter provides evidence that austerity can affect

one's efficacy in the sense of feeling participation is effective (e.g. section 7.4). Efficacy in the latter sense would therefore potentially be a confounding variable when testing the effects of austerity.

Political efficacy was measured using the BES variable asking level of agreement with the statement 'understands the important political issues facing our country'. Strongly disagree was the reference category for this variable. Education was measured by highest qualification, with no qualifications used as the reference category. Income was again measured as a binary of household income above or below the relative poverty line as explained above.

An initial version of this model<sup>12</sup> included disability, however the Hosmer-Lemeshow test suggested that the model was a poor fit for the data because the chi-square result was significant at  $p < 0.01$  at both steps. When this variable was excluded this was no longer the case, so disability was excluded to improve the model. This suggests that disability is not a strong predictor of voter turnout.

Table 5 shows the coefficients from this more complex model of voting. In step 1 (model 2a), all variables are significant at  $p < 0.01$  except for education (qualification below GCSE). The lack of significance for this variable is not surprising as there is no particular reason to expect a significant difference between the voting behaviour in people with no qualifications (the reference category) and those with qualifications below GCSE level. The Cox-Snell and Nagelkerke  $R^2$  figures both show an improvement in explanation of variance compared to the first model, however the predictive power is still low. It is worth noting that low  $R^2$  values are a common issue for models of voter turnout, as there are many and changing factors that affect voting, including a degree of randomness (Matsusaka and Palda, 1999). In this model, the Hosmer-Lemeshow test does not provide evidence that the model is a poor fit for the data because the chi-square result is not significant at  $p = 0.229$ . This suggests that, while the predictive power of the model is low, it does provide an acceptable model for voting.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A for the full table of coefficients for this model.



Table 5: Model 2 – Binary logistic regression coefficients for predictors of voting in 2015 general election

	Model 2a		Model 2b	
	b (SE)	Odds Ratio	b (SE)	Odds Ratio
<b>Understands the important political issues facing our country</b>				
<b>Disagree</b>	0.528** (0.101)	1.695	0.526** (0.101)	1.692
<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	1.438** (0.095)	4.214	1.436** (0.095)	4.204
<b>Agree</b>	1.916** (0.093)	6.795	1.914** (0.094)	6.779
<b>Strongly agree</b>	2.309** (0.123)	10.064	2.307** (0.123)	10.045
<b>Age</b>	0.023** (0.001)	1.024	0.023** (0.001)	1.024
<b>Education level</b>				
<b>Below GCSE</b>	0.191 (0.102)	1.211	0.190 (0.102)	1.210
<b>GCSE</b>	0.294** (0.076)	1.342	0.293** (0.076)	1.340
<b>A Level</b>	0.519** (0.081)	1.680	0.517** (0.081)	1.677
<b>Undergraduate</b>	0.791** (0.079)	2.205	0.790** (0.079)	2.204
<b>Postgraduate</b>	0.856** (0.109)	2.355	0.857** (0.109)	2.356
<b>Income &gt; £15,000</b>	0.181** (0.051)	1.199	0.180** (0.051)	1.197
<b>Local authority cuts</b>			0.138 (0.228)	1.148
<b>Constant</b>	-1.763** (0.135)	0.171	-1.727** (0.148)	0.178
<b>Cox-Snell R-squared</b>	0.084		0.084	
<b>Nagelkerke R-squared</b>	0.136		0.136	
<b>Observations</b>	18197		18197	

Note. \* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$

As discussed above, the primary reason for this analysis of predictor variables for voting is to build a model from which to assess whether including spending cuts improves or worsens the predictive power. I therefore ran this model step-wise with the second step adding in local authority cuts (see Model 2b in Table 5). Where the first step of this model was significant overall

at  $p < 0.01$ , significance was lost at the second step ( $p = 0.54$ ). This suggests that reduction in local authority spending is not a good predictor of voting.

This result supports the findings from the interview data because I found that cuts are failing to provoke participation (including voting specifically). While a small number of people have been mobilised by cuts, as discussed in section 7.7, these participants represented only a small proportion of the interview sample and were also probably overrepresented. The evidence from my quantitative analysis suggests that these actively anti-austerity individuals are likely to be rare in the wider population. It is therefore unsurprising that they would not have any obvious influence on the statistical model which is more representative of the wider population.

