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# About us

The Electoral Commission is an independent public body established by the UK Parliament under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). The Commission is independent from Government and is accountable to, and receives its funding from, the cross-party Speaker's Committee in Parliament.

The corporate purpose of The Electoral Commission is to foster public confidence and participation in the democratic process within the United Kingdom. We aim to do this through modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters and regulating and registering political parties and donations to them. The Commission has several other statutory duties including managing the conduct of major referendums, advising on matters relating to political broadcasting, evaluating electoral pilot schemes and publishing reports on the administration of elections.

The Commission also has a statutory duty to promote public awareness of democratic institutions and processes. Public awareness campaigns are delivered through a wide range of media and communications activities. These include specific programmes of work targeted at certain groups which research suggests are least likely to vote or participate in the democratic process, including an Outreach strategy whose primary target is young people aged 16–24. PERA also allows us to provide grants to fund projects helping to promote awareness. In 2002 we established our New Initiatives Fund for this purpose.

On 1 April 2002, The Boundary Committee for England (formerly the Local Government Commission for England) became a statutory committee of The Electoral Commission. Its duties include reviewing local electoral boundaries.

Further information about the Commission can be found via its website:  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

**The Hansard Society** is an independent, non-partisan educational charity, which exists to promote effective parliamentary democracy. The Society celebrates its 60th anniversary in 2004. It believes that good government needs to be supported and balanced by a strong, effective parliamentary democracy and these concerns are reflected in its work to strengthen Parliament by encouraging greater accessibility and closer engagement with the public.

The Society is involved in several initiatives designed to increase young people's engagement with politics including the MPs in Schools, MEPs in Schools and HeadsUp initiatives. In addition, in summer 2004 the Society is holding a major exhibition, Parliament for the Future, in the historic Westminster Hall. The exhibition will explore Parliament's roots, origins and development before speculating about how it might look in the future as circumstances change and technology advances.

In addition, the Society's latest independent commission, chaired by Lord Puttnam, has been set up to examine how public perceptions of Parliament are influenced by the way it is presented. The Commission will recommend changes to enhance public understanding of, and respect for, Parliament and engagement in the democratic process.

Further information can be found via the Hansard Society's website:  
[www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk)

# Preface

Levels of democratic participation are a key indicator of the health of the ‘body politic’ of any society. Consequently, the significant decline in turnout at the 2001 general election was seen by many as a matter of grave concern. The decline in traditional forms of political participation contrasts with the willingness of the public to participate by different means – 2003 witnessed several large demonstrations in Britain around the issues of the Iraq war, higher education funding and the visit of President Bush. Recent years have also seen an increase in pressure group and ‘protest’ politics, indicating a more complex picture of political engagement than voting figures alone might suggest.

This report, undertaken jointly by The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, seeks to audit the nature and extent of the UK public’s political engagement, and thereafter to provide a platform for further debate about what might be done to enhance engagement in politics and with the political process. It uses two main inputs: a Political Engagement Poll by the MORI Social Research Institute of 1,976 UK adults aged 18+ and a Hansard Society survey of MPs, both conducted in December 2003.

The core of this report is an examination of 16 indicators divided into three main groupings each representing a different facet, or ‘building block’, of political engagement: knowledge and interest, action and participation, efficacy and satisfaction. The report provides a snapshot of public perceptions of, and engagement with, politics at a particular moment in time. However, conscious that public attitudes towards politics are shaped by both short-term and long-term factors, we plan to update the audit on an annual basis. In doing so, we will be able to track any changes in political engagement over time.

This is by no means the first research in recent years to cover some or all of this ground. Social researchers and academics have already made a valuable contribution to our understanding of popular attitudes towards politics and political participation – especially through the Economic and Social Research Council’s Democracy and Participation programme and the British Social Attitudes surveys. The initial summary of data in this report cannot hope to rival the depth of that more detailed academic research. However, following publication of this report, we will make

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the full data available for further investigation by others and will ourselves use detailed statistical analysis to add greater interpretative value.

The report does not seek to offer solutions itself. It is an audit in the sense of being a thorough examination of political engagement, albeit an examination from one particular perspective – that of the public. We hope that the next stage will be a public consideration of the main implications of this research, the sharing of good practice and the development of further solutions and strategies. To facilitate this, we will be inviting others to take part in a series of discussions.

In the meantime, we would welcome any comments or ideas you may have on what this research says or what might be done in response to it – via [info@politicalengagement.org.uk](mailto:info@politicalengagement.org.uk).

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by the MORI team, and in particular their analysis of the Political Engagement Poll. While this report has been carried out under the joint auspices of The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society and overall responsibility for the report rests with us, we have drawn heavily on MORI's own analysis of the survey data.

We are delighted to introduce this report and are hopeful that it will be read, and used, by all those interested in facilitating greater levels of political engagement in this country.



Sam Younger

Chairman, The Electoral Commission



Lord Holme

Chairman, Hansard Society

# Executive summary

Politics matters. In its broadest sense it is about relationships between people and how we organise our lives. The extent to which people are engaged with politics is of critical importance and is a key indicator of the health of our democratic society. The purpose of this report is to audit political engagement in the UK and to provide a platform for further debate and action.

The report makes use of the Political Engagement Poll undertaken by MORI which involved interviews with a representative sample of 1,976 adults across the UK in December 2003. It also draws on a Hansard Society survey of MPs undertaken in the same month. At the heart of the report are 16 indicators, based in some cases on responses to individual questions from the Political Engagement Poll and in others on a combination of answers to several questions. The 16 indicators reviewed in this report all represent important 'health-checks' of the state of political engagement, both in their own right and as a collective.

These indicators provide those working towards facilitating greater levels of political engagement in this country with much useful material on which to base future strategy and action. Moreover, as well as being of immediate value, they provide a baseline for future surveys, enabling significant changes – and, for that matter, any absence of change – to be tracked.

Figure 1: Political engagement indicators

## Knowledge and interest

Know own MP's name		42%
'Passed' political knowledge quiz		45%
Feel they know about politics		42%
Feel they know about role of MPs		45%
Interested in politics		50%

Base: 1,976 UK adults aged 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

Figure 1 cont: Political engagement indicators

**Action and participation**

Have discussed politics		38%
Likely to vote (general election)		51%
Have contacted MP/councillor		13%
Electoral activists		16%
Political activists		14%
Political membership or giving		44%

**Efficacy and satisfaction**

'Getting involved works'		36%
Trust politicians generally		27%
Satisfied with Parliament		36%
Satisfied with their own MP		41%
Think present system of governing works well		36%

Base: 1,976 UK adults aged 18+, 11-17 December 2003

Source: MORI

**Knowledge and interest**

All four of our indicators of knowledge – covering people's real and perceived knowledge – are consistent in finding between 42% and 45% of the public to be well-informed. Slightly more express themselves as being at least 'fairly' interested in politics.

Some of the main findings from these indicators include:

- Two in five people (42%) can correctly name their local Member of Parliament. This is lower than the number who were able to do so in the early 1990s.
- Less than half the public (45%) can correctly answer four or more out of seven political knowledge 'quiz' questions. The questions most frequently answered correctly are those

relating to local government. By contrast, barely a quarter of the public realised that the statement 'There has to be a general election every four years' is untrue.

- Half the public (50%) say they are fairly or very interested in politics. This is the lowest level of interest in politics since the question was first asked by MORI in 1973. However, the figure was 58% as recently as May 2003, so the fall may be the product of a short-term or seasonal effect.

## Action and participation

Participation varies with the degree of commitment or interest that various activities require. Around one in seven people are politically active (14%).

Some of the main findings from these indicators include:

- Just over half the public (51%) put their likelihood of voting in an immediate general election at 10 on a 10-point scale. This is similar to the proportion who say they feel a sense of satisfaction when they vote (53%), and substantially lower than the 74% who agree that 'it is my duty to vote'.
- One in seven people (14%) can be defined as 'political activists', having done at least three from a list of eight political activities. Two in five (39%) have signed a petition, and one in six (18%) have boycotted products for political, ethical or environmental reasons.
- Under half the public (44%) have either paid to join or donated money to some charity, campaigning organisation or political party.

However, donations to, or membership of, political parties make up only a fraction of this activity.

## Efficacy and satisfaction

Again, there is some degree of agreement between the indicators in this category. The proportion of people with positive attitudes, in respect of four of the five attitudinal measures, falls within a narrow range (36% to 41%). However, only 27% of people say they trust politicians generally.

Some of the main findings from these indicators include:

- Generally, people are divided about the efficacy of getting involved in politics at a national level: 36% agree that getting involved can really change the way the UK is run, but 40% disagree.
- Two in five people (41%) are satisfied with the way their own MP is doing his or her job. Fewer are dissatisfied (13%). As with perceptions of Parliament, however, a large proportion do not give an opinion (47%).
- Just over a third (36%) of the public feel the current system of government 'works well', though only 2% see no room for improvement. The majority feel it could be improved 'quite a lot' or 'needs a great deal of improvement'. This level of satisfaction is higher than in the mid-1990s, but is considerably lower than the most recent previous measures.

## Conclusions

This report analyses the 16 indicators collected via the Political Engagement Poll, as well as more general attitudes towards 'politics' and 'politicians'. The poll findings provide several key insights into the extent and nature of the current state of political engagement in the UK:

- A minority of the public link 'politics' with their own personal involvement. Politics tends to be seen as something done by, and for, others or as a system with which they are not particularly enamoured.
- 'Politics', as the public understands this term, is verging on becoming a minority interest; only half say they are very or fairly interested.
- Political knowledge is lower still and MORI found some significant knowledge gaps.
- Any political participation more active than voting is the preserve of a minority of the adult population.
- At the same time, three-quarters say that they 'want to have a say in how the country is run'.
- Opinions of individuals tend to be more favourable than generalised views of institutions or politicians and familiarity helps to build favourability.
- There is a strong local dimension – more people have presented their views to a councillor than to an MP and more pick their local council rather than parliament as one of the institutions having the most impact on their lives.

This research shows that political engagement operates at a number of different levels – local, regional and national. Moreover, public acceptance of the connection between political activity and governmental consequences, the depth of public knowledge and understanding, and familiarity and contact with politicians, all play their part in building engagement with politics and the political process. Above all, these findings suggest a need to re-build the relevance of 'politics', both as a concept and as an activity worth taking part in.

The new forms of political activity that have emerged in recent years are to be welcomed, but for parliamentary democracy in the UK to thrive, formal political process must flourish alongside them. The task of re-engaging people with 'politics' and the formal political process is a challenging one but the picture is far from bleak.

People remain interested in the issues that affect them, their families and the wider world. Moreover, they want to have a say in the way decisions are made and to know that their voices have been heard. Harnessing that positive aspiration and making it reality is something we should, and must, do.

# 1 About this report

This report provides detailed commentary on the 16 indicators of political engagement designed by The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society and collected via the Political Engagement Poll conducted by the MORI Social Research Institute.

## The indicators

**1.1** The indicators, and the other survey questions which go with them, have been designed with the intention of exploring as many aspects of political engagement as possible, and from as many different angles as survey research allows. Surveys can measure five distinct elements – behaviour, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and values – and all of these are incorporated within the indicators.

**1.2** The indicators touch upon the political system at different levels, as well as more general public perspectives on ‘politics’ and ‘politicians’. They fall within three broad groups:

- The first five are concerned with the public’s knowledge of, and interest in, politics.
- The next six are essentially measures of behaviour, discovering the extent to which the public have participated in or are willing to participate in a broad range of political activities, including some that many of the public may not think of as ‘politics’.
- Finally, five attitudinal indicators examine public satisfaction with the system and the people in it, and people’s perceptions of their own personal involvement and the efficacy of taking part.

## Research methodology

**1.3** The Political Engagement Poll, undertaken by MORI, involved interviews with a representative sample of 1,976 adults aged 18+ across the UK. Interviewing took place face-to-face, in respondents’ homes between 11–17 December 2003 in Britain and between 6–15 December 2003 in Northern Ireland.

The data have been weighted to the known population profile. The full topline survey results can be found in Appendix 3 of this report and further technical information relating to the interpretation of the data, social class definitions and statistical reliability is also provided.

**1.4** The Political Engagement Poll was designed to provide data at a UK-wide level. The 1,976 sample size has provided us with robust sub-samples for most demographic groups and for different regions and parts of the UK. In this report we have drawn out any notable differences between these, although it should be remembered that the audit represents an examination of political engagement at the UK-level and cannot substitute for targeted research among particular sub-groups – for example, among young people or black and minority ethnic communities. In addition, while the Political Engagement Poll explores popular attitudes towards different aspects of the political system – including the Westminster Parliament, the European Union and local councils – we have not explored the dimension of devolution in any great detail (although this has been done in previous Electoral Commission research).

**1.5** The report also draws on findings from a survey of MPs. The Hansard Society sent a short self-completion questionnaire to all 659 Westminster MPs on 12 November 2003 and received 121 responses by 5 December 2003, representing a response rate of 18%. The survey sample was reasonably representative of party composition in the House of Commons: 51% Labour, 25% Conservative, 16% Liberal Democrats, 7% 'others'.

Further details of this survey and its main findings are available at:  
[www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk).

### Next steps and further research

**1.6** The publication of this report will be followed by a series of discussions with stakeholders to discuss the implications of its findings and to identify responses and solutions to the problems identified. In terms of further research, we will use additional statistical analysis of the survey data by MORI to add greater interpretative value and to help us identify the key determinants of political engagement as we begin to plan for next year's audit (the findings will be published on The Electoral Commission and Hansard Society websites).

