



**SHEILA
MCKECHNIE
FOUNDATION**

We don't do politics, we give people a voice

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nfpResearch and the Sheila McKechnie Foundation

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Foreword

Foreword by Sue Tibballs, Chief Executive, Sheila McKechnie Foundation

Politics seems to have become a dirty word. This research throws into sharp relief the uneasy relationship that so many people have with politics and politicians – a discomfort that has grown. Meanwhile, charities' involvement in politics and campaigning is seen variously as essential, controversial, radical, or desirable. It depends on who you ask, how you ask, and when you ask.

As a society, we have never been good at distinguishing between 'politics' and 'party politics'. We barely have the language to do so. So, I found it heartening that participants recognise that politics 'is everything' and that change is possible. But they also said that they found it complex and overwhelming – to the point where many felt the need to switch off – and did not see being involved with formal politics as aspirational.

So how might charities respond to these findings? I would suggest 'optimistically'. People are clearly willing to support charities campaigning if they get the right information in the right way. There's no one-size-fits-all solution but there are some fruitful avenues to explore.

There has long been anxiety that trumpeting charities' lobbying and campaigning work might put off donors. A clear 'win' is desirable to share, but the longer slog of connecting with people affected, building relationships with decision-makers, gathering evidence, developing analysis, and shifting attitudes, often goes under the radar until a positive outcome can be reported. This essentially leaves your community behind. Is it time to bring people on the long slog with you, explaining why you're doing things as you go?

Margaret's story (p.8) is a wonderful example of how people's views can shift as their knowledge grows, allowing them to judge things from different perspectives. The initial gut reaction is not always the final one. Is explaining more confidently why campaigning is an effective way to achieve your charity's goals now vital?

Words that have strong associations with political parties and politicians (lobbying, politics) seem to trigger negative responses. More active and empowered language (standing up, having a voice, moving things forward, challenging) elicits more supportive reactions. Not every utterance can be positive or even respectful – there are times when only a passionate outcry is appropriate – but, at a time when people feel overwhelmed by politics, is there an opportunity for charities to offer hope and the chance to be part of positive change?

I want to thank nfpResearch for this fascinating contribution to the debate that, with a General Election imminent, couldn't come at a better time.



Introduction

Ahead of a looming election, it is crucial to understand the public's attitudes towards the involvement of charities in politics. The Shelia McKechnie Foundation and nfpResearch wanted to understand how aware the public is of the political work of charities. Whether they feel this is a space that charities should occupy, and who people think should be involved in politics. We also wanted to explore what the public thinks of different charity campaigns to change the law or influence government policy. We know that language can be important in framing charity campaigning work, so we wanted to begin to unpack the reactions to the different language used when talking about campaigning. To take stock of the public's opinions on these topics we surveyed the general public and ran two focus groups with charity supporters.

Methodology

In December 2023, nfpResearch surveyed a representative sample of 1000 members of the general public on their attitudes towards charity campaigning and activism. To explore these attitudes in greater depth, we also held two focus groups on the 16th and 18th of January 2024. Both groups were with people who were warm to charities. The first group was with under 30s who had either donated or volunteered to a charity in the last 3 months. The second group was the over 60s, all of whom had given over £50 to charity in the last 3 months. Both groups were a mix of genders and regions. We were also careful to include a mixture of voting intentions in the groups.

Key findings

1. People don't aspire to be 'political'

2. Warm charity audiences can be convinced of the impact of political work of charities, but aren't there yet

3. People don't connect with the language of politics

4. The public is more comfortable with some charity sectors lobbying rather than others

5. Charities are not seen as the sector that has power in the UK

1. People don't aspire to be 'political'

Politics does not have a positive reputation in the UK. nfpResearch data on trust in institutions shows that only 18% of the public trust the government, and 8% trust political parties¹. Many of the participants in the focus groups were engaged in campaigning activity, from signing petitions to attending protests, but they did not always consider their actions as 'political'. This was particularly notable with the younger age group. Two respondents described their involvement in marches and events in parliament as not 'political'.