## 8.6 Conclusion

The quantitative evidence suggests that austerity has negatively affected political attitudes, but that this has not translated into political participation. Those living in areas of higher cuts are more likely to disagree with austerity both in principle and in practice, although there is greater geographical variation in attitudes to the implementation of austerity than to the idea of it.

Geographical variation in experience of cuts also appears to play a role in attitudes towards politicians, as those who feel that politicians do not care about them are more likely to be from areas with higher cuts. However, on an individual level it appears there is not a linear relationship between attitudes to cuts and attitudes towards politicians. Both those who feel cuts have gone too far and those who feel cuts have not gone far enough are more likely to feel politicians do not care about them, compared to those who feel cuts are about right. This is perhaps not surprising, as it is intuitive that those who support the way austerity (or, indeed, any policy of interest) has been implemented are more likely to feel that politicians listen to them. However, those who feel cuts have gone too far are more likely to feel that politicians do not listen to them than those who feel they have not gone far enough. This may suggest that being opposed to cuts is a more alienating experience than seeking further cuts.

Due to constraints of time, I have not been able to develop the analysis of the variable 'politicians don't care what people like me think' further. However, the descriptive statistics indicate there may be a relationship between cuts and political attitudes, even if this does not result in political participation. This finding matches the qualitative data which suggests that austerity has played a role in feelings of alienation from politics. However, the evidence on attitudes towards politicians is somewhat mixed so this finding should not be overstated. It would be beneficial to model the relationship between cuts and such feelings of political efficacy to test this in a more robust manner, so this is an important area for future research.

Both the descriptive statistics and regression model provide little evidence of spending cuts playing a role in propensity to vote. All three regression models were poor at explaining turnout which likely reflects the need for more complex models using more or different variables, a more complex research method or both. As argued by Matsusaka and Palda (1999), modelling turnout is very complex, particularly due to the influence of factors which are difficult to measure, such as the weather. However, model 2, which included important predictor variables and had a higher  $R^2$  (albeit still very low), was only made worse by including local authority cuts as a variable. It would be valuable for future research to develop this analysis further by building a model of turnout which includes attitudes to cuts to test the role of austerity further. However, in line with the interview data, the findings here broadly suggest that austerity fails to provoke participation.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion

Austerity is a policy that has caused considerable harms, yet the central finding of this research is that it has broadly failed to provoke political participation. There are three reasons for this political inaction: firstly, a significant minority of people have lost resources under austerity that are key for participation; secondly, many feel that resisting austerity would not be effective; and thirdly, others are little affected by cuts and therefore lack motivation to act. While there are exceptions – the minority who actively resist austerity and the one person who said that he voted specifically to support austerity – many people feel that austerity is at least partially necessary and that there are no clear alternatives.

This chapter will discuss these findings in more depth. It begins by drawing out the conclusions of this thesis and its contributions to understandings of political participation. I then discuss areas for future research to further develop the findings of this thesis. Finally, I explain the policy implications of this research amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

### 9.1 The consequences of austerity

One participant, Melissa, summed up many of the themes from this thesis:

I know there's debts and people have to tighten their purse strings and things but I think the priorities this government, I think they're just... I think they're not, they're not looking at the most vulnerable people in society who also tend to be the ones that are least likely to complain about stuff.

This quotation draws out a lot of the key themes of this research. Firstly, she explains that austerity has most significantly affected vulnerable people, an argument which is corroborated both by this data and the wider austerity literature (e.g., Beatty and Fothergill, 2013; O'Hara, 2014; Hall, 2019b). Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 explore people's experiences of austerity through the lens of their interactions with public services. These data demonstrate that the people who have been worst hit by the cuts are those living on low incomes, with disabilities and/or with caring responsibilities. These people tend to be most reliant on public services, often claiming benefits and using social care, which means that they are particularly vulnerable to cuts to public spending.

Not all participants had negative experiences of austerity, with some expressing concern over relatively minor issues such as potholes in the roads and longer wait times to see their GPs. These people tended to live in Hampshire and London and were relatively protected from cuts. This was either due to having minimal cuts in their area, personal resources that insulated them from the

cuts, or both. In contrast, others shared sometimes harrowing stories of food poverty, mental health issues due to financial insecurity, growing work pressures and safety fears due to lack of policing. Many were reliant on friends and family members for support or had turned to food banks and emergency fuel vouchers.