## 2 The background to this research

Five million fewer people voted at the 2001 general election than did so in 1997. The 59% turnout in 2001 led some to describe the election as an ‘apathetic landslide’<sup>1</sup> and prompted much commentary and many analyses of the scale of political disengagement, sometimes referred to as ‘disconnection’ or ‘apathy’.

2.1 While there are differences in interpretation about the reasons for the sharp drop in turnout in 2001, what is incontrovertible is that turnout is on a downward trend in the UK and that much research has found the public to have low opinions of politicians and of politics. The prognosis for electoral participation is fairly gloomy according to qualitative research conducted by MORI for The Electoral Commission in 2003:

[There is] deep-rooted and widespread scepticism about the impact of voting *per se*... This scepticism also seems to be shared by many of those who do actually vote. Most are not advocates for voting, and some even seem to regard their own propensity to vote as a strange personal quirk – a result of having the importance of voting drummed into them as a child. Many had no great faith that their vote made much of a difference, and they were not inclined to encourage others to follow their example.<sup>2</sup>

2.2 But declining electoral participation is by no means a ‘UK disease’ and in recent years it has become commonplace to argue that levels of turnout have declined across established democracies.<sup>3</sup> Established and new democracies are equally vulnerable to low and/or declining turnouts, even for so-called ‘first order’ elections<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> P. Norris (2001) ‘Apathetic Landslide: The 2001 British general election’ in P. Norris (ed.) *Britain votes 2001*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; M. Harrop (2001) ‘An Apathetic Landslide: the British general election of 2001’, *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 36, pp. 295-313.

<sup>2</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections* (written by MORI and Professors C. Rallings and M. Thrasher of the Local Elections Centre at the University of Plymouth).

<sup>3</sup> M. N. Franklin (2002) ‘The Dynamics of Electoral Participation’ in L. LeDuc, R.G. Niemi and P. Norris (eds) *Comparing Democracies 2: New Challenges in the Study of Elections and Voting*, London: Sage Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Reif and Schmitt distinguish between ‘first-order’ and ‘second-order’ elections. The most important distinction between the two is that parties and the public consider there to be ‘less at stake’ in the case of ‘second-order’ elections. See K. Reif and H. Schmitt (1980) ‘Nine National Second-Order Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results’, *European Journal of Political Research* 8: 3-44.

or apparently ‘big issue’ referendums. For example, fewer than half of registered electors used their vote in Poland’s parliamentary elections in 2001, while turnout at US Congressional elections in 2002 was a record low of around 30%. Furthermore, in the Republic of Ireland, an independent commission has been set up to investigate ‘voter apathy’ and the trend of declining turnout among first-time voters in particular.<sup>5</sup>

**2.3** At the same time, the picture is very different in terms of participation beyond the ballot box. Professor Whiteley and his team at the University of Essex have used the Economic and Social Research Council-funded Citizen Audit to assert that there is ‘a good deal of evidence of civic vitality’. They also suggest that ‘it is not so much a case of [political] participation having declined, and more that it has evolved and taken on new forms’. While conventional political activities such as voting or contacting a politician have declined since 1984, there has been a significant growth in ‘consumption’ and ‘contact politics’ such as boycotting products and contacting the media.<sup>6</sup>

**2.4** Professor Whiteley and his team identify a broad and diverse repertoire of political participation and observe that political engagement is multi-faceted, such that ‘Contrary to the claims of political apathy, people frequently participate in activities designed to influence political outcomes’.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the latest British

Social Attitudes (BSA) survey found a higher proportion of people saying they would take action in the event of Parliament considering an ‘unjust and harmful law’, than was the case 20 years ago. Crucially, analysis of the BSA survey data found non-electoral participation to be an add-on to voting, and not a substitute,<sup>8</sup> and Pippa Norris’s international study found people in post-industrial societies increasingly moving from ‘electoral repertoires toward mixed-action repertoires combining electoral activities and protest politics’.<sup>9</sup>

**2.5** Surveys by MORI and NOP for The Electoral Commission in May 2003 found that the public’s interest in political issues, especially local ones, is stronger than its interest in elections.<sup>10</sup> At the 2001 general election, 59% of adults said they were very or fairly interested in politics, mirroring the 59% turnout figure. At the same time, 53% of 18–24 year olds were interested in politics, and yet it is estimated that only 39% actually turned out to vote. This suggests that a broad interest in politics is not necessarily translating into electoral participation and that something other than simple ‘apathy’ is at work. It may be necessary to distinguish ‘interest’ from other aspects of political engagement including ‘participation’, ‘awareness’ and ‘knowledge’.

**2.6** Research has consistently found ‘information deficits’ relating to electoral participation, ranging from awareness of the mechanics of registering

5 V. Robinson (2003) ‘Republic to study low poll turnouts’, *The Irish News*, 24 June 2003.

6 C. Pattie, P. Seyd and P. Whiteley (2003), ‘Civic Attitudes and Engagement’ in *Parliamentary Affairs* vol.56, no.4, Oxford University Press, Oxford, and P. Whiteley (2003), ‘The State of Participation’ *ibid*.

7 *Ibid*.

8 J. Curtice and B. Seyd ‘Is there a crisis of political participation?’ (2003) in A. Park *et al* (eds) *British Social Attitudes – the 20th report*, London: Sage Publications.

9 P. Norris (2002) *Democratic Phoenix*, Cambridge University Press.

10 MORI (2003) *Attitudes to voting and the political process for The Electoral Commission*, NOP (2003) *National Assembly for Wales Elections 2003 for The Electoral Commission*.

and voting, to awareness of representatives, institutions, policy platforms and the issues at stake. This at a time when the public is faced with a growing number of elections, institutions, parties and voting systems – by 11 June 2004, residents of Greater London will have lived through elections in six of the past eight years, and in Scotland every member of the public is represented by 18 different elected representatives<sup>11</sup> at different levels of government. There is evidence to suggest that, ‘in some respects, the public seems less politically aware than a few years ago’, that there is a close link between familiarity with political institutions and satisfaction with them, and that ‘lower political knowledge goes naturally with lower electoral turnout’.<sup>12</sup>

**2.7** Many surveys, including BSA surveys, have shown that people are ‘less trustful nowadays of politics and the political system’<sup>13</sup> and that politicians are among the least trusted professions. They have also found cynicism about politicians’ motivations; in a MORI poll in 1996, more than half the public said they felt that MPs put their own interests before any others, and another quarter thought they put their party’s interests first.<sup>14</sup> This is important because political parties have traditionally played a key role as ‘mobilising agencies’,<sup>15</sup> linking

people to the political process and facilitating participation. At the same time, non party agencies such as trade unions, churches, voluntary associations, interest groups and the news media, also play a part in drawing people towards (or pushing them away from) politics and political participation.<sup>16</sup>

**2.8** Political engagement operates at a number of different levels and any investigation of such engagement needs to be sensitive to the specific patterns and trends operating at each level and between those levels. Such a consideration has informed the development of the 16 indicators analysed in this report.

11 Nineteen in areas with community councils.

12 R. Mortimore (2002) ‘Why politics needs marketing’ paper for the Political Marketing Conference, September 2002.

13 M. Boon (ICM) and J. Curtice (2003) *Scottish Elections Research 2003*, ICM, London. Report submitted to The Electoral Commission.

14 R. Mortimore (2002) ‘Why politics needs marketing’. Paper for the Political Marketing Conference, September 2002.

15 For an international analysis of the role of mobilising agencies, see P. Norris (2002) *Democratic Phoenix*, Cambridge University Press.

16 *Ibid.* For further discussion of the role of politicians, parties and the media in mobilising turnout, see B. Marshall and M. Williams (2003) ‘Turnout, attitudes to voting and the 2003 elections’, paper prepared for EPOP Conference, September 2003. Available on The Electoral Commission website, at: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk).

# 3 Knowledge and interest

The first five indicators of political engagement are concerned with people's knowledge of and interest in politics. In auditing political knowledge we set survey respondents a 'quiz' to test actual knowledge, but also measured perceived knowledge, i.e. how much people feel they know about politics and political institutions.

**3.1** These are important factors in engagement given the strong correlation between familiarity and favourability. According to much research including numerous MORI surveys, the more people know about a service or an institution, the more positive they tend to be towards it and research for The Electoral Commission in 2003 found a strong relationship between knowledge and electoral abstention.<sup>17</sup> Our survey also updated data going back to the 1970s on the level of public interest in politics, and used a follow-up question to explore what people understand the term to mean.

## Knowledge of own MP

Two in five people (42%) can correctly name their local Member of Parliament. Half the public do not know who their MP is and one in 10 gave an incorrect name (see Figure 2).

**3.2** Unlike many of the other indicators discussed in this report, men and women correctly name their MP in equal proportions. Knowledge increases with people's social class and age, with half of those aged 55 years or more giving the correct name. In contrast, only one in four (26%) 18–24 year olds can do so. There is also some regional variation, with fewer people in London (35%) and Scotland (37%) giving the correct name for their MP.

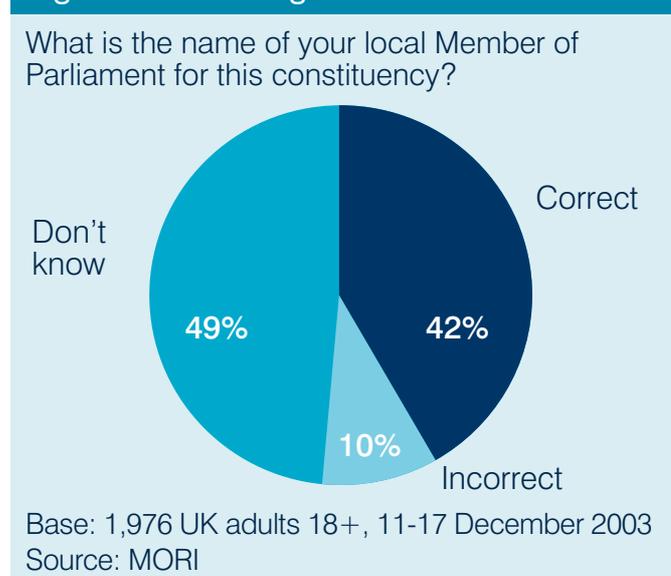
**3.3** As Table 1 illustrates, these findings are similar to those recorded by MORI in May 2001, prior to the last general election, though they mark a drop when compared to findings from 1991 and 1992. The 10 point fall in correct answers may be

<sup>17</sup> See The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*, pp.7-8.

partly explained by the long period of one party government up to 1991 (12 years) and the high turnover of MPs in 1997. More detailed analysis of constituency sampling points would be needed to confirm this hypothesis. However, if correct, it would show that, on average, it takes several years (and a number of re-elections) for MPs to become relatively widely known by their constituents.

**3.4** People's knowledge of their local MP is higher than their knowledge of local councillors as measured by MORI in a survey for Green Issues Communications in April 2002. In that research, 36% of people **said** they knew the name of their councillor(s) – six percentage points lower than the number who can correctly name their MP.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 2: Knowledge of own MP**



<sup>18</sup> There is probably some over-claim in knowledge of councillors. More than a fifth of those who thought they knew the name of their MP, amounting to 10% of the public, nevertheless gave the wrong name when asked. The survey of knowledge of councillors made no attempt to check respondents' accuracy in the same way.

In the same study, two in three people (67%) said they had never met their local councillor(s).<sup>19</sup>

**Table 1: Knowledge of own MP, 1991-2003**

What is the name of your local Member of Parliament for this constituency since June 2001 (last by-election)?

	Mar 1991 <sup>20</sup>	Oct 1992 <sup>21</sup>	15 May 2001 <sup>22</sup>	Dec 2003
Correct	52	51	41	42
Incorrect	8	n/a	6	10
Don't know	40	n/a	54	49

Base: GB/UK adults  
Source: MORI  
Figures are percentages.

**3.5** While more people say they know the name of their MP than their councillor(s), this does not translate into greater knowledge of the respective representative political institutions. Fewer say they know at least 'a fair amount' about the Westminster Parliament (33%) than about their local council (38%).

<sup>19</sup> None of the recent surveys have tested knowledge of MEPs, but in the October 1992 survey, when 51% could name their MP only 7% could name their MEP. At that time MEPs represented single-member constituencies, and the present system of multi-member constituencies electing under list proportional representation is not really comparable. However, in MORI focus group research for The Electoral Commission in 2003, virtually none of the focus group members were able to name any of their MEPs; but this did not use a representative sample of the public, and should be regarded as, at best, indicative (The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*).

<sup>20</sup> Asked as 'What is the name of the current MP for this constituency?'

<sup>21</sup> Asked as 'What is the name of the current MP for this constituency?'

<sup>22</sup> Asked as 'What is the name of your Member of Parliament for this constituency since May 1997/last by-election?'

## Political knowledge

Less than half (45%) correctly answer four or more out of seven political knowledge questions. Five per cent answer no questions correctly, though equally few can also answer all seven questions correctly (3%).

**3.6** As a test of their knowledge of the political system, survey respondents were given a ‘quiz’ consisting of seven statements, and asked to say whether each was true or false (or whether they did not know either way). The statements were chosen to cover several different levels in the political structure – Westminster, Europe and local councils – and dealt with both the workings of political institutions and the election of their members. This found a wide range in the percentages correctly answering each statement – shown in Figure 3. While a relatively high proportion correctly identify that local councils are not allowed to set school-leaving ages in their area (74%), barely a quarter correctly disagree that there has to be a general election every four years (27%).