"I'm not sure how political this is, but I try to do as much marching for Black Lives Matter." Female, 18-30

"Talking about the charity to MPs and members of the Senedd and that sort of thing is something that I have enjoyed doing. And if I'm invited to by Guide Dogs would continue to do it. But I don't think I'd actively be on the politics side of it. I'd rather stick with the charity side." Female, 18-30

Whereas people in the older group were quick to see signing a petition as a political action.



"Signing the petition about the post office workers."

Female, 60+

"I've written sort of a pro forma letter from the Humanist Society in relation to assistant dying."

Male, 60+

However, people still defined politics in a very broad way. One focus group participant referenced how he was now seeing politics and current events

in many different spheres of his life, including sports.



"There's a lot of politics and current events sneaking into sports. That 10, 20 years ago you just wouldn't see that at all." Male, 18-30

The younger focus group saw politics as all-encompassing but complex. There was a recognition that politics was important but a hesitancy to engage as it was viewed as 'complicated' and 'overwhelming'. Although some did recognise that it can create change.



"Politics is everything, but also terribly confusing. And a lot of great politics is something that you could spend your entire life trying to wrap your head around or go 'I don't care'. But without politics, we wouldn't have anything that we have today because it provides us so much structure and it is what our society is." Male, 18-30

[Politics is] "a big thing that surrounds everything, that is very complicated and too overwhelming to try and understand." Female, 18-30

"It can make change if you put your head into a positive and less cynical headspace." Male, 18-30

People frequently associated politics with politicians, political parties or being partisan so they were wary of charities being 'political'. For the younger group concern over being partisan was high.



"When a charity takes a particular political side, it might be seen as negative and isolate them from getting funding or people that would donate." Male, 18-30

The older age group were more likely to talk about specific politicians, with questions of their motives for entering politics. There was a perception that

¹ nfpIntelligence, December 2023, 1000 respondents 16+, UK

politicians of the past were of a higher calibre than the current crop. The perception that politicians did not listen or follow through on their promises felt like a barrier to change for this group.



“When you were younger there were definitely better politicians than the world, more aligned to what you need. Now you get the feeling that they're all in it for themselves [...] they're no like what they were in the past.” Male, 60+

“I think at one time the politicians did it for passion and beliefs whereas now it's an occupation [...] they all look pretty much the same now and every time they open their mouth you can tell they're lying anyway.” Male, 60+

In January 2021, 38% of people over 65 agreed with the statement that ‘people like me can make a meaningful difference’, but this dropped to 29% December 2023². A possible cause for this shift was a feeling that politicians have not fulfilled their promises. The over-60s group recalled Boris Johnson’s unfulfilled promise of more funding for motor neurone disease. There was a strong feeling that politicians were unreliable and would go back on their word.



“They just promise you the earth to get into power and then just turn to what they really want for their own personal ends.” Male, 60+

In spite of this cynicism, we see in our polling that almost half (47%) of the public believe that ‘people like me can make a meaningful difference to society by taking part in campaigns’³. This is particularly high for those in higher social grades and younger people⁴. But this wasn’t necessarily reflected in the groups.

There was a lack of motivation to be involved in ‘political’ activities among the under 30s. They would only act if it was something they cared about or directly affected their lives. It was not something that they were likely to seek out on their own.



“If the matter is of interest to me or if it directly affects me. It's not something that I would actively go out and look for and try and get involved in.”
Female, 18-30

One participant in the 18-30 focus group talked about avoiding political issues by not watching the news. Suggesting that for some there are limited places where they would see things outside of their spheres of interest.



“I don't particularly watch the news. It's just all a bit depressing, to be honest. And so yeah, I wouldn't say I'm clued up.” Male, 18-30

There was a noticeable lack of pride when people referenced the many political actions they took part in. Campaigning for change wasn’t something to aspire to. This lack of pride and cynicism seems to be fuelled, in part, by negative perceptions of politicians and Westminster politics. Campaigning doesn’t seem to inspire the same awe as raising lots of money for charity might.

² nfpIntelligence, December 2023, 1000 respondents 16+, UK

³ As before

⁴ 32% of 16-24 year olds and 36% of 25-34 year olds

2. Warm charity audiences can be convinced of the impact of the political work of charities, but aren't there yet

The public is generally very positive about charities. ¾ of the public thinks that the charity sector is a force for good in the UK⁵. In the focus groups the older participants did mention charity scandals and CEO pay, but, they were still very supportive of charities and supported them financially.