This contrast highlights the value of the comparative approach used in this research. Comparing the experiences of people from a mix of backgrounds underscores the inequality of austerity's effects and the challenges of life under austerity for those bearing the brunt of the cuts. This juxtaposition also serves as an invitation to those of us who have experienced austerity in the UK to reflect on how our own experiences differ from others around us.

For those working in public services, particularly in social care but also across the NHS, schools and libraries, there were major challenges caused by reduced staffing and increased workloads. Many were underpaid and required to take on extra roles that were not an expected part of their job description, such as the library assistant who provided support with benefits claims and social services. These were stories of public services under extreme pressure, where often those who were struggling were supported by people who were struggling themselves. These data offer new evidence towards a growing body of literature on the challenges faced by public services under austerity (e.g., British Medical Association, 2018; Page, Langford and Higgs, 2020; Cunningham, Lindsay and Roy, 2021).

Chapter 8 also suggests that there is a geographical component to variation in experiences of cuts. Those living in the North and London have seen the highest cuts to local authority spending, which creates localised variation in experiences of austerity. As argued in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, those living in wealthier areas tend to be more protected from austerity, as there was 'more fat to cut', yet these areas have typically been cut the least. These findings match those of Berry and White (2014), Gray and Barford (2018) and Simpson (2017) who show that cuts have been deepest in the areas of highest need.

However, the interview data also reveal a more complex picture. It is not a straightforward story that all of those in wealthy areas are less affected than those in deprived areas. There are many people within the less deprived areas for whom the cuts have been very damaging, again typically those on benefits and/or with serious health issues. This tells a story of what Boswell *et al.* (2020) call nested deprivation, where 'pockets' of deprivation exist within areas of comparative wealth. The consequence can be that these people are overlooked by policymakers because it is easy to dismiss higher income areas as not requiring investment or additional support.

To better explain the variation in experiences of austerity, as well as attitudes and political participation in relation to it, I developed a typology to group participants into four ideal types.

These groups were 'pro-austerity', 'austerity sceptics', 'inactive anti-austerity' and 'actively anti-austerity'. This typology offers a broader contribution to political participation literature because it identifies individual-level factors that affect whether a policy will provoke political participation.

Returning to Melissa's quote, she uses similar language to the government in talking about austerity. She refers to the need to 'tighten purse strings', while many other participants used phrases such as 'tightening our belts' and 'living within your means'. As argued in Chapter 6, this language echoes that of the coalition government, suggesting that their narrative has significantly influenced the way the public views austerity.

When Melissa comments on the debt and says that people *have* to tighten their purse strings, she implies that austerity is necessary, which also reflects the way the government spoke about austerity (Stanley, 2013). However, in line with many of the participants, Melissa expresses discontent with the way cuts have been implemented. This distinction between attitudes to austerity in principle and practice is an important theme because it is a key piece of the participation puzzle. As I will discuss further below, the widespread reluctance to express opposition to austerity is less surprising in the context that most people accept austerity to some extent. Even those most negatively affected by austerity tended to say that cuts were needed. Only a small proportion of interview participants, typically those from the 'actively anti-austerity' group, objected to austerity as an economic policy. Yet the majority of people felt that austerity had been implemented poorly. Many, like Melissa, described it as 'unfair' or 'targeted' at the vulnerable and argued that the cuts should have been more equally distributed.

The descriptive statistics comparing attitudes to austerity in principle and practice largely matched the interview data. Even among those from areas of the highest cuts and higher deprivation, most people agreed with the need for deficit reduction and were supportive of using cuts to at least some extent to achieve this. In the South and East there was a high degree of support for cuts in principle. However, there was stronger opposition to cuts in practice, with people more likely to say that the cuts had gone too far, particularly in the areas with higher cuts.

Finally, Melissa highlights one of my key arguments relating to cognitive mobilisation theory, that those who are most badly affected are also those who are least likely to challenge the policy. Research has shown that those on low incomes who would benefit most from greater redistribution of wealth are less likely to participate in politics (Pontusson and Rueda, 2010). Resources are key for participation (Verba and Nie, 1972; Lijphart, 1997), yet, as shown here, austerity has depleted many people's resources. As argued in Chapter 7, many interview participants explained that they did not have enough time or money to participate, particularly for attending protests. Health was also a major concern, both physical and mental, as many people felt they were not well enough to participate or, in some cases, even to follow the news.