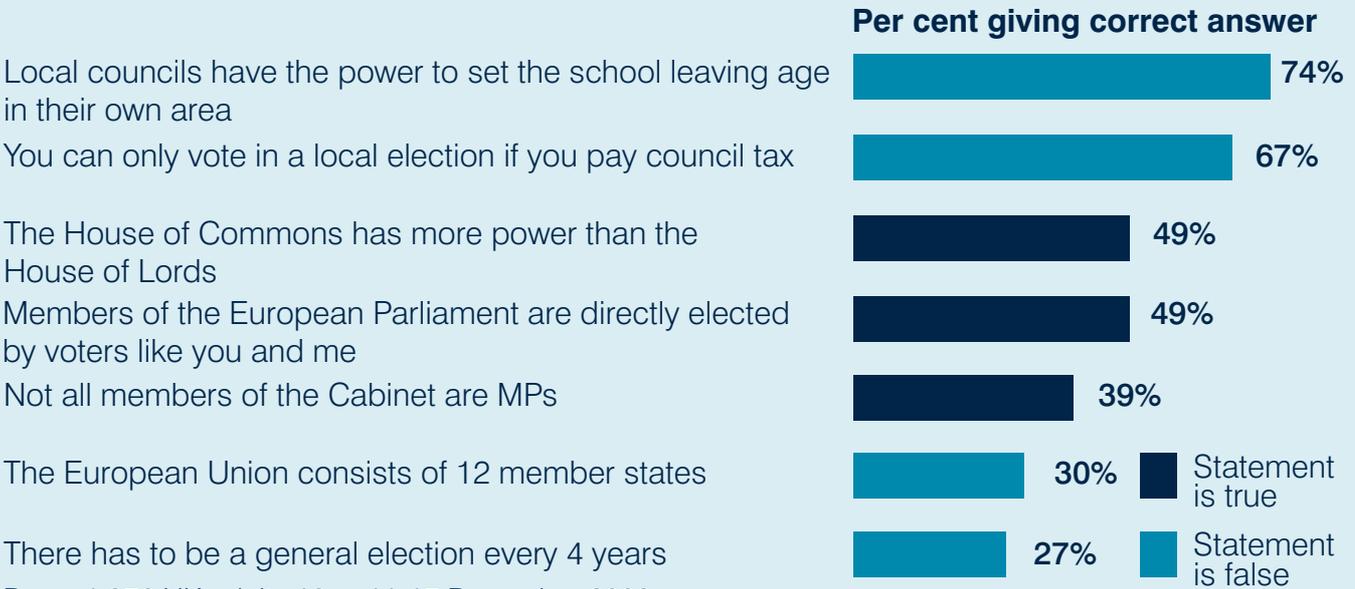
**3.7** Less than half (45%) correctly answer four or more out of seven political knowledge questions. Only 3% were able to answer all seven questions correctly although a further fifth (21%) got five or six answers correct (see Figure 4). Five per cent answer no questions correctly, although this rises to 8% of 18–24 year olds and remains at 8% for 25–34 year olds. Using four or more correct answers as the benchmark indicator, there are large differences in sub-groups. Men score more highly than women (52% to 38%) and political knowledge

increases with age, social class and education. In common with several other indicators, and reflecting the demographic differences, on this indicator white people<sup>23</sup> score more highly than those from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities (45% to 29%).

<sup>23</sup> This category includes those classifying themselves as British, Irish or ‘any other white background’.

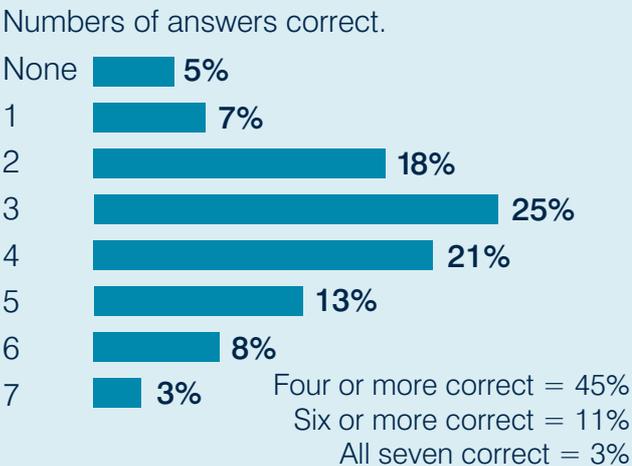
**Figure 3: Political knowledge 'quiz'**

Please tell me whether you think the following statements are true or false.



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**Figure 4: Political knowledge 'quiz' scores**



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**3.8** As well as demographic differences, there is a positive relationship between this indicator and several of the others in the report. For instance, people who claim to know at least a fair amount about politics are nearly twice as likely to answer four or more questions correctly (60%) as those who say they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' (33%). There is also a clear divide in terms of political knowledge between those very interested in politics (73% answer four or more correctly) and those who are not interested (33%).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> This divide is also marked when looking at the number in these groups that get none or all answers correct. Among the very interested in politics, less than 1% fail to answer any questions correctly and 12% answer all seven correctly. The respective figures for those not interested in politics are 8% (none correct) and less than 1% (all seven correct).

**3.9** People are more likely to answer the local government questions correctly than those relating to national or European politics. This could be related to the closer association the public have with local issues and politics (a consistent finding throughout this study).<sup>25</sup> The two European questions replicate a knowledge test included in the European Commission's Eurobarometer survey of citizens across the EU, conducted in October and November 2002. On that occasion 20% of Britons correctly denied that the EU has only 12 member states, well below the EU average of 28% with only Italians and Germans scoring as badly as the British. On the other hand, more than half of EU citizens (54%) thought the statement was correct so this widespread lack of knowledge is by no means confined to the UK. On both items the scores in the present survey are a significant improvement on the 2002 findings, and indeed surpass the EU average score as measured by Eurobarometer.

### Perceived political knowledge

Forty-two per cent of the public feel they know at least 'a fair amount' about politics – although, just 3% say they know 'a great deal'. The majority say they do not know very much or know nothing at all (see Figure 5).

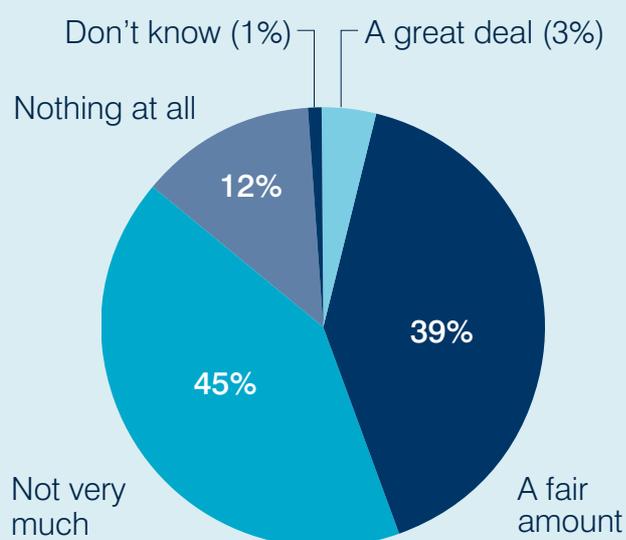
**3.10** As with the 'actual' level of political knowledge measured in the previous indicator, there are significant differences between men and women (49% of men claim to know at least 'a fair amount', compared with 36% of women saying this). This gap is evident in all

<sup>25</sup> Though, arguably, it is difficult to assess whether these questions are objectively easier or harder than the others.

age groups, though it is widest among younger people. While this significant gap partly reflects true differences in knowledge levels, MORI's surveys have generally found that on most subjects, men claim higher levels of knowledge than women. Political knowledge increases with age; 28% of 18–24 year olds claim to know at least a fair amount, compared with half of over 65s. There are also regional variations, with those living in Scotland standing out from the rest of the country. Only one in three adult residents of Scotland say they know at least 'a fair amount' about politics (31%). In contrast, nearly half (48%) in London claim this.

**Figure 5: Perceived knowledge of politics**

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



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**3.11** MORI’s research has consistently found that the more people know – or think they know – about an organisation or individual, the more favourable they are towards it. As shown later, satisfaction with how Parliament works, MPs in general and one’s own MP is higher among those who say they know a great deal/fair amount about politics than those who say they do not know very much or anything at all. People feel they know less about key political institutions, such as Parliament (33%), the European Union (24%) and local councils (38%), than they feel they know about ‘politics’ (42%). This suggests that ‘politics’ is understood to have a wider definition than the institutions with which it is concerned.

**3.12** The public’s perceptions of their levels of political knowledge are reasonably accurate as judged by the results of the political knowledge quiz. Nevertheless, as Table 2 shows, the differences between those who do and those who don’t feel knowledgeable are perhaps less than might be expected. Those who think they know

‘a great deal’ about politics average a score of just under five out of seven, less than one right answer ahead of those who think they know ‘a fair amount’. Those who think they know ‘not very much’ are less than another point behind.

### Perceived knowledge of role of MPs

Under half the population (45%) claim to know at least ‘a fair amount’ about the role of MPs, with only 4% saying they know a great deal. Almost one in eight (13%) say they know ‘nothing at all’.

**3.13** As with previous knowledge indicators there are notable differences among subgroups of the population. Better educated, older people and the middle class (ABC1s) are most likely to feel informed about what MPs do. Men feel somewhat more knowledgeable than women do (49% of men say at least ‘a fair amount’ compared to 41% of women). People in Scotland and Wales feel less knowledgeable compared with those from other parts of the UK.

**Table 2: Perceived political knowledge**

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

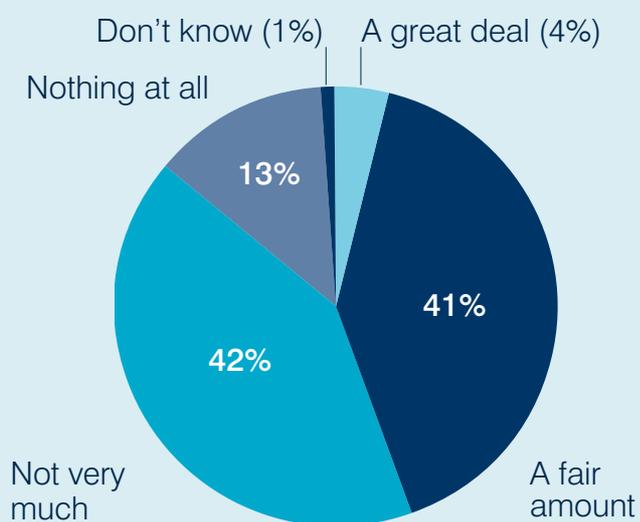
Mean scores on ‘political quiz’

	Politics	The EU	Your local council	The Westminster Parliament	The role of MPs
A great deal	4.8	5.0	4.4	5.1	5.1
A fair amount	3.9	4.2	3.8	4.2	3.9
Not very much	3.1	3.3	3.2	3.1	3.1
Nothing at all	2.1	2.4	2.5	2.3	2.1
Don’t know	1.9	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.9

Source: MORI

**Figure 6: Perceived knowledge of role of MPs**

How much, if anything, do you feel you know about 'the role of MPs'?



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**3.14** The public feel more knowledgeable about the role of MPs than about the Westminster Parliament (with 45% and 33% respectively knowing at least 'a fair amount' about each, see Figure 6). This suggests that they recognise that Westminster politicians' roles are more than just their work at Parliament. It also shows that the public feel they can associate better with people than institutions – something which is equally true of other professions and institutions.<sup>26</sup> The reason for this 'appears to be that trust in individuals is more personal and specific, based upon relationships and familiarity'.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> MORI Social Research Institute (2003), *Trust in public institutions*.

A good example of this is the higher levels of public trust in doctors, than in the NHS.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## Interest in politics

Half the public say they are fairly or very interested in politics, and half say they are not very or not at all interested. One in five people (18%) are not at all interested in politics, compared with one in ten (11%) who are very interested.

**3.15** Fewer women say they are less interested in politics than men (48% compared to 53%) with young women the least interested (33% compared to 42% of men in the 18–34 years age band). Interest in politics increases with social class and education and, linked with this, ethnicity is also an important factor – this survey shows that seven in 10 people from BME communities say they are not interested in politics. Interest has also fallen among the population as a whole. As Table 3 illustrates, the latest findings show the lowest level of interest in politics recorded by MORI since the question was first asked in 1973, though the results are similar to findings by NOP in May 2002 which subsequently recovered by May 2003.

**3.16** It is too early to know whether the present low level of interest in politics represents a continued general downturn since the last general election or whether the latest data represents a short-term fall in people's interest in politics, reflecting a distinctive recent political climate. However, having two measures in the same year does demonstrate that levels of interest fluctuate within years, which has not been measured by survey evidence before.

**Table 3: Interest in politics 1973-2003**How interested would you say you are in politics?<sup>28</sup>

	1973	March 1991	April 1995	April 1997	May 2001	May 2002	May 2003	Dec 2003
Very interested	14	13	13	15	14	12	14	11
Fairly interested	46	47	40	44	45	40	44	39
Not very interested	27	26	30	29	29	29	30	32
Not at all interested	13	13	17	11	11	19	13	18
Don't know	*	1	*	*	1	1	*	0
Interested	60	60	53	59	59	52	58	50
Not interested	40	39	47	40	40	48	43	50

Base: all

Source: MORI except May 2002 NOP/Electoral Commission poll

Figures are percentages.

