

# No politics, please...we're women

## Gender and political engagement

### Briefing Paper

#### Overview

Not only are women proportionally under represented in Parliament, they also report being less knowledgeable, less likely to participate beyond voting and less interested in politics and Parliament than men.

This paper summarises the findings of the Hansard Society's Annual Audit of Political Engagement on areas such as knowledge, interest, participation and satisfaction with the political system. The findings indicate a significant gender gap in almost every aspect of political engagement.

In addition to being less represented in Parliament these findings indicate that there are many issues relating to gender in politics, and that under representation is just one aspect of the gender gap in many areas of political engagement.

#### Knowledge about politics and the political system

Gender differences are starkest when examining perceived knowledge about politics and the political system. Men are far more likely than women to say that they know at least a fair amount about politics. Since 2004, the Hansard Society's annual Audit of Political Engagement has found that on average, over half of men (54%) have said they know a great deal or a fair amount about politics.<sup>1</sup> Only 35% of women have said the same (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Q. How much, if anything, do you feel you know about politics?*

		Audit 1 (2004)	Audit 2 (2005)	Audit 3 (2006)	Audit 4 (2007)	Audit 5 (2008)	Average (2004- 2008)
A great deal	Men	5	6	7	9	6	7
	Women	2	2	1	3	2	2
A fair amount	Men	44	52	42	53	46	47
	Women	34	31	29	34	35	33
Not very much	Men	41	36	43	31	41	38
	Women	49	52	58	48	44	50
Nothing at all	Men	10	6	7	7	7	7
	Women	14	14	12	16	18	15

Source: Ipsos MORI poll for the Hansard Society

On average a majority of women – 65% – say they know not very much or nothing at all about politics, compared to only 45% of men.

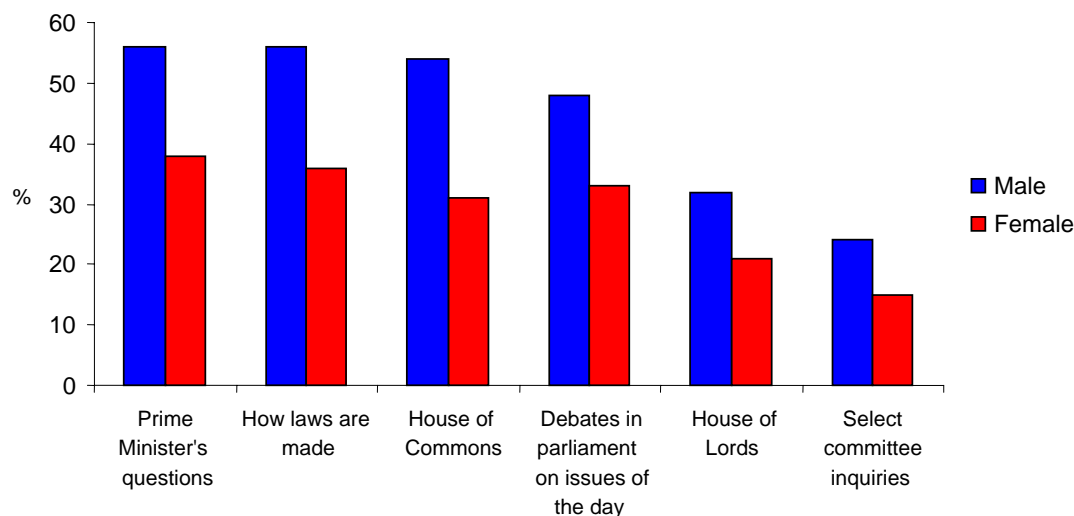
#### Parliament, government and the Constitution

These gender divisions persist when people are asked about their knowledge of specific aspects of the political system such as Parliament, government and the Constitution. While 42% of men report that they feel they have a good understanding of the way Parliament works, only 24% of women say the same.<sup>2</sup> Nearly half of women (49%) say that

they do not feel they have a good understanding, compared to 29% of men. In general, men are more likely to say that they know about various components of Parliament's work than women (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2**