A lack of resources was not the only factor that inhibited participation, however. The government narrative around austerity as necessary and unavoidable appears to have been widely accepted by the public (Harrison, 2021b). This understanding of austerity is demotivating for many because it suggests that even if they were to try to resist the cuts then nothing would change as there is no alternative anyway. On the other hand, for those supportive of austerity, there is also no need to actively express support for spending cuts, because it does not appear likely that the policy will change.

The data analysis has shown that there are a number of people who, due to affluence, good health and stage of life, were little affected by spending cuts. As a result of this protection from the negative consequences of cuts, these participants had relatively little awareness of austerity and consequently no motivation to express support or opposition to it. Indeed, some of these people were supportive of austerity both in principle and practice and almost all still felt no need to actively express support for the policy. This finding supports the grievance theory aspect of my argument and the findings of Kern et al. (2015), suggesting that grievances are necessary for political mobilisation. As these individuals were not aggrieved by the cuts, they were not motivated to act.

The quantitative data analysis, including the regression models of turnout, broadly supported the argument that cuts do not play a role in political participation. There were important limitations to this analysis, the most significant being that I was not able to create a good model of turnout even without spending cuts. It is likely that a more nuanced and perhaps multilevel model would be needed to better model turnout. However, in all cases, including local authority spending cuts as a variable reduced the overall predictive power of the models, which indicates that it is not a strong predictor of turnout. More research is needed to test this, however the findings here do suggest that austerity does not motivate (or indeed demotivate) people to vote.

The one important exception to this finding is that all but a few participants claimed to vote in some, if not all, elections. Many attributed this to a sense of duty or having the right to complain, which is a relatively little discussed motivation for political participation. This may imply a degree of cynicism among these participants, who expect to be disappointed by the outcomes of elections and/or the party they vote for. However, it may be the case that cynicism from the public may result from a perception of poor performance of political parties, rather than inherent cynicism of the public.

There are, of course, people who are highly politically active and who have taken action to challenge austerity as a policy. They are, however, typically people who are active on a range of issues, which suggests that either it is not austerity that is their primary motivation for participation or that, should austerity never have happened, they would have become active on a

different issue in its place. This does not invalidate their efforts – participants gave a range of examples of activist work they have done to oppose the cuts – but rather implies that austerity is not necessarily an exceptional political issue to much of the public. If the majority of people who are acting on it are people who would otherwise be politically active, it can't realistically be described as a mobilising issue.

Given the substantial, wide-ranging impacts that austerity has had, as described in Chapter 2, 4 and Chapter 5, it is on the surface surprising that it has not had a greater mobilising effect. Austerity is a policy that has affected public spending and national policy for a decade. The initial protests that took place in the first few years of the Coalition government show that it was significant enough to motivate participation. However, this action has not been sustained by the majority of people, despite continued cuts and deepening consequences for vulnerable people.

This thesis therefore contributes two key arguments to understandings of political participation. The first is that, in support of the work of Kern et al. (2015), grievance theory and civic voluntarism are most effective at explaining participation when used in combination. The second point is that government and media narratives around policies play a key role in influencing how the public will respond to those policies. This argument builds on the theory of policy feedback, which suggests that government narratives influence participation (Skocpol, 1995). By framing a policy as necessary and unavoidable, public resistance to it may be dampened. However, this comes with damaging consequences, as a lack of opposition does not equate to public support for a policy, but instead can increase more generalised feelings of alienation from politics. Therefore, this research shows that grievance theory, civic voluntarism and policy feedback together provide a fuller picture of political participation under austerity.

## **9.2 Future research**

In order to build on these findings, I suggest five opportunities for future research. The quantitative evidence here is an important mechanism through which to triangulate the findings from the qualitative data. However, it is somewhat limited in scope. As such, the first area for future research is to develop a more nuanced model of turnout to test the impact of austerity more rigorously. It would be beneficial to use a multilevel model to account for the individual (e.g. income) and group level (e.g. local authority cuts) variables, as well as any interaction between them. Additional variables, such as vote in previous election, party identification and political interest, could strengthen the model to better test the role of austerity (Smets and van Ham, 2013). It may also enhance the model to incorporate attitudes to austerity. Local authority cuts as a variable does not necessarily reflect political attitudes, but political attitudes is an important intermediary between experience of cuts and political participation.