\* denotes &lt;0.5%

**3.17** There is also a useful contrast to be made here between the levels of interest in politics as measured by the Political Engagement Poll, and interest in issues and elections taken from surveys for The Electoral Commission in 2003. As shown in Table 4, interest in issues is stronger than interest in both 'politics' and in elections. Similarly, in a survey of 1,153 adults across Wales conducted immediately after the 1 May National Assembly for Wales elections, NOP found 59% saying they were very or fairly interested in politics, but only 44% said the same when asked about news in relation to the Assembly elections.

**Table 4: Interest in issues and elections**

How interested would you say you are in...

	Very/fairly interested	Not particularly/not at all interested
National issues	82	18
Local issues	78	21
News about elections	60	40
Politics	58	43
News about the Assembly election (Wales)	44	55

Source: MORI, NOP May 2003

Figures are percentages.

<sup>28</sup> The measures since 2001 are based on a representative UK sample. Those for 1997 and before are based on a representative GB sample (i.e. excluding Northern Ireland).

**3.18** It is clear that lack of interest in ‘politics’ is not simply an expression of political disillusionment with the government in power. In fact, there is no significant difference in interest in politics between those who say that they are satisfied and those who are dissatisfied with the way that the government is running the country (see Table 5).<sup>29</sup> However, those who do not express a view about whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied are much more likely to express themselves as disinterested in politics.

shown in Figure 7, and MORI found that only a minority of respondents linked politics with their own or an individual’s personal involvement in politics. Instead, the vast majority see politics as something that other people do, or as a system with which they are not particularly engaged or enamoured.

**Table 5: Interest in politics by satisfaction with the Government**

How interested would you say you are in politics?				
Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the Government is running the country?				
	All	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Don’t know
Very interested	11	11	12	2
Fairly interested	41	44	43	20
Not very interested	31	34	30	31
Not at all interested	17	11	14	44
Don’t know	*	1	*	2
Interested	52	55	55	22
Not interested	48	45	44	75

Base: All asked about satisfaction with government (1,001 GB only)

Source: MORI

Figures are percentages.

\* denotes <0.5%

**3.19** The Political Engagement Poll followed up asking people about their interest in politics by asking a supplementary question ‘What do you understand by ‘politics’?’ In general, the responses can be grouped into four categories,

<sup>29</sup> The question on satisfaction with the government was asked only in Great Britain, and only to one (representative) half of the sample, as part of MORI’s monthly Political Monitor.

**Figure 7: What do you understand by 'politics'?**

Main categories of answer and illustrative verbatims

**Synonymous with government/running the country/elections:**

'The way things are run, locally and nationwide'

'Politics is the way a country is governed'

**Theoretical:**

'It's the grouping of ideas into running a society'

'The process whereby the public is involved in organisation of government at all levels'

**Practical:**

'Load of men sitting in a posh office, and talking about how they're going to run the country'

'It's people discussing issues at any level, either Government or at home'

**Cynical:**

'The art of lying convincingly'

'It's one party trying to get one over on another'

# 4 Action and participation

The next six indicators are primarily about political behaviour. They measure the extent to which people are currently participating in a broad range of political activities including electoral and other political activities. We also asked people about their propensity to vote at an immediate general election.

**4.1** In developing these indicators we have been sensitive to the need to capture the public's involvement in traditional political activities such as voting, canvassing at elections or joining a political party as well as their involvement in activities which many people might not immediately think of as political, such as boycotting a product or urging someone else to contact a politician.

## Discussing politics

Approximately two in five people (38%) say they have discussed politics or political news with someone else in the last two to three years (see Figure 8).

**4.2** Our first indicator measures the extent to which people discuss politics, recognising academic research which has pointed to the link between personal conversation or political networks and political engagement.<sup>30</sup>

**4.3** Middle-aged people (aged 35–54) are the most likely age group to discuss politics, with younger and older people doing this less often; 24% of 18–24 year olds and 40% of those aged 55 or over. Discussion of politics is clearly related to several of the other indicators, such as levels of interest, perceived and actual political knowledge. Similarly, social class and the amount of formal education relate closely with this and most of the other indicators. Professional/non-manual workers are more than twice as likely to discuss politics as manual/non-working people (53% compared to 22%).

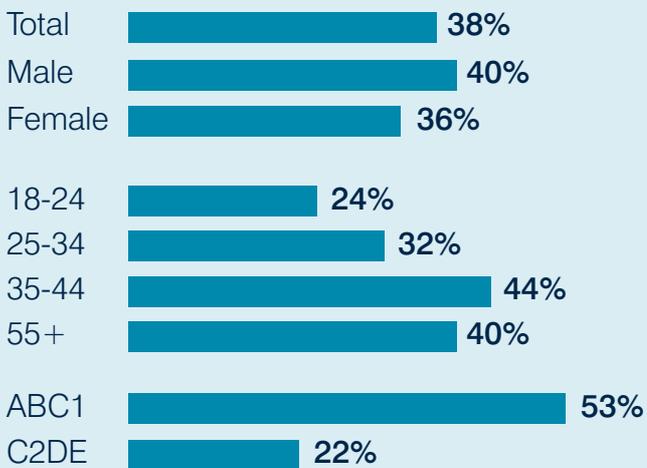
<sup>30</sup> S. Coleman (2003) *A Tale of Two Houses: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home*, Hansard Society, London.

In terms of education, those with at least A-level qualifications or equivalent are more than three times as likely to discuss politics than those with no formal qualifications (62% versus 18%).

**Figure 8: Discussing politics**

And which of these, if any, have you done in the last two or three years?

'Discussed politics or political news with someone else'



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**4.4** The proportion of people who say they have discussed politics or political news (38%) is lower than the proportion who stated an interest in politics (at 50%). Those who say they are interested in politics, but have not discussed it with somebody else, are disproportionately aged 65-and-over and/or from C2DE socio-economic groups.

**4.5** There are probably two distinct effects at work here:

- In the case of the senior citizens, who as a group show high interest and engagement in politics, the reason is probably that as they grow older more of them lose contact with the social networks within which they have such discussions.
- For C2DEs it may be more that being, or feeling, unusual among members of their social network in taking an interest in politics, they are either inhibited from starting such discussions or find no interest if they do so.

**4.6** Following qualitative research for The Electoral Commission in 2003, MORI developed five typologies based upon distinct attitudinal groupings or 'personalities'. These include 'apolitical man (and woman)' who, while fundamentally interested in community issues and public service delivery, do not see this as 'political'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the Hansard Society's Connecting Communities with Parliament project has found that many civically active people such as parent governors or tenant representatives, do not consider themselves 'political'. These findings suggest that different segments of the population may interpret what constitutes a 'political discussion' very differently, with those with higher educational attainment drawing a wider definition.<sup>32</sup> Bearing this in mind, the figures above may exaggerate the varying political habits of sections of the population, and simply reflect differing perceptions of what is understood as 'political'.

<sup>31</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

**4.7** Similar survey measures of political conversation at recent elections provide some useful context for this indicator. An NOP survey for The Electoral Commission in Wales in May 2003, found 49% saying they discussed the Assembly elections with family or friends, while an ICM survey found 15% in Scotland saying they discussed the Scottish Parliament elections ‘a lot’ and a further 38% saying they discussed it ‘a little’.

**4.8** A MORI survey for The Electoral Commission after the 2001 general election found that 75% of respondents said that they had discussed the election with friends or family (and 20% said that the views of family or friends had a ‘great deal’ or ‘fair amount’ of influence on what they decided to do). Although this is probably at least a slight inflation of the true figure,<sup>33</sup> it suggests that there are many people who discussed the election two years ago yet now say that they have not ‘discussed politics or political news’ over the last two or three years.

**4.9** This has two interpretations:

- That respondents are answering the present survey on the basis of whether they have regularly or recently discussed politics rather than searching their minds for isolated conversations two years ago (or perhaps rejecting conversations about the election as exceptions that therefore ‘don’t count’).

- That the level of discussion of political topics is very much lower now than it was during even a notoriously disengaging election. The presumption is that this is a natural and recurrent contrast between election periods and ‘peacetime’ periods, but in the absence of historical data this can only be an unproven hypothesis.

## Propensity to vote

Based on those assessing their certainty of voting as 10 on a 10-point scale, just over half of the public (51%) say they would be likely to vote in an immediate general election (see Figure 9).

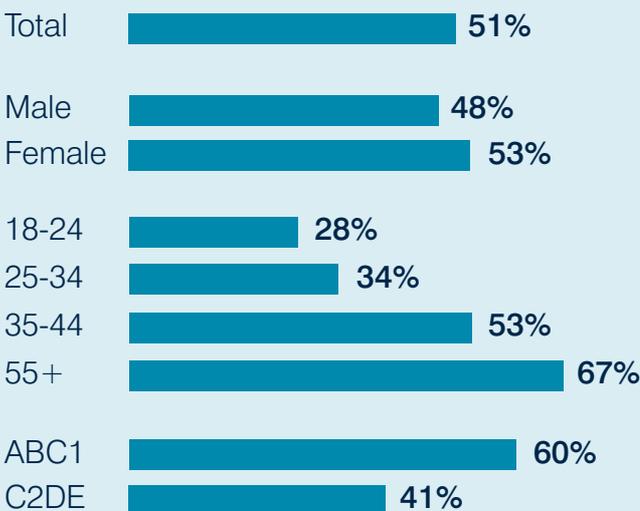
**4.10** If this number were to vote in practice,<sup>34</sup> it would of course represent a further fall in turnout even from the record low 59% of electors who voted at the 2001 general election. However, such measures should not be seen as a prediction of voting levels. Past experience has shown that the number ‘certain to vote’ tends to grow as an election approaches and the issues to be decided become clearer, so the practical meaning of any given propensity to vote will change at different points in the life of a Parliament. The 8 out of 10 measure (65%) may at the moment be a reasonable approximation of the group who would in fact vote were there an immediate general election, assuming it had been preceded by the normal campaign build-up.

<sup>33</sup> The 2001 survey was the second wave of a panel study, re-interviewing a sample of the public who had already completed an earlier survey. This almost inevitably has the effect that as those least interested in the subject of the survey are most likely to drop out of the panel, the sample will disproportionately include the politically engaged and will tend to over-estimate levels of political activity.

<sup>34</sup> In an ICM eve-of-election opinion poll for *The Guardian* in 2001, the only one of the surveys at that election which published likelihood of voting measured on a 10-point scale, the number giving themselves 10 out of 10 likelihood of voting (58%) was the best predictor of turnout.

**Figure 9: Propensity to vote at immediate general election**

How likely would you be to vote in an immediate general election on a scale of one to 10, where 10 means you would be absolutely certain to vote, and one means that you would be absolutely certain not to vote?



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**4.11** Older people and professional/non-manual workers say they are more certain to vote. This is, however, one of the few political indicators considered in this study where women score higher than men (53% certain versus 48% certain). This pattern broadly matches other evidence on actual turnout patterns at elections, and the reported turnout of this sample at both general and local elections. The difference between the sexes in current propensity to vote is particularly marked among the middle-aged: 58% of women aged 35–54 but only 48% of men

in the same age band are ‘absolutely certain to vote’, but the gap is smaller in claimed turnout at previous elections.

**4.12** Propensity to vote is the same as the proportion who say they feel a sense of satisfaction when they vote (53%), and lower than the number who say that they voted at the last general election (64%). A substantially lower number, 51%, claim to have voted at the last council election. It is clear that there is a degree of exaggeration involved here. While it is not possible to give a definitive correct figure,<sup>35</sup> local election turnouts in non-electoral pilot scheme areas have historically been around a third. However, the measure is of value because it suggests that at least some of those who recall having voted when they did not, feel some discomfort at not having done so.

**4.13** One striking finding is the much higher proportion of people who agree ‘It is my duty to vote’ (74%) than either claim to have done so at the last opportunity or say they would be absolutely certain to vote now. Some fraction of these will of course have been prevented from voting at the last election by factors beyond their control (or will be allowing for a similar eventuality in the future), but it is clear, that a substantial number recognise a theoretical duty to vote which they fail to match in practice. The prickings of conscience in people’s minds may mean that this gap is not sustainable in the long term. What may be important to the future

<sup>35</sup> Turnout varies considerably between different types of local election. Because the different elections are staggered at different stages through a four-year cycle, there is never a single point at which all local electors are simultaneously entitled to vote. Consequently, no overall turnout figure for the electorate as a whole could be calculated.

democratic base of British elections is whether the gap between claimed and actual turnout is narrowed by:

- a resurgence in turnout;
- those who are currently failing to vote gradually dropping their belief in a duty to do so.