This warmth towards charities does not automatically mean they understand why charities campaign. People viewed funding as the main thing that charities might lobby the government for. This was considered a strong reason why charities might lobby. People could not immediately think of other reasons why charities might campaign.

“They depend on funding, so I think it's totally acceptable that they would ask and maximize as much as they can get.” Female, 18-30

The younger group had come across different charity campaigns outside of funding requests. This included a campaign to change the law on maternity leave and a Guide Dog's campaign to prevent pavement parking.

Warm charity audiences might not initially be supportive of charity campaigning. But they can be taken on a journey to understand and even support it. One of the strongest supporters of charities from the over-60s group stated she would support all charities if she could. But she was

initially very anti-lobbying, deciding that she wouldn't support charities involved in politics. She finished the group by saying charities should 'keep lobbying' and 'make as much of a nuisance of yourself' as you can.

When given clear examples people were very comfortable with charities campaigning. We asked the focus groups about three examples; Crisis's campaign to scrap the Vagrancy Act, RNIB's campaign on the proposed closure of train ticket offices, and environmental charities campaigning against removing environmental protections during the Liz Truss government (this included reference to RSPBs tweet 'make no mistake, we are angry This government has today launched an attack on nature').

All the participants were supportive of the campaigns by RNIB and the environmental charities. They felt it was within the charities' remit and that they should be campaigning on these issues.

On the environmental campaign:

“If you're an environmental charity, you need to campaign against these things because that's the whole point of your charity.” Male, 18-30

“Because it's their baby, if you like, it's their remit.” Male, 60+

On RNIB's campaign:

“It's a good use of their time. It's no no-brainer. That's what the charity focuses on. So I think it's an excellent use of their time” Female, 18-30

“I think, yeah, it's got to be a good use of money” Male, 60+

⁵ nfpIntelligence, December 2023, 1000 respondents 16+, UK

Understanding the wider impact of a campaign is crucial. It affects people's support for spending charity time and resources on the issue. When discussing Crisis's campaign, people were unsure of the impact of the Vagrancy Act. They were sceptical that the outdated law was still being used by police and felt that the money spent campaigning would be better used elsewhere.

“It looks good to get rid of the Vagrancy Act. Yes. Is it the best use of their time and does it help people sleeping rough today? I don't know.” Male, 18-30

“It depends on how much they're spending on the lobbying. If they're lobbying, and yet the primary reason for the charity to exist is to help the homeless, I don't want them to take all that money.” Female, 60+

For RNIB's campaign, people could unpick the wider impact that closing ticket offices would have. The elderly and people with learning disabilities were quickly identified as also benefiting from the campaign. So, people felt this was a good issue to campaign on.

Specific examples helped people to understand why charities need to campaign. But understanding the wider impact a campaign can have was also crucial for lending support. People recognised that campaigning was necessary and sometimes the only option for charities to protect their cause.

“The government says what they think you want to hear, but then it's not followed up by their actions. And if charities have to be political to make that happen, so be it. Let's do it.” Female, 60+

Margaret's journey to supporting charity campaigning:

Margaret was very supportive of charities:

“I have to say that I think every single charity in the world is very worthy and it breaks my heart that personally, I can't support them all. But you know I'm there in spirit with them.”

She was initially very against charities campaigning:

“I'm not politically minded in any way. [...] I'm not sure I would support charities that are involved politically. In fact, I wouldn't.”

During the discussion she expressed frustration that things have not changed:

“I just feel they don't listen. [...] How many people have tried to lobby and tried to make the public aware of what's going on and where have we got today? Nowhere.”

By the end of the discussion Margaret advised charities to keep going:

“Keep lobbying. I do this with the NHS if I'm waiting months for an appointment somebody once said to me make a nuisance of yourself and it works [...] but that's my message to [charities] make a nuisance of yourself.”