*Q. How much, if anything, do you feel you know about the following?*



*Source: ComRes poll for the Hansard Society*

The largest disparity is with respect to knowledge about the House of Commons. While 54% of men say that they know either 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal' about the House of Commons, just 31% of women say the same. The Audit has also found that over half of men (54%) say they feel they know about the role of MPs, compared to 39% of women.<sup>4</sup>

Recent research has found that only half of the public recognises that there is a distinction between Parliament and government, and men and women are roughly equally likely to say that there is a difference.<sup>5</sup> However, men are more likely than women to be able to correctly ascribe roles to these bodies: more men than women associate 'debating and passing laws' with Parliament (37% of women versus 48% of men); 'holding ministers to account for their actions' with Parliament (37% versus 48%); 'ensuring that laws are enforced' with government (47% versus 53%); 'taking up the concerns of individual people' with Parliament (34% versus 42%); and 'drafting major legislation' with government (32% versus 36%).

One measure on which women appear to have a more accurate view than men is 'delivering public services', as more women than men (59% versus 55%) associate this function with government.

In addition, men are more likely to say they know at least a fair amount about the country's constitutional arrangements (24% compared to 16% of women), and when asked about their knowledge of 11 constitutional issues, men reported greater levels of knowledge than women.<sup>6</sup> The most significant margins emerged in relation to knowledge of how the date of a general election is chosen (only 29% of women say they understand this issue compared to 47% of men) and Scottish MPs voting on English issues (40% versus 55%).

### **Perception versus reality**

Perception of knowledge is not the same as knowledge itself. Our research suggests that feeling knowledgeable about politics and the political system does not always equate to holding actual political knowledge. We have found that men tend to overestimate their actual political knowledge, while women are more inclined to underestimate their knowledge. For example, while the percentage of men reporting a great deal or a fair amount of knowledge about politics is nearly 20 points higher than that of women, the proportion that can name their MP is only 6 points higher (47% versus 41%).<sup>7</sup>

To test people's actual knowledge of politics, we created a quiz based on eight relatively straightforward statements about issues at the local, national and European levels, and respondents were asked whether each statement was true or false (see Figure 3).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 3**

*Q. Please tell me if you think that the following statements are true or false.*

	% giving correct answer	
	Men	Women
The cabinet is usually made up of around five government ministers ( <i>false</i> )	61	43
Members of the European Parliament are directly elected by voters like you and me ( <i>true</i> )	57	44
The prime minister is not an MP ( <i>false</i> )	80	70
The House of Commons has more power than the House of Lords ( <i>true</i> )	53	37
Every problem a constituent takes to an MP will be debated in the House of Commons ( <i>false</i> )	81	73
The minimum age for voting at a general election is 16 ( <i>false</i> )	80	78
Local councils have the power to set the school leaving age in their own area ( <i>false</i> )	80	73
You are automatically registered to vote if you pay council tax ( <i>false</i> )	68	61

Source: Ipsos MORI poll for the Hansard Society

Men were more likely than women to answer each question correctly, and to give four or more correct answers (83% versus 76%), albeit not in the proportions that their claimed knowledge might suggest.

One particular subject area in which there is a very large knowledge gap is the EU. Men are 17% more likely than women (21% of women versus 38% of men)<sup>9</sup> to claim to know about the EU. When asked a question relating to how MEPs were chosen men were 13% more likely than women (44% versus 57%)<sup>10</sup> to correctly state that MEPs were directly elected. As such when tested, albeit on a single question, the actual gap was 13%, not the 17% stated. While it is still a significant gap these figures demonstrate that the knowledge gap is not as significant as is often stated. While the claimed gap might be close to 20% the actual figure appears to be around 10 to 15%.