**4.14** Perhaps, in any case, the belief is not a very powerful one, even though half of those who agreed that they had a duty to vote said that they agreed strongly. Recent qualitative work by MORI for The Electoral Commission indicates that those who feel they have a ‘duty to vote’ are often far from being vehement defenders of the ideal and that the duty does not extend in equal measure to all types of election. The research found a sense that ‘one’s democratic duty to vote was ‘absolved’ by having cast a vote in the general election’ and that people are also resistant to being told that voting is a duty, particularly by politicians.<sup>36</sup>

## Contacting elected representatives

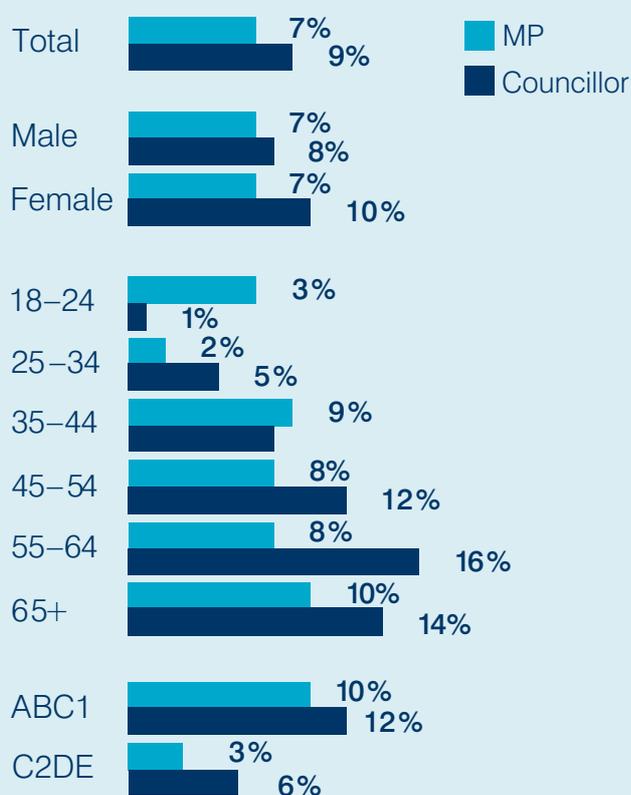
One in eight people (13%) have contacted an elected representative (at a local or national level) at some point over the last two to three years. More have contacted a councillor (9%) than an MP (7%), although 3% have contacted both (see Figure 10).

**4.15** This is predominantly a middle-aged, middle-class activity. One in five of those aged over 55, with higher educational attainment, in social classes ABC1 recall presenting their views to either a councillor or an MP. Among

younger and less affluent groups contact is far less common: only 3% of men aged under 35 have contacted an elected representative, in contrast to 8% of women of the same age. The youngest (18–24) group are also exceptional in that they are far more likely to have contacted an MP than a local councillor.

**Figure 10: Percentage contacting elected representatives by sub-group**

Which, if any, of the things on this list have you done in the last two or three years?  
‘Presented my views to a local councillor or MP’



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

<sup>36</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*.

**4.16** It seems clear that a principal reason for making contact with elected representatives is to air a political grievance. Those who say they are dissatisfied with the way the government is running the country are considerably more likely to have contacted their MP than those who are satisfied (9% compared to 6%), whereas there is no significant difference between the two groups in the numbers who have contacted local councillors (11% and 10% respectively).<sup>37</sup>

**4.17** Those who have contacted their MP recently are much more likely to be satisfied with the way he or she is doing the job than those who have not (62% as against 38%). At the same time they are also somewhat more likely to be dissatisfied – 17% compared with 12% (although it is worth noting that half of those who have not contacted their MP have no opinion of his or her performance). However, there is significantly less difference between those who have and those who have not contacted their own MP, in terms of opinions of MPs in general.

**4.18** This suggests that the greater reluctance to judge the performance of the local MP among those who have not had occasion to contact him or her is not simply because this group is less politically engaged, but because people tend to keep an open mind on the merits of their own MP until they have personal knowledge, while being far less wary of making a generalisation (good or bad) about MPs collectively. It also suggests that the predominantly positive opinions of those who have contacted their own MP may derive from satisfaction with the service they received on

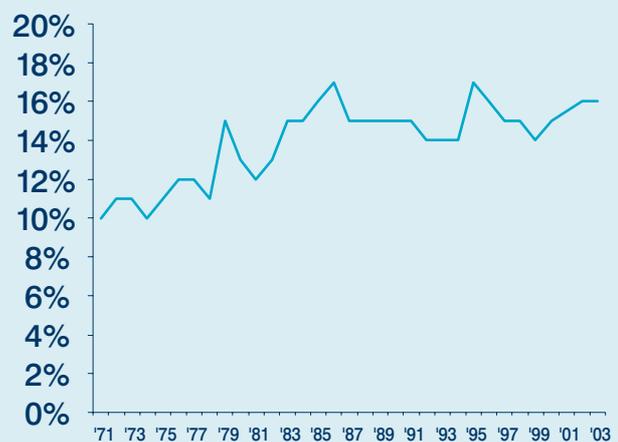
<sup>37</sup> This analysis applies only to Great Britain, as the question on satisfaction with the government was not asked in Northern Ireland, and only to a representative subset of the sample (n=1,001).

that occasion. The ‘good constituency MP’, it appears, can indeed influence opinions in his or her favour; yet this good work wins no plaudits for the system in general.

**4.19** MORI has regularly tracked the proportion of the public claiming to have recently presented their views to an MP or councillor (see Figure 11). The level has been constant at or around 15% for many years, with no sign that changes in attitudes to politics or engagement with the political system have either increased or diminished the number who have chosen to contact their elected representatives. This 15% does, however, represent an increase of a half over the number who were saying the same in the 1970s. There seems to have been a significant change in the culture of political contact, but it is not a recent one.

**Figure 11: Percentage contacting representatives over time**

Which, if any, of the things on this list have you done in the last two or three years?  
‘Presented my views to a local councillor or MP’



Source: MORI

## Electoral activism

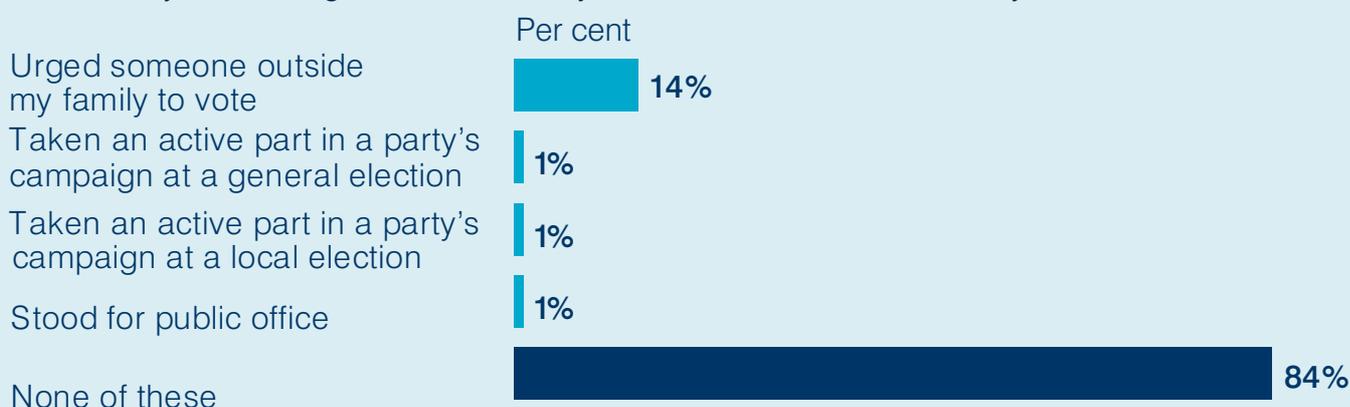
Only a few of the public take any active part in the electoral process (this measure excludes voting). One in seven, 14%, say that they have urged somebody outside their family to vote; but only 1% have taken an active part in a party's general or local election campaign, or been a candidate for office themselves (see Figure 12).

**4.20** Our analysis of electoral activism has been deliberately confined to fairly proactive electoral activities and designed to capture the truly 'active' by excluding voting (see Table 6 for details of electoral turnouts during 2003). Activism is highest among older age groups with 16% of those aged 55+ having urged somebody to vote. Among the youngest group (18–24 year olds) the figure falls to 10%. Men are a little more likely to be active than women, but this is especially marked among the younger age groups.

**4.21** Activists are disproportionately likely to be middle class rather than working class, to read a broadsheet newspaper rather than a tabloid and to have A-levels. In terms of their attitudinal characteristics, those who are very interested in politics are more likely than the rest of the public to want to go beyond voting in their electoral activities. More than a third, 36%, of those who say they are very interested in politics (11% of the adult population) have urged somebody outside their family to vote, and 9% have taken an active part in a party's campaign at a local election.

Figure 12: Electoral activism

Which, if any, of the things on this list have you done in the last two or three years?



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003

Source: MORI

**4.22** MORI has regularly asked a series of questions on 'socio-political activism' including whether people have urged someone outside their family to vote. The 14% recorded in December 2003 compares with 18% in 1972, 17% in 1999 and 13% in 2001 before the general election.<sup>38</sup> This 'word of mouth' advocacy will be an important indicator to monitor. At the 2001 general election, MORI found 9% of the public encouraging somebody else to vote for the three main parties, down from 15% in 1997. Qualitative research for The Electoral Commission last year also found a reluctance on the part of those who usually vote to pass the habit on:

Most are not advocates for voting... Many had no great faith that their vote made much of a difference, and they were not inclined to encourage others to follow their example.<sup>39</sup>

**Table 6: Election turnouts in 2003**<sup>40</sup>

Election	Date	Per cent turnout
National Assembly for Wales	1 May	38.2
Scottish Parliament (combined with local elections)	1 May	49.4
English local elections (incl. pilot schemes)	1 May	34.9
Northern Ireland Assembly	26 Nov	64.0

<sup>38</sup> Figures for 1972, 1999 and 2001 are based on British adults 16+.

<sup>39</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*.

<sup>40</sup> Figures for Scotland and Wales from The Electoral Commission; figure for Northern Ireland from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI); figure for English local elections calculated by the Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre at the University of Plymouth.

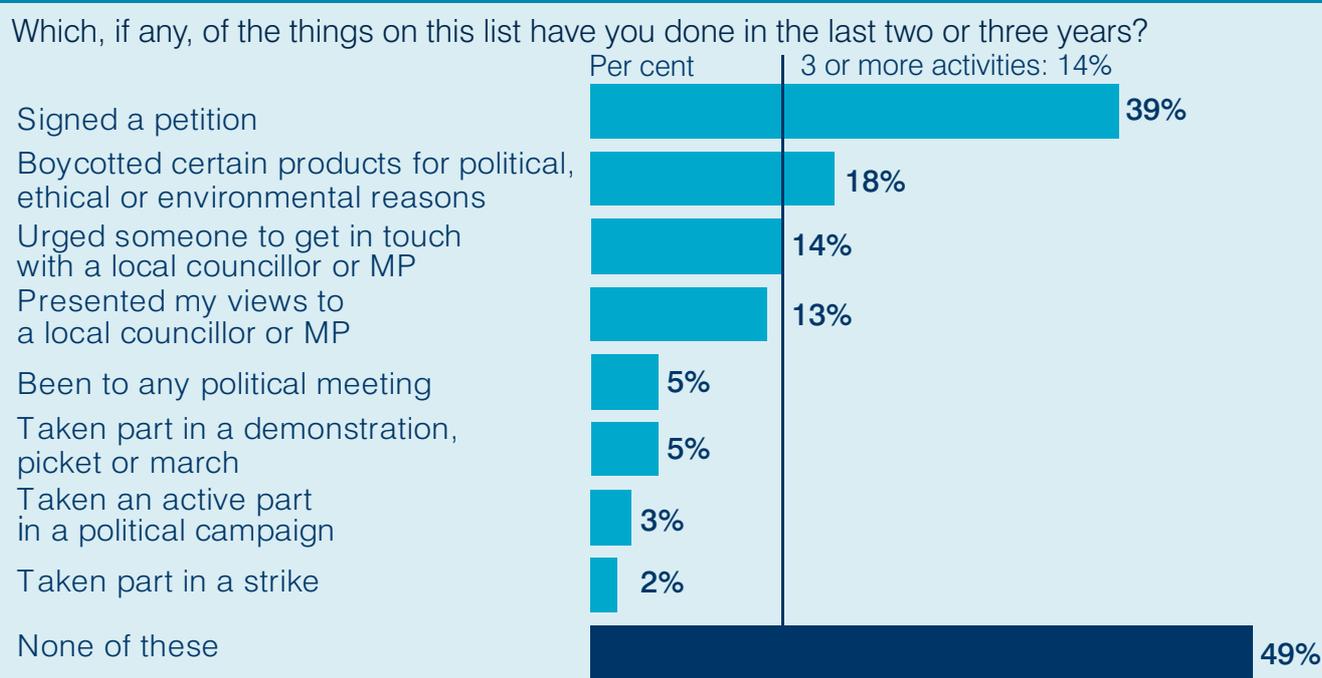
## Political activism

One in seven citizens (14%) are defined as 'political activists', having done at least three from a list of eight political activities (excluding voting and the electoral activities included within the previous indicator). Two in five (39%) have signed a petition, and one in six (18%) have boycotted products for political, ethical or environmental reasons. Half, 51%, have performed any activity (see Figure 13).

**4.23** Those activities demanding more time, commitment or energy, though, are much rarer: only 5% have taken part in a demonstration, picket or march, and 3% an active part in a political campaign. Half the public have not been involved in any of the eight activities. The young are much less likely to be active than their older counterparts: 8% of 18–34 year olds said that they had done three or more of the things on the list, compared to 17% of 35–54 year olds, 16% of 55–64 year olds and 13% of those aged 65 and over. Nevertheless, some forms of activism are as popular, or even more popular, with the young than the rest of the public: 18–24 year olds are more likely (9%) than anybody else to have taken part in a demonstration, picket or march, and only a little less likely than average (31%) to have signed a petition. Related to this, past research for The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society that suggests that the younger generation often view such activities as more effective than working through the ballot box.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See for example, S. Diplock (2001) *None of the Above*, Hansard Society, London.