3. People don't connect with the language of politics

The language we use to talk about the campaigning and influencing work of charities has a significant impact on public support for this work. The public and donors tend not to think of charities as 'political' or operating in the 'political' space. References to charities' political campaigning do not help people understand this work. People question if charities should be involved in politics

because it is primarily associated with politicians and being partisan.

However, different language seems to have better cut through. The public is supportive of charities 'standing up' for their cause. Polling shows that 75% of the public believe 'charities should have a voice in parliament'⁶. Less direct language seems to have more support from the public. In the groups, when describing how charities should campaign people used softer language. For example, describing campaigning as making a 'nuisance'. People also used phrases such as 'taking a stand' and moving things 'forward'.

"Get the public involved. The more people that stand with them, the better really." Female, 18-30

"Get the right people on your side and just sort of push things forward, making people stand up and take notice and using the right channels to do it"
Male, 18-30

"Move the aims of the charity forward" Female, 60+

The term lobbying does not illicit the same support. Only 45% of the public believe it is acceptable for charities to lobby government. In the media, lobbying is often reported on as negative and secretive. A quick Google news search for the word brings up stories of an MP suspended for a lobbying scandal, Amazon lobbyists being banned from the EU parliament, and water companies trying to increase bills and lower fines. Although lobbying does not have the best reputation, it was not completely tainted. In conversation, people were happy for charities to lobby as long as it was done responsibly.

"I don't have a problem with charities lobbying and being political. I just hope they do it responsibly. It

wouldn't put me off donating. In fact, sometimes they should definitely be political." Female, 60+

"I feel that they definitely need to lobby the governments and I'm sure lots and lots of charities do it." Male, 60+

Lobbying along with the word politics has complicated meanings for people.

"Apart from the odd lobby to support themselves, they shouldn't be looking at the politics of the government at the time or supporting them in any way." Male, 60+

People were much more accepting of charities being 'challenging'. 65% of the public said it is acceptable for a charity to 'challenge government policy'⁷. We saw this clearly in the support for the environmental campaign.

When asked about environmental charities campaigning against removing environmental protections including RSPB's tweet "Make no mistake, we are angry." participants felt this was acceptable. Some participants described environmental charities as having no choice but to campaign against the government's plan to remove environmental protections.

"It's good that they are asking the government to be accountable for their actions." Male 18-30

"If that charity is going to be directly affected in a really negative way, then of course you're gonna make a stand." Male, 18-30

The older group was more conscious of the language used by campaigns. When referencing RSPB's tweet one person expressed concern that it was heading towards more provocative, violent language.

⁶ nfpIntelligence, December 2023, 1000 respondents 16+, UK

⁷ nfpIntelligence, December 2023, 1000 respondents 16+, UK

“I’m 50/50 on this one because obviously everybody’s got a right to an opinion and to express it. But I think the wording is a little bit provocative. You know, ‘we are angry’ and the word ‘under attack’ on nature. It’s quite provocative. And I just don’t want to see charities recruiting supporters that feel now that it’s OK for them to go in and attack something.” Female 60+

More research is needed to determine the best language to use to talk about campaigning. But it’s clear that phrasing can change how acceptable the public thinks it is for a charity to campaign.

4. The public is more comfortable with some charity sectors lobbying rather than others

There were very different reactions to the environmental campaign and the campaign to change the Vagrancy Act. If a charity is providing services, does this change how the public views them campaigning?

In the focus groups, campaigning was seen as one of the main functions of environmental charities.

“If you’re an environmental charity, you need to campaign against these things because that’s the whole point of your charity” Male, 18-30

“It’s good that they are asking the government to be accountable for their actions and sort of ask why they’re doing things and give reasons instead of just letting them sort of go ahead without consulting anyone.” Male, 18-30

Some of this support could have been down to the charities criticising an unpopular Liz Truss government. However, it was clear that they felt

environmental charities had a mandate to campaign.

For charities like Crisis, which provides services for the homeless, participants questioned whether campaigning was the best use of their resources. Comparisons were made between spending resources on campaigning versus spending on hostels, housing, or mental health support.