## Interest in politics

Men are more likely than women to say they are interested in politics, although the difference is not as striking as it is for perceived knowledge. Since 2004, 58% of men have said on average that they are interested in politics, compared to 48% of women.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 4**

*Q. How interested would you say you are in politics?*

		Audit 1 (2004)	Audit 2 (2005)	Audit 3 (2006)	Audit 4 (2007)	Audit 5 (2008)	Average (2004- 2008)
Very interested	Men	13	17	18	13	15	15
	Women	9	10	9	10	11	10
Fairly interested	Men	40	44	45	41	43	43
	Women	39	35	42	38	34	38

<b>Not very interested</b>	<b>Men</b>	32	26	25	27	26	27
	<b>Women</b>	32	31	34	28	31	31
<b>Not at all interested</b>	<b>Men</b>	15	13	12	19	15	15
	<b>Women</b>	20	24	15	23	24	21

Source: Ipsos MORI poll for the Hansard Society

Men are also more likely than women to say that they are interested in Parliament (55% of men express interest compared to 50% of women).<sup>12</sup> However, more women than men say they would like to know more about Parliament (49% of women versus 44% of men).<sup>13</sup>

Breaking interest in politics down into interest in national, local and international issues produces some interesting findings. Both men and women are far more likely to say they are interested in 'issues' rather than 'politics'.<sup>14</sup> While women say they are less interested in both national issues (72% versus 80%) and international issues (63% versus 77%) than men, they are roughly just as likely to say they are interested in local issues (79% versus 80%). This is consistent with the finding that women are almost as likely as men to say they are knowledgeable about their local council: 46% of women say they know a great deal or fair amount about their local council, compared to 48% of men.<sup>15</sup>

## Political participation

An examination of the political participation of men and women reveals a far more nuanced picture than both knowledge of and interest in politics. Generally, women are slightly less politically active than men. However, there are some differences in the types of political activities carried out by each of the sexes and in certain participation methods women participate more than men.

Over the past five years, we have found that women are no less likely to say that they vote than men. In fact, the 2008 Audit found that women are more likely to vote than men (55% versus 52%).<sup>16</sup> They are also just as likely to have contacted their MP or councillor (15% of both men and women say they have done so).<sup>17</sup> Women are only marginally less likely than men to donate money or pay a membership fee to a political party (3% versus 5%) or a charity or campaigning organisation (36% versus 39%).<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 5**

*Q. Have you discussed politics or political news with someone else in the last two or three years?*

% answering yes	Audit 1 (2004)	Audit 2 (2005)	Audit 3 (2006)	Audit 4 (2007)	Audit 5 (2008)	Average (2004- 2008)
<b>Men</b>	40	46	43	47	42	44
<b>Women</b>	36	31	35	34	40	35

Source: Ipsos MORI poll for the Hansard Society

**Figure 6**

*Q. Which of these local, national and international issues, if any, have you discussed with your family or friends in the last year or so?*

	%	
	Men	Women
<b>Crime or anti-social behaviour</b>	71	67
<b>Iraq</b>	74	64
<b>Terrorism in the UK</b>	71	62
<b>Quality of health services</b>	67	63
<b>Immigration/asylum</b>	68	60
<b>Council tax</b>	61	56
<b>Climate change/environmental issues</b>	60	54
<b>Street cleaning, refuse collection or recycling services</b>	56	55
<b>Educational issues</b>	53	55
<b>Pensions</b>	56	50
<b>Public transport</b>	53	46
<b>World poverty/fair trade</b>	41	41

<b>The leadership of the main political parties</b>	47	35
<b>The European Union/the Euro</b>	42	22
<b>How political parties raise or spend their money</b>	27	21
<b>The electoral system</b>	23	12

Source: Ipsos MORI poll for the Hansard Society

Despite the fact that women are less likely than men to say they are interested in, and knowledgeable about, politics, they are equally likely to be political activists (11% and 13%, respectively). However, there are significant differences in the types of political activities in which they engage. For example, women are less likely to say they've attended a political meeting than men (7% versus 4%)<sup>19</sup>. Women are also less likely to have made a speech before an organised group (8% versus 14%)<sup>20</sup>.