Figure 13: Political activism



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**4.24** On the whole, though, such political activity is complementary to voting rather than a substitute for it (British Social Attitudes survey data has also shown that 'non-electoral' participation is an add-on to 'electoral participation'<sup>42</sup>). Activists are more likely to be absolutely certain they would vote at an immediate general election (67% as against 51% of the public as a whole), and are more likely to agree that it is their duty to vote (89% as against 74%). Taking these together, it is unsurprising that political activists are often electoral activists as well – in fact, they are four times as likely to be as the rest of the public.

<sup>39</sup> J. Curtice and B. Seyd (2003) 'Is there a crisis of political participation?' in A. Park *et al* (ed.s) *British Social Attitudes – the 20th report*, London: Sage Publications.

**4.25** The level of political activism is put into perspective by comparison with charitable activities. Almost a quarter, 23%, say they have done voluntary work, 16% have helped organise a charity event and 15% have taken part in a sponsored event. Many of the public are willing to contribute time and effort to a cause they support, but few are attracted to direct political activities. Part of this, perhaps, arises from peer pressure: many who might not get involved if left to their own devices feel compelled to go with the flow and help with charitable causes. In the case of political activity, this is so much a minority pursuit that any pressure is likely to be exerted in the opposite direction.

## Political membership and giving

Under half the public, 44%, have either paid to join or donated money to some charity, campaigning organisation or political party. However, donations to, or membership of, political parties make up only a fraction of this activity (see Figure 14).

**4.26** Another measure of how far the public are committed to what they believe in is whether they have ‘put their money where their mouth is’ by paying to join or otherwise contributing money to a political party, charity or campaigning organisation. Two in five of the public have donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation, but only one in 20 has paid to join a political party or donated money to one. More than half the public, 56%,

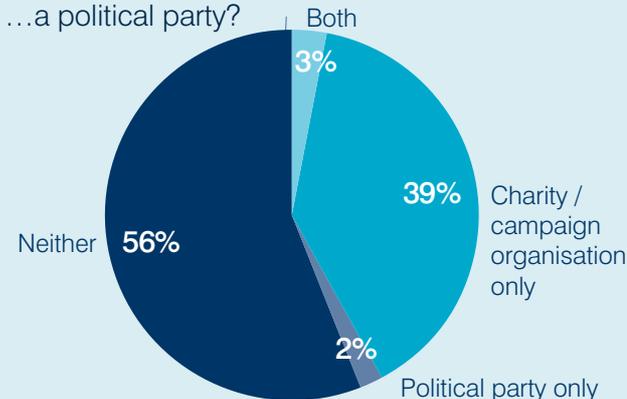
have not felt sufficiently involved to spend their money on either in the last two or three years.

**4.27** The middle-class are considerably more likely to have donated or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation than are the working class, but there is much less difference when it comes to political parties. Half (52%) of ABC1s have contributed to a charity or campaigning organisation, but only 30% of C2DEs have done so; however, 5% of ABC1s and 4% of C2DEs have stumped up for a political party. Since C2DEs will naturally tend to have lower incomes than ABC1s, it is unsurprising that fewer feel they can spare money for charities and other campaigns; but it is reassuring that the party system seems more classless.

**4.28** Of course, there is a close relationship between willingness to commit money to a cause and willingness to be active in other ways. Three-quarters of political activists have contributed to a campaigning organisation or charity whereas barely a third of non-activists have done the same. Similarly, 12% of electoral activists but only 3% of electoral non-activists have paid a membership fee or contributed money to a political party. Yet only two-fifths (41%) of those who have paid money to a political party are also electoral activists. The remainder of the funders do nothing else for their party except – in most cases – remembering to turn out at the ballot box, and tend not even to urge somebody outside their family to vote.

**Figure 14: Political membership and giving**

Which of these, if any, have you done in the last two or three years?  
 Donated money or paid a membership fee to...  
 ...a charity or campaigning organisation?  
 ...a political party?



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
 Source: MORI

# 5 Efficacy and satisfaction

The final set of five political engagement indicators focus on attitudes, examining people's satisfaction with the political system and some of its institutions and personnel.

**5.1** The Political Engagement Poll asked respondents to rate Parliament, MPs in general and their own MP. They were also asked to comment on the trustworthiness of politicians in general and the survey finished by asking people to rate the current system of governing the country.

**5.2** These indicators sought to build on our first set of 'familiarity' indicators by measuring the public's favourability towards aspects of the political system. In addition, we included several questions, and one indicator, measuring peoples' perceptions of the efficacy of taking part in politics.

## Efficacy of participation

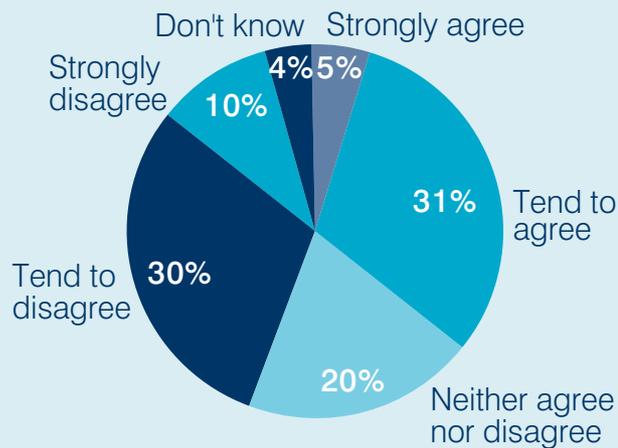
Generally, people are divided about the value of getting involved in politics at a national level: 36% agree getting involved can really change the way the UK is run, but 40% disagree. A large minority (20%) say they neither agree nor disagree with the statement (see Figure 15).

**5.3** Views on participation are fairly consistent among demographic sub groups of the population, with the main exception of ethnicity. Those from the black and minority ethnic population (29%) are less likely to agree than other groups (37%). Regional differences are also quite marked, with adults in Wales, London and Scotland more likely to agree with the statement than disagree.

**Figure 15: Perceptions of the efficacy of participating**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

‘When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way the UK is run’



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**5.4** Perceptions of the efficacy of participation are closely linked to other attitudinal measures, such as level of interest in politics and perceived knowledge and opinions of how the system of government works. However, and more encouragingly:

- While people generally do not think that getting active in politics can change the way the UK is run, the majority (55%) disagree that ‘being active in politics is a waste of time’.

- One in eight (13%) strongly disagree that being active in politics is a waste of time, rising to 16% of those aged 55+, a similar proportion of ABC1s and a fifth (20%) of those interested in politics.

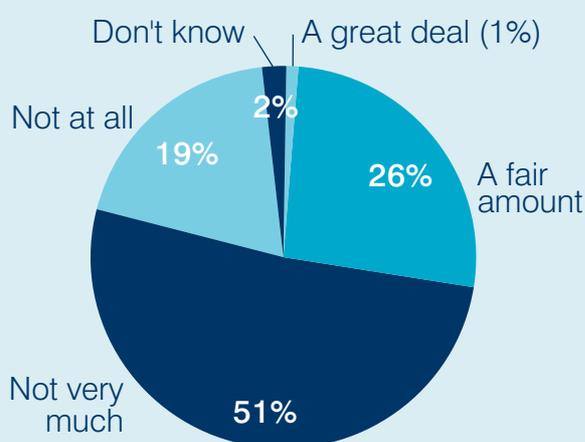
### Trustworthiness of politicians

Just over a quarter of the public (27%) say they would trust politicians ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’. In contrast, one in five (19%) say they would not trust politicians ‘at all’ (see Figure 16).

**5.5** People do not trust politicians by a ratio of more than two-to-one. A quarter, 27%, say they would trust politicians ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ but seven in ten, 70%, say they would trust them ‘not very much’ or ‘not at all’. It is also notable that hardly anyone (1%) says they would trust politicians a ‘great deal’, in contrast to the fifth who answer most negatively, saying they would trust them ‘not at all’. The level of trust varies little among sub-groups of the population, though older women, broadsheet newspaper readers and people living in Scotland are most trusting of politicians generally (around a third) albeit only relative to other sub-groups.

**Figure 16: Public trust in politicians**

How much would you say you trust politicians generally?



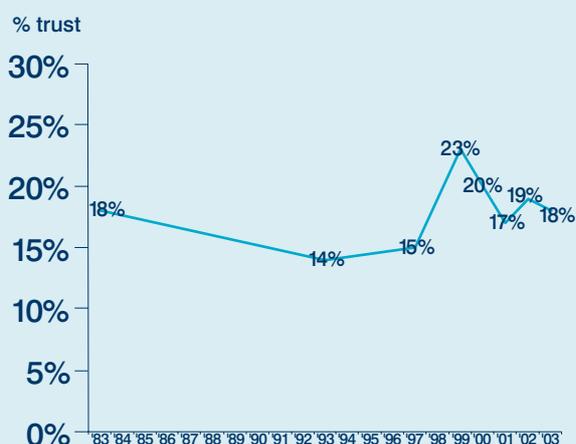
Base: 1,064 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**5.6** Surveys by MORI over the past 20 years have shown that politicians have been among the least trusted professions,<sup>43</sup> with usually around one in five people saying they would trust 'politicians generally' to tell the truth.

**5.7** Figure 17 is based on MORI research for the BMA over several years using a different question which asks 'Now I will read out a list of different types of people. For each, would you tell me whether you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?' This trend shows that trust in politicians is higher than at any time since before 1998, but lower than for several measures recorded since then.

**Figure 17: Public trust in politicians over time**

Would you tell me whether you trust politicians generally to tell the truth or not?



Source: MORI

## Satisfaction with Parliament

More of the public are satisfied (36%) with the way Parliament works than are dissatisfied (32%). However, a large proportion express no opinion either way (32%) (see Figure 18).

**5.8** When looking at those who are very or fairly satisfied with how Parliament works, satisfaction increases with age and social class, a finding consistent with those for other indicators:

- Two in five (40%) of those aged 55+ are positive about Parliament, compared to 28% of those aged 18–24 and a similar differential exists between ABC1s and C2DEs.

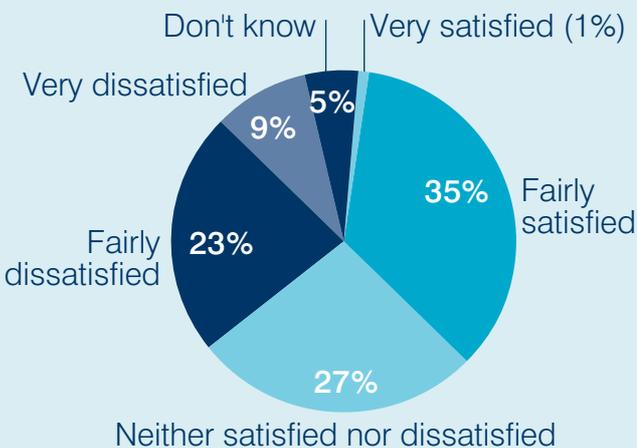
43 See [www.mori.com/polls/trends/trust.shtml](http://www.mori.com/polls/trends/trust.shtml)

- Men view Parliament a little more favourably than women (38% compared to 34%).

5.9 However, these patterns are in part related to the proportions expressing no opinion either way or answering 'don't know'. Overall, a large proportion express no opinion either way (32%), reflecting a low understanding about this institution – 67% say they know not very much or nothing at all about the Westminster Parliament.

**Figure 18: Satisfaction with Parliament**

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that Parliament works?



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

5.10 People's overall opinion of the system of British government and favourability towards Parliament's work are closely related. The latest findings are similar to those recorded in 1995 (as shown in Table 7), though they do show a fall in satisfaction from those found in 2000 and 2001.

**Table 7: Satisfaction with Parliament**

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that Parliament works?<sup>44</sup>

	1995	Aug 2000	9-15 May 2001	Dec 2003
Satisfied	34	43	45	36
Dissatisfied	31	29	30	32
+/- net satisfied	+3	+14	+15	+4

Source: MORI

Figures are percentages

## Satisfaction with own MP

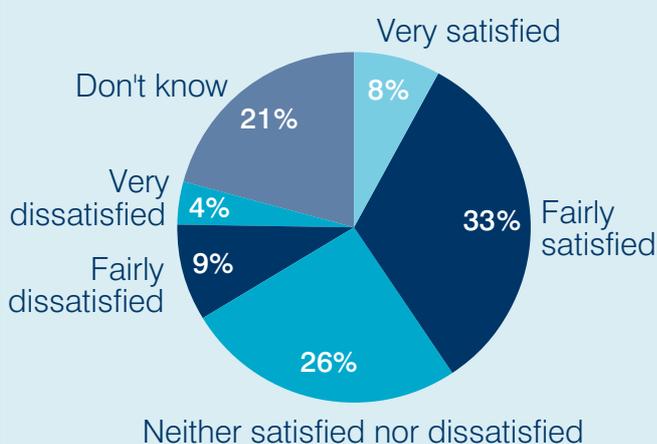
Two in five people (41%) are satisfied with the way their own MP is doing his/her job. Fewer are dissatisfied (13%). As with perceptions of Parliament, however, a large proportion do not give an opinion (47%).

5.11 Reflecting variable levels of knowledge, almost half do not express an opinion on their MP's performance. Two in five people (41%) are satisfied with the way their MP is doing his/her job, and one in eight (13%) are dissatisfied. There are no differences in views between men and women or by social class, though older people are more satisfied with their MP than younger people: 55% for 55 years and over, compared with 27% for 18–24 year olds. Ethnicity remains a key factor on this indicator: 42% of white people are satisfied with their MP, significantly higher than the 30% among those from BME groups.