Secondly, another area in which to develop the quantitative analysis would be to create an inferential model of attitudes to cuts. It would be valuable to test which variables influence views of austerity and explicitly test the qualitative evidence that disability, income, receipt of benefits and caring responsibilities affect attitudes to cuts.

Thirdly, one of the key advantages of the interview research was that, in speaking to a cross-section of members of the public, it was possible to identify which public service cuts had the biggest impact on people. However, this meant that for certain important policy areas, such as the NHS, schools and libraries, the evidence was somewhat limited from the perspective of practitioners. The data on social care were particularly rich because, by chance, I spoke to a large number of social workers and carers. It would therefore be valuable to build on the evidence gathered here by conducting further in-depth interviews with people working in these public services to better understand the challenges they have faced.

Fourth, in discussions of voting, participants in this research frequently mentioned voting to have the right to complain. Beyond the work of Lomasky and Brennan (2000), there are few discussions of the right to complain in political science. As such, it would be valuable to explore this argument through further research, as it has important implications for theories of voter turnout.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, this research has important implications for the impact that specific policies have on political participation. In focusing on austerity, I have been able to explore in depth how people's experience and understanding of austerity has impacted their political response to it. This speaks to the policy feedback literature which considers how policy influences politics (Béland, 2010; Campbell, 2012). Evidence suggests that negative experiences of policies, such as welfare assistance, can actively depress participation (Soss, 1999), while positive policies can promote participation (Haselswerdt, 2017). Yet this thesis suggests that policy that is damaging for some does not necessarily depress participation. As such, further research could build on this to develop our understanding of the role that mechanisms such as government narrative and media coverage of policy have on policy feedback. It would also be valuable to further test the influence that other very broad policies have had on political participation, such as COVID-19 lockdowns or Brexit, to understand further whether the scope of the policy influences participatory feedback.

### **9.3 Implications for COVID-19 and beyond**

This research has significance both for retrospectively understanding participation levels seen in the UK over the last decade, but also for future policy decisions. With the COVID-19 pandemic leading to significant economic instability, there remains a chance that governments will return to

austerity as a solution to the economic challenges we face. In the UK, the 2021 budget promised large spending increases of £150 billion over the course of the parliament (BBC News, 2021), yet the rises were unevenly distributed across departments with the Ministry of Defence seeing a real-terms cut of 1.4 per cent to current spending (Financial Times, 2021). For most benefits claimants, increases from changes to the universal credit taper rate and increases in the minimum wage, designed to increase support for in-work benefit claimants, are outweighed by the £20 cut (Schmuecker, 2021b). These increases also offer no additional support to those out of work or with disabilities (Schmuecker, 2021a).

Without additional investment, many public services still face significant budgetary challenges. In particular, local government have received only a 1.8 per cent spending increase outside of social care, compared to 3.3 per cent on average across departments (Zaranko, 2021). Having already faced some of the highest spending cuts (London Councils, 2018), the increases will have only a limited benefit. Even if departments no longer face substantial cuts, for many spending has yet to overtake the cuts seen under austerity (Zaranko, 2021). While funding remains so low it is difficult to argue that austerity has truly ended.

This research demonstrates the damage that austerity can do to those reliant on public services, which is now a growing number due to the staggering increase in benefits claimants since March 2020 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020b). The new cohort of benefits claimants represent significantly different demographics to those claiming prior to the pandemic, including a higher proportion of university graduates, home owners and people from the 'AB' social grade (Edmiston *et al.*, 2020). Given these changes, it might be expected that attitudes to benefits may become more favourable. Evidence suggests that proximity to benefits, either as a direct recipient or relative of a benefits recipient, makes people more favourable towards benefits (Hedegaard, 2014). However, the evidence so far suggests that there have been no meaningful changes in political attitudes towards social welfare and redistribution (Blumenau *et al.*, 2020; de Vries *et al.*, 2021).