However, women are more likely than men to report having boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons (21% versus 17%)<sup>21</sup>. Women are also more likely than men to have done voluntary work (27% versus 19%)<sup>22</sup>. Women are also more willing than men to sign a petition (74% versus 69%)<sup>23</sup>. However in a number of other methods female participation is much weaker than male participation. Women are much less willing to be involved in a parliamentary consultation (8% compared to 18%)<sup>24</sup>, vote against the party they usually support (27% versus 38%)<sup>25</sup> and they are half as likely as men to present their case at a public inquiry (10% versus 20%)<sup>26</sup>.

These indications correlate to the findings of the Hansard Society's Annual Audits of Political Engagement. When asked what political activities participants had undertaken women were less likely to have voted against their preferred political party (11% versus 19%)<sup>27</sup> or have written to a newspaper (10% versus 15%)<sup>28</sup>. Fewer women also report having financially contributed to a campaign based organisation they support (6% versus 14%)<sup>29</sup>.

## **Efficacy and satisfaction**

Despite reporting less knowledge of politics and being less active, both sexes report similar levels of belief in their ability to influence and effect change within the system; 31% of both men and women believe that 'When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run'<sup>30</sup>. In addition there is only a slight difference in general satisfaction with the overall system of governing Britain (31% of women compared to 34% of men)<sup>31</sup>.

Men are marginally more likely to express an opinion about their satisfaction in the way Parliament and other political institutions work; consequently, they tend to be both more satisfied and more dissatisfied with the constitutional arrangements governing Britain. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the net difference between men and women's overall satisfaction is narrower than the variances apparent for levels of knowledge. Indeed, for many of the issues, net satisfaction is either the same across the sexes or there is only a negligible difference.

Nearly half the public (48%)<sup>32</sup> agree that 'Parliament undertakes important functions that no other body can undertake'. A quarter of people disagree and another quarter neither agrees nor disagrees. However, there is evidence here of a striking gender divide, with men far more likely to agree with the statement than women (56% versus 40%)<sup>33</sup>. Men are also more satisfied (33% of women versus 38% of men) and more dissatisfied (28% of women versus 37% of men)<sup>34</sup> with Parliament, indicating that men are more likely to express a strong opinion on the working of Parliament.

While both men and women have little trust in politicians (71% of women and 70% of men)<sup>35</sup>, women report being less dissatisfied with MPs generally than men (32% versus 41%)<sup>36</sup>. When specifically asked about their MP, women respond more positively (43% to 39% satisfied, 11% to 14% dissatisfied)<sup>37</sup>, to the job that their MP is doing.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society), as well as the previous four Audits published jointly with the Electoral Commission, available at [www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk).

<sup>2</sup> A. Brazier, S. Kalitowski & M. Korris (2008), *Removing Barriers to Engagement*, report for the Group for Information to the Public

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission)

<sup>5</sup> A. Brazier, S. Kalitowski & M. Korris (2008), *Removing the Barriers to Engagement*, report for the Group for Information to the Public.

<sup>6</sup> Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society)

<sup>7</sup> Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society)

<sup>10</sup> Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission)

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<sup>11</sup> See Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society), as well as the previous four Audits published jointly with the Electoral Commission, available at [www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk).

<sup>12</sup> A. Brazier, S. Kalitowski & M. Korris (2008), *Removing Barriers to Engagement*, report for the Group for Information to the Public

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society)

<sup>20</sup> Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission)

<sup>21</sup> Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hansard Society (2006), *Audit of Political Engagement 3* (London: Hansard Society)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission)

<sup>28</sup> Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society)

<sup>29</sup> Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission)

<sup>30</sup> Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.