<sup>44</sup> Asked as 'To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way each is doing its job these days?... The way the Westminster Parliament works'. Prior to 2001 asked as 'Parliament'.

**Figure 19: Satisfaction with own MP**

Q11. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way your MP is doing his/her job?



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**5.12** People's satisfaction with their local MP (Figure 19) seems to be closely related to both their contact with him/her and with a sufficient level of familiarity to recall his or her name. Six in 10 of those who can correctly identify their local MP are satisfied with his/her performance, compared with only 26% who cannot. However, the proportion dissatisfied does not vary in the same way – 13% are negative whether or not they know who he or she is. Similarly, those who can and those who cannot name their MP are equally likely to be dissatisfied with the way MPs in general are doing their job and there is no significant difference in the proportion dissatisfied with the way Parliament works.

**5.13** In each case, it seems that actively negative feelings are not related to the level of knowledge, but of the remainder, those who know less remain undecided while greater knowledge seems to promote only positive, and not negative, reactions. Moreover, as Table 8 illustrates, satisfaction with the local MP has remained consistent since the early 1990s while dissatisfaction has fallen.

**Table 8: Satisfaction with MP**

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way your MP is doing his/her job?<sup>45</sup>

	Oct 1991	Oct 1992	Oct 1995	15 May 2001	Dec 2003
Satisfied	43	44	43	42	41
Dissatisfied	23	28	23	19	13
+/- net satisfied	+20	+16	+20	+23	+28

Source: MORI

Figures are percentages

**5.14** Backing-up earlier findings, and studies elsewhere, ratings of individuals (i.e. people's own MP) are much higher than ratings of types or groups of people (i.e. MPs generally). When asked about the way 'MPs in general are doing their jobs' satisfaction falls nine points to 32%, and dissatisfaction rises 23 points to 36%. This, in fact, represents a sharp improvement from a few years ago: in October 1992, the same number, 32%, were satisfied with the way MPs were doing their jobs, while 56% were dissatisfied.

<sup>45</sup> In 2003, the interviewer gave the actual name of the MP.

**5.15** There is also an interesting contrast to be drawn with the predictions of MPs responding to the Hansard Society’s survey of MPs. On average, MPs predicted that 36% of the public would be very or fairly satisfied with the ‘job done by MPs’ and that 48% would be dissatisfied – a more negative prognosis than transpired. The Hansard Society questionnaire also asked MPs how satisfied they found the Parliamentary process in terms of ‘enabling them to represent constituents’ concerns’.

**5.16** In this respect, more MPs were very or fairly satisfied with Parliament than the public were in terms of ‘the way Parliament works’ (42% to 36%), while fewer were very or fairly dissatisfied (17% against 32% of people).

## Ratings of the system of governing Britain

Just over a third, 36%, of the public feel the current system of governing Britain<sup>46</sup> works well, though only 2% see no room for improvement. The majority feel it could be improved quite a lot or indeed needs a great deal of improvement (see Figure 20).

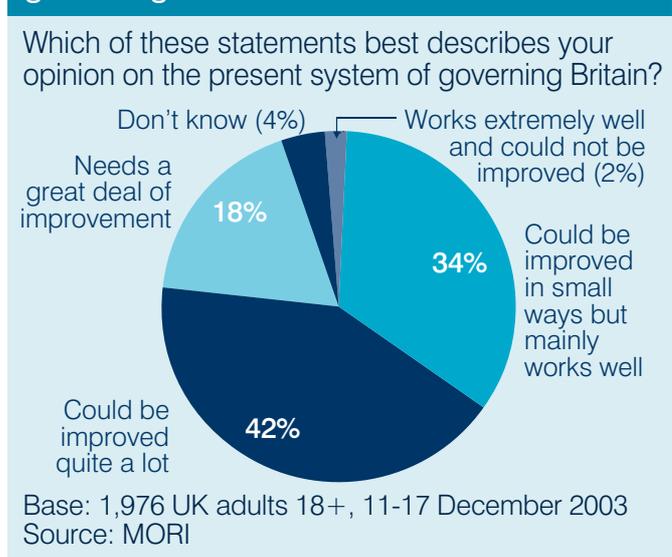
**5.17** Among the third of the public (36%) who think the system of governing Britain ‘works well’, there are no statistically significant differences between men and women, by ethnicity or by age. The main differences are by social class and educational achievement. People in the north of England are most content with how the system works – 41% think it works well.

**Table 9: Satisfaction with own MP, MPs in general and Parliament**

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with...	your MP is doing his/her job	MPs in general are doing their job	the way that Parliament works?
Satisfied	41	32	36
Dissatisfied	13	36	32
+/- net satisfied	+28	-4	+4
(Neither/nor or don't know)	47	32	31

Source: MORI  
Figures are percentages

**Figure 20: Ratings of the system of governing Britain**



<sup>46</sup> This question was asked as ‘... system of governing Britain’ in England, Scotland and Wales (to ensure consistency with past measures) and as ‘... system of governing the UK’ in Northern Ireland.

**5.18** Table 10 below provides trend data for this indicator since 1973. It shows that the current level of approval for governing Britain is at the lowest point since 1998 (when it was 41%), but is higher than at any time measured in the 1990s. Opinion on the system of governing Britain is likely to be linked to support for the governing party. For instance, in the latest survey, half of Labour supporters believe that the system works well, compared to 33% of Conservative and 30% of Liberal Democrat supporters. The boost since 1997 also underpins this hypothesis.

**Table 10: Ratings of the system of governing Britain**

Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing Britain?							
	1973	1991	1995	1997	1998	Apr 2003	Dec 2003
Works extremely well and could not be improved	5	4	3	2	4	3	2
Could be improved in small ways but mainly works well	43	29	19	26	37	42	34
Could be improved quite a lot	35	40	40	40	39	38	42
Needs a great deal of improvement	14	23	35	29	15	13	18
Don't know	4	5	3	3	5	3	4
<b>Works well</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Needs improving</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>60</b>

Source: MORI (in 1973: Crowther Hunt)

All figures are based on British adults except Dec. 2003 which is UK adults.

Figures are percentages.

# Conclusions

The successive fall in turnout at the last two general elections and the persistent low turnout at local elections has been seized on by some politicians and commentators as definitive evidence of a general public disengagement with politics and the political process. However, while electoral turnout is important, it would be too simplistic to view it as the only significant indicator of political engagement. The evidence from this audit shows that the reality is much more complex.

**6.1** Political engagement operates at a number of different levels – local, regional and national. Moreover, public acceptance of the connection between political activity and governmental consequences, the depth of public knowledge and understanding, and familiarity and contact with politicians, all play their part in building engagement with politics and the political process. While turnout is certainly a symptom of the democratic health of the UK, our 16 indicators represent a fuller, more comprehensive ‘health-check’, both individually and more importantly, collectively. This audit, a first annual ‘check-up’, contributes to our understanding of the state of health of the UK’s ‘political industry’ and will help us to identify appropriate remedies or prophylactics.

**6.2** This research confirms that ‘politics’, as most people appear to understand that term, is a minority activity among people in the UK and, of perhaps more concern, is verging on becoming a minority interest. Only half the public say they are even ‘fairly interested’ in politics. This recent downturn trend, as measured against other polls, could be a short-term blip or might represent something more concerning.

**6.3** Political knowledge is a little lower still – all four of our knowledge indicators are unanimous on a percentage score in the low forties – and any political participation more active than voting is the preserve of a minority of the adult population. Yet at the same time, the overwhelming majority, 75%, say ‘I want to have a say in how the country is run’. Plainly, many do not equate participation with their aspiration to have a say.

**6.4** Few people have any intimate involvement in politics. It is perhaps too easy, especially for those who move all the time in political circles, to forget that only a small fraction of the population is active in politics beyond voting. Only one in 20 say they have paid a membership fee to a political party or otherwise donated money, and for many of those this seems to be a substitute for any more active involvement: three in five of those who have paid money to a political party have done nothing more in terms of campaigning – not even to the extent of having urged somebody outside their family to vote. But at the same time, the Political Engagement Poll found people disagreeing by two-to-one that ‘being active in politics is a waste of time’, although they are fairly split about whether ‘when people like me get involved, they really can change the way that the UK is run’.

**6.5** Just as a disconnection exists between people’s stated desire to have a say and their actual participation in the many electoral and other political activities we have discussed in this report, so there is a mismatch between people’s relatively high interest in issues and their lower propensity to vote. In addition, the Political Engagement Poll found that the percentage of people identifying voting as a duty is greater than the proportion who actually turn out to vote. While only a minority vote at local elections, there is clearly some level of connection in people’s minds between the process of voting for the council and the importance they ascribe to its actions, since for every 10 citizens who actually reach the ballot box, another four apparently feel sufficiently

uneasy about not having done so that they wouldn’t admit it to MORI’s interviewers.<sup>47</sup>

**6.6** Hostility to the concept of ‘politics’, as people understand it, presumably acts as a deterrent to involvement. This research confirms what others have found: namely, that many people seem to see ‘politics’ as an obstruction to, rather than the means of, proper government of the country – particularly, if it is ‘party politics’. Further, ‘politics’ is perceived as that activity pursued by and identified with ‘politicians’ whom more than two-thirds trust ‘not very much’ or ‘not at all’. Yet confront the public with a specific individual rather than with the generalised ‘politician’, especially one they are familiar with, and the hostility is much less pervasive. Familiarity, and particularly personal contact, with a local MP seems to have an almost entirely beneficial effect on that MP’s standing, yet with no corresponding improvement in the standing of ‘politics’ or of the system as a whole.

**6.7** The Political Engagement Poll seems to confirm two wider principles that research has frequently found to apply to many areas of public life: that specific opinions of individuals tend to be more favourable than generalised views of institutions, and that familiarity breeds favourability, not contempt. According to MORI, the reason for the former ‘appears to be that trust in individuals is more personal and specific, based upon relationships and familiarity’.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> For more on this, see The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*, p.67.

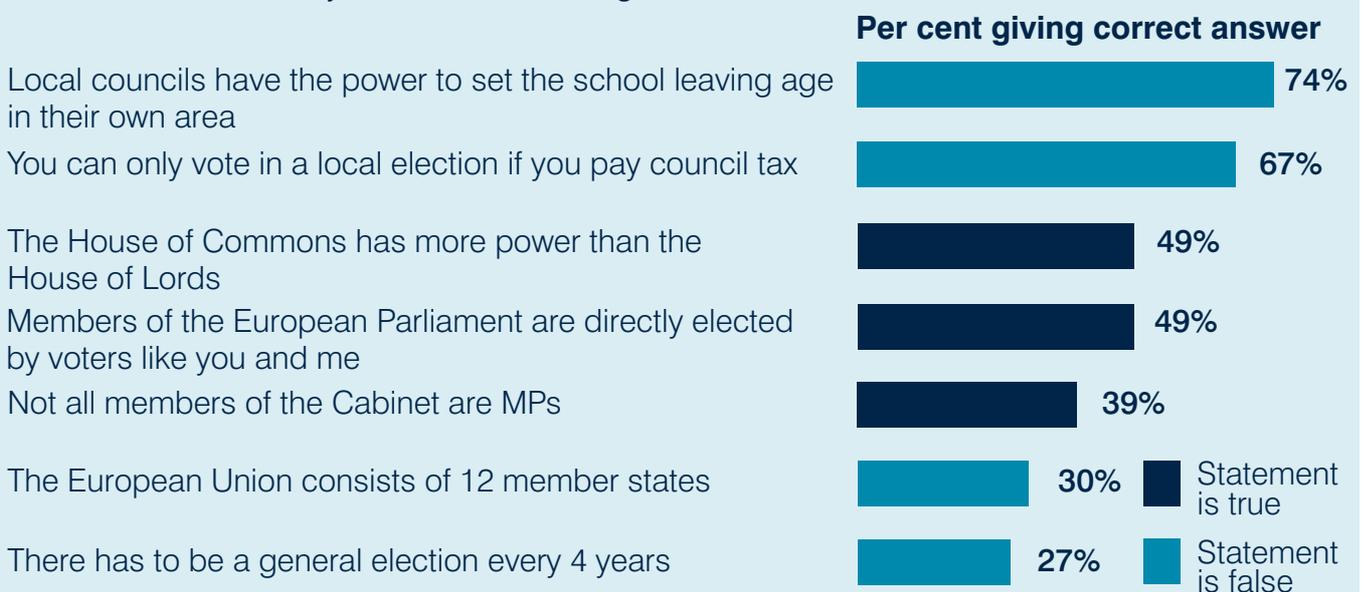
<sup>48</sup> MORI Social Research Institute (2003), *Trust in public institutions*. A good example of this is the higher levels of public trust in doctors than in the NHS.

**6.8** The link between familiarity and favourability makes the significant knowledge gaps found by this audit even more telling (see Figure 21). MORI found that half the public did not know that MEPs are elected politicians and even among the 11% of adults who describe themselves as **very** interested in politics, 45% are unable to name their MP. But perhaps most startling is that just a quarter of the public, 27%, know how often general elections are held and

almost two-thirds said it was true that ‘There has to be a general election every four years’. While it is possible that some of the public might be confused by the four-year cycle of local government elections or by the recent tendency of Prime Ministers to appeal for a new mandate after four years, it is nonetheless striking that people answered incorrectly by a majority of more than two-to-one.

**Figure 21: Political knowledge ‘quiz’**

Please tell me whether you think the following statements are true or false.