“If that time, effort, and energy could have been put towards putting services in place that prevent people from becoming homeless and having to sleep rough in the 1st place, then that could potentially be a better use of time, resources, and funding.” Male, 18-30

“I think it’s a waste of good funds they could be looking at addressing those problems that you just mentioned the mental health or getting them into a hostel.” Male, 60+

“I feel that lobbying is very important, but not to the extent of everything else or not at the expense of everything else.” Male, 60+

The immediacy of the need might also play a role in this perception. Someone sleeping rough could be viewed as quickly solved with a room in a hostel. This immediate fix seemed to outweigh the slower progress made by campaigning and changing the law. There was also a sense that campaigning needed to have a big impact to justify diverting money away from services.

People might also view homelessness as a more imminent issue than protecting the environment which could in part explain the different reactions to these campaigns.

5. Charities are not seen as the sector that has power in the UK

When asked to rank which sectors have the power to affect change in the UK, charities were not at the top for either focus group. For the older group, the media was seen to have the most influence. They also referenced the Post Office and Just Stop Oil as gaining attention.

“MPs need votes and if the media influences the public then they won't get their votes.” Female 60+

“A good example is the post office thing through the media” Male, 60+

In the 60+ group people had been very impressed by the long-standing campaigning of Mr Bates against the post office. This was seen as a clear example of an individual persevering and making a difference.

“An individual with passion. Yeah, the man that did the investigation into the post office scandal, he didn't retire. The accountant that was brought in to look into it, he went on. [...] Mr. Bates he just carried on and carried on, didn't he?” Female, 60+

There was a recognition that they might not be aware of the impact that charities have had in achieving change.

“Maybe we don't know enough about what charities do to influence the government and legislation and laws and bylaws and everything else. They do change a lot of things, and they've changed a lot of things over the years.” Male, 60+

This lack of visibility for charities is something we see in other areas where charities work. For example, even during the height of the covid pandemic, very few members of the public could name charities responding to it.

The younger group felt celebrities had more power, referencing Kim Kardashian and Marcus Rashford.

“I know Kim Kardashian helped get someone out of prison.” Female, 18-30

“Marcus Rashford, I remember that he did the campaigning for free school meals.” Female, 18-30

There was a recognition that money and power are linked, and big corporations can have a lot of sway to create change.

“Big multinational corporations, they've got a lot of money. If they threaten to move out of a country if something doesn't happen, it would take a massive amount of money away from the economy. And so I think they've got the platform with their reputation as well as the money and power to sort of instigate change.” Male, 18-30

For the younger group charities were firmly at the bottom of the list for being able to influence politicians and decision-makers. Celebrities, businesses, the media, wealthy individuals, and the public are all higher up the list in terms of ability to influence. The over-60 group was slightly more confident in charities' ability to influence politicians ranking them on average third or fourth.

Conclusion

The findings from this research paint a bleak picture of the state of politics in the UK. Among our focus groups were some very engaged individuals, who support charities, are involved in their communities and have participated in campaigns. And yet hardly any saw themselves as 'political'. And neither is it an association they appear to want.

This is a problem for charities who seek to influence local and national government. In a recent Sheila McKechnie Foundation Charity Reform Group roundtable, one participant spoke about politics as 'getting into the mud'. But is ultimately where many charities have to be to create positive change for the people they support.

Charities are not considered to be as powerful as other groups in society – the media, multinationals, celebrities are all seen to hold more sway.

Perhaps this is something charities can use to their advantage – a David vs Goliath narrative that can be very powerful, as demonstrated by Alan Bates and his tireless campaign for justice.

The research does show that by using the right language and giving the right information about your work, there is a path to building understanding and support for your campaigning work. Language such as 'having a voice in parliament' and 'challenging government' is acceptable to the majority. Lobbying is something best left to others. And clear information on what your campaign will achieve, and why this is a better use of your resources than simply 'sticking to your knitting'.



About us

nfpResearch is a leading market research agency in the not-for-profit sector. We put information in the hands of charities, to help them to help as many people as possible.

What sets us apart is the quality of our research. Using sophisticated analytical tools, we drill down into the detail to produce rigorous analysis that can take your organisation to the next level. We might not always tell you what you want to hear – but we promise to tell you what you need to hear, and to listen to your vision of where you want to go.

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