The consequences of further cuts for political participation could be critical, as individuals' resources are likely to be substantially undermined by rising unemployment, poor health and loss of public service support. An important finding from this research is support for the civic voluntarist argument that resources play a key role in political participation (Kern, Marien and Hooghe, 2015). It is well established that resources such as time, money and political education are important in enabling political participation (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995). However, the role of physical and mental health in participation is also increasingly acknowledged (Mattila *et al.*, 2013; Melo and Stockemer, 2014; Gollust and Rahn, 2015).

Physical disabilities and ill health can be very limiting to political participation. Accessibility can be an issue at events where one needs to be physically present or where additional needs are not met, such as sign language interpretation (Priestley *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, participation of all kinds can require significant energy which can be challenging for people with disabilities or poor health. Online participation, particularly through social media, can be advantageous for some as it is relatively accessible, such as for participant Liz who regularly uses the internet to read about politics and express her views. However, the costs of internet access can be considerable (Kearns and Whitley, 2019), so reductions in disability benefits payments and cuts to library services limit the accessibility of the internet as a resource. Similarly, cuts to social care are likely to inhibit participation, as some argue that social workers should play an active role in facilitating political activity (Postle and Beresford, 2007). At the very least, cuts to support from carers and social workers is likely to undermine care users' capacity for action, as cuts have led to poorer health and greater social isolation for many (Macdonald and Morgan, 2021).

Austerity measures have also significantly affected many people's mental health through increasing financial pressures, housing insecurity, food poverty, unemployment and reduced mental health provision (Mattheys, 2015). Many participants from this research corroborated this, speaking of the mental distress caused by benefits cuts and increased work pressures, among other issues.

This research has demonstrated that poor mental health can be a significant barrier to engaging with politics. Participants such as Melissa, who has benefited from a high level of education and strong political awareness, have been held back from participating in politics because their mental health limits the energy and motivation they need to do so. It is not surprising that someone experiencing severe depression, struggling to get out of bed and maintain day-to-day functions, will struggle to vote, attend marches or even follow the news.

Research has already linked COVID-19 to rising depression and shows that this could reduce political participation, especially in its most demanding forms such as political campaigning (Landwehr, Ojeda and Tüscher, 2020). There is substantial overlap in many of the issues relating to COVID-19 and austerity, including unemployment, poor mental and physical wellbeing, and greater reliance on benefits and social care. Provision of services has also been threatened, such as social care which has seen further increases in staff shortages, after years of underfunding under austerity (Comas-Herrera *et al.*, 2020). Such risk factors are only likely to be exacerbated by further public spending cuts and this research shows that, beyond those issues, political participation could also become a significant victim.

## Appendix A Model of turnout including disability

Table 6: Binary logistic regression coefficients for predictors of voting in 2015 general election, including disability

	Model 2a		Model 2b	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	Odds Ratio	<i>b</i> (SE)	Odds Ratio
<b>Understands the important political issues facing our country</b>				
<b>Disagree</b>	0.534** (0.101)	1.706	0.532** (0.101)	1.703
<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	1.445** (0.095)	4.242	1.443** (0.095)	4.232
<b>Agree</b>	1.923** (0.093)	6.842	1.921** (0.094)	6.825
<b>Strongly agree</b>	2.319** (0.123)	10.167	2.317** (0.123)	10.147
<b>Age</b>	0.024** (0.001)	1.025	0.024** (0.001)	1.024
<b>Education level</b>				
<b>Below GCSE</b>	0.187 (0.102)	1.206	0.186 (0.102)	1.205
<b>GCSE</b>	0.284** (0.076)	1.329	0.283** (0.076)	1.327
<b>A Level</b>	0.506** (0.081)	1.659	0.504** (0.081)	1.656
<b>Undergraduate</b>	0.774** (0.080)	2.168	0.774** (0.080)	2.167
<b>Postgraduate</b>	0.835** (0.109)	2.304	0.835** (0.109)	2.306
<b>Income &gt; £15,000</b>	0.146** (0.052)	1.157	0.144** (0.052)	1.155
<b>Disability</b>	-0.158** (0.051)	0.853	-0.159** (0.051)	0.853
<b>Local authority cuts</b>			0.146 (0.228)	1.157
<b>Constant</b>	-1.731** (0.135)	0.177	-1.692** (0.148)	0.184
<b>Cox-Snell R-squared</b>	0.084		0.084	
<b>Nagelkerke R-squared</b>	0.137		0.137	
<b>Observations</b>	18197		18197	

Note. \* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$

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