Base: 1,976 UK adults 18+, 11-17 December 2003  
Source: MORI

**6.9** More encouragingly, the public are more satisfied with the performance of Parliament than dissatisfied (36% compared to 32%). On the other hand, a third (32%) express no opinion either way, while 67% of people say they know ‘not very much’ or ‘nothing at all’ about the Westminster Parliament. Similarly, while it is encouraging that by a margin of three-to-one, people are positive about the way their own MP is doing his/her job – with dissatisfaction lower now than in the early to mid-1990s – almost half (47%) feel unable to give an opinion (43% apparently offer a view without actually being able to correctly name their MP). Backing-up earlier findings, and studies elsewhere, when asked about the way ‘MPs in general are doing their jobs’, satisfaction falls nine points to 32%, and dissatisfaction rises 23 points to 36%. That people are currently more favourably disposed towards individuals than institutions represents not only a significant challenge to Parliament, but perhaps also something for it to build upon.

**6.10** Of course, politics is much wider than Westminster alone and, on the evidence of this research, there is some truth in the assertion that ‘all politics is local’.<sup>49</sup> The public feel they know more about their local council than about Parliament or the European Union, and the objective test of the political ‘quiz’ bears this out even more clearly. More people have presented their views to a local councillor than to an MP suggesting that this is the level of government that is the public’s most immediate interface with the democratic process. Furthermore, as Table 11 shows, just half pick their local council as one of the institutions having the most influence on their

everyday lives, while less than one in three pick Parliament and one in six the European Union. Significantly, this pecking-order is broadly shared by MPs. Responding to the same question in the Hansard Society’s survey, MPs similarly ranked the media, local councils and business as having the most impact on people’s everyday lives, although MPs believe local councils to be the most influential of the three.

**Table 11: Who has impact?**

From this list, which two or three<sup>†</sup> of the following do you believe have most impact on people’s everyday lives?

You can select up to three options.

	1,976 UK adults	MPs
Media	52	65
Local councils	47	77
Business	41	45
Westminster Parliament	30	34
Prime Minister	25	27
Civil Service	22	25
European Union	17	20
The Cabinet	8	8
Scottish Parliament**	3	n/a
National Assembly for Wales**	2	n/a
Northern Ireland Assembly (Stormont)**	1	n/a
None	*	n/a
Don’t know	6	n/a

<sup>†</sup> MPs were asked ‘Which three...’

\* denotes <0.5%

\*\* Only included in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively

Source: MORI/Hansard Society

Figures are percentages.

49 T. O’Neill (1994) *All politics is local*, Adams Media Corporation, USA.

**6.11** This local dimension further highlights a theme underpinning many of the findings we have discussed in this report, namely how relevant people perceive politics to be. We have seen through responses to the supplementary question following our interest in politics indicator, that only a minority of respondents linked ‘politics’ with their own/an individual’s personal involvement. Instead, the vast majority see it as something done by other people, usually the government or politicians. A qualitative study by MORI for The Electoral Commission last year identified an ‘apolitical’ segment of the electorate who are fundamentally interested in community issues and public service delivery, but do not see this as ‘political’ and do not associate themselves with ‘politics’.<sup>50</sup> Research by NCSR for ODPM in 2002 similarly found that ‘Young people were often more bothered about the area than about politics’.<sup>51</sup>

**6.12** There is, then, a serious and urgent need to re-build the relevance of ‘politics’, both as a concept and as an activity worth taking part in. This is no easy task and there is no single solution. The challenge of re-engaging people with ‘politics’ and especially the formal political process requires a concerted and united effort from all those involved including The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society. Without this, we risk the formal political process becoming sidelined by societal changes as well as the development of new networks of communication and association.

**6.13** This is not to say that new and different forms of political organisation are unwelcome or unwanted. On the contrary, the flourishing of a range of political activities and agencies contributes to the health of a democracy in many ways. But the UK is a parliamentary democracy in which Parliament is the sovereign body from which members of the government are drawn. Within Parliament and other UK legislatures, political parties are the prime mechanism by which the views of the public are represented. Consequently, it is essential that they respond to the challenges outlined in this report, reassessing how they interact with their own party members and people generally, and considering how they can develop their policies to connect with the views and interests of the public.

**6.14** Likewise, Parliament and other representative bodies in the UK must investigate how they can build public awareness of the role they play and better enable people to participate in the democratic process and influence outcomes. In the post-industrial world, a political and policy-making process which fails to properly engage the public will fundamentally weaken democracy.

**6.15** The picture would be bleak if people simply did not care about what happens in the world around them. However, this is not the case. People remain interested in the issues that affect them, their families and the wider world. Moreover, they want to have a say in the way decisions are made and to know that their voices have been heard. Harnessing that positive aspiration and making it reality is something we should, and must, do.

<sup>50</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*.

<sup>51</sup> ODPM (October 2002) *Youth Participation in Local Government*.

# Appendix 1

## Selected bibliography

We are mindful of the contribution that social researchers, academics and others have already made to an understanding of political engagement and popular attitudes towards politics and political participation. Here, we have provided a selected list of sources of research on these subjects.

### Political engagement and participation

S. Coleman (2003) *A Tale of Two Houses: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home*, Hansard Society, London.

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# Appendix 2

## Technical details

### Survey methodology

The Political Engagement Poll, undertaken by MORI, involved interviews with a representative sample of 1,976 adults aged 18+ across the UK. Interviewing took place face-to-face, in respondents' homes between 11–17 December 2003 in Britain and between 6–15 December in Northern Ireland. The data have been weighted to the known population profile.

The Hansard Society sent a short self-completion questionnaire to all 659 Westminster MPs on 12 November 2003 and received 121 responses by 5 December 2003, representing a response rate of 18%. The survey sample was reasonably representative of party composition in the House of Commons: 51% Labour, 25% Conservative, 16% Liberal Democrats, 7% 'others'. Further details of this survey and its main findings are available at [www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk).

### Interpretation of the data

It should be noted that MORI interviewed a sample, not the entire population of the UK, and that the survey of MPs is based on 121 responses. As a result, all survey results are subject to sampling tolerances, and where differences between sub groups do occur these are not necessarily statistically significant – a guide to statistical reliability has been included in the report appendices. It is also important to note that the MORI survey records public perceptions, which may, or may not, accord with reality and that it represents a snapshot of opinion at one particular moment in time.

Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of 'don't know' categories, or multiple answers. Throughout this report, an asterisk (\*) denotes any value less than half a per cent but greater than zero. Reference is made to 'net' figures. This represents the balance of opinion on attitudinal questions, and provides a particularly useful means of comparing the results for a number of variables. In the case of a 'net agree' figure, this represents the percentage agreeing with a statement less the percentage disagreeing. For example, if 40% agree and 25% disagree, the 'net agree' figure is +15 points.

### Statistical reliability

The respondents to the Political Engagement Poll are only samples of the total 'population', so we cannot be certain that the figures obtained are exactly those we would have if everybody had been interviewed (the 'true' values). We can, however, predict the variation between the sample results and the 'true' values from a knowledge of the size of the samples on which the results are based and the number of times that a particular answer is given. The confidence with which we can make this prediction is usually chosen to be 95% – that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the 'true' value will fall within a specified range. Table 12 illustrates the predicted ranges for different sample sizes and percentage results at the '95% confidence interval'.

**Table 12: Sampling tolerances**

Size of sample on which survey result is based	Approximate sampling tolerances applicable to percentages at or near these levels		
	10% or 90% +/-	30% or 70% +/-	50% +/-
100	6	9	10
500	3	4	4
1,000	2	3	3
1,500	2	2	3
1,976	1	2	2

Source: MORI

For example, with a sample size of 1,976 where 50% give a particular answer, the chances are 19 in 20 that the 'true' value (which would have been obtained if the whole population had been interviewed) will fall within the range of +2 percentage points from the sample result.

When results are compared between separate groups within a sample, different results may be obtained. The difference may be 'real', or it may

occur by chance (because not everyone in the population has been interviewed). To test if the difference is a real one i.e. if it is 'statistically significant', we again have to know the size of the samples, the percentage giving a certain answer and the degree of confidence chosen. If we assume the '95% confidence interval', the differences between the results of two separate groups must be greater than the values given in Table 13:

**Table 13: Sampling tolerances**

Size of samples compared	Differences required for significance at or near these percentage levels		
	10% or 90% +/-	30% or 70% +/-	50% +/-
100 and 400	7	10	11
400 and 400	4	6	7
500 and 1,000	3	5	5
1,000 and 1,000	3	4	4

Source: MORI

## Guide to social class definitions

Table 14 contains a brief list of social class definitions as used by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising and which are standard in all surveys carried out by MORI and other social research agencies.

**Table 14: Social class definitions**

A	Professionals such as doctors, surgeons, solicitors or dentists; chartered people like architects; fully qualified people with a large degree of responsibility such as senior editors, senior civil servants, town clerks, senior business executives and managers, and high ranking grades of the Services.
B	People with very responsible jobs such as university lecturers, hospital matrons, heads of local government departments, middle management in business, qualified scientists, bank managers, police inspectors, and upper grades of the Services.
C1	All others doing non-manual jobs; nurses, technicians, pharmacists, salesmen, publicans, people in clerical positions, police sergeants/constables, and middle ranks of the Services.
C2	Skilled manual workers/craftsmen who have served apprenticeships; foremen, manual workers with special qualifications such as long distance lorry drivers, security officers, and lower grades of the Services.
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, including labourers and mates of occupations in the C2 grade and people serving apprenticeships; machine minders, farm labourers, bus and railway conductors, laboratory assistants, postmen, door-to-door salesmen.
E	Those on lowest levels of subsistence including pensioners, casual workers, and others with minimum levels of income

Source: MORI

# Appendix 3

## Political Engagement Poll – ‘topline findings’

- Poll conducted by MORI.
- These topline findings are based on 1,976 adults aged 18+ across the UK.
- Interviews in Great Britain were conducted face-to-face, in home, between 11–17 December 2003.
- Interviews in Northern Ireland were conducted face-to-face, in-home between 6–15 December 2003.
- Results are based on all respondents unless otherwise stated.
- Data are weighted to the profile of the population.
- An asterisk (\*) indicates a finding of less than 0.5% but greater than zero.
- Where percentages do not add up to exactly 100% this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of ‘don’t knows’ or to multiple answers.

Q1. How likely would you be to vote in a immediate general election, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 means you would be absolutely certain to vote, and 1 means that you would be absolutely certain not to vote?

	Per cent
10 (Absolutely certain to vote)	51
9	6
8	8
7	5
6	3
5	7
4	2
3	2
2	2
1 (Absolutely certain not to vote)	11
Don't know	2
Refused	0

**Q2. Which, if any, of the things on this list have you done in the last two or three years.**

	Per cent
Presented my views to a local councillor or MP	13
Written a letter to an editor	6
Urged someone outside my family to vote	14
Urged someone to get in touch with a local councillor or MP	14
Made a speech before an organised group	11
Been an officer of an organisation or club	8
Stood for public office	1
Taken an active part in a political campaign	3
Helped on fund raising drives	21
Voted in the last general election	64
Flown on business overseas	8
Flown on a business trip within the UK	7
None of these	25

**Q3. You said that you have presented your views to a local councillor or MP. Was this to a local councillor, an MP or both?**

	Per cent
Local councillor	48
MP	27
Both	24
Don't know	2

Base: All who have presented views to councillor or MP (263)

**Q4. And which of these, if any, have you done in the last two or three years?**

	Per cent
Voted in the last local council election	51
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation	41
Signed a petition	39
Discussed politics or political news with someone else	38
Contacted my local council	26
Done voluntary work	23
Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	18
Helped organise a charity event	16
Taken part in a sponsored event	15
Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march	5
Been to any political meeting	5
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party	5
Taken part in a strike	2
Served as a school or hospital governor	2
Taken an active part in a party's campaign at a general election	1
Taken an active part in a party's campaign at a local election	1
Served as a local magistrate	1
None	17
Don't know	0

### Q5. How interested would you say you are in politics?

	Per cent
Very interested	11
Fairly interested	39
Not very interested	32
Not at all interested	18
Don't know	0

### Q6. How much, if anything, do you feel you know about....

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not very much	Nothing at all	Don't know	Great deal/fair amount	Not much/nothing
a) Politics	3	39	45	12	1	42	57
b) The European Union	2	22	55	20	1	24	75
c) Your local council	4	34	49	12	1	38	61
d) The Westminster Parliament	3	30	50	17	1	33	67
e) The role of MPs	4	41	42	13	1	45	55

Figures are percentages.

### Q7. What is the name of your local Member of Parliament for this constituency since June 2001/since the last by-election?

	Per cent
Correct	42
Incorrect	10
Don't know	49

**Q8. Please tell me if you think that the following statements are true or false. If you don't know, just say so and we will move on to the next question.**

	True	False	Don't know
A) Members of the European Parliament are directly elected by voters like you and me (True)	49	32	19
B) Not all members of the Cabinet are MPs (True)	39	39	22
C) Registering to vote is optional <sup>52</sup>	49	43	8
D) The European Union consists of 12 member states (False)	38	30	33
E) The House of Commons has more power than the House of Lords (True)	49	30	22
F) There has to be a general election every 4 years (False)	65	27	8
G) You can only vote in a local election if you pay council tax (False)	19	67	14
H) Local councils have the power to set the school leaving age in their own area (False)	8	74	17
Figures are percentages.			

**Q9. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that Parliament works?**

	Per cent
Very satisfied	1
Fairly satisfied	35
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	27
Fairly dissatisfied	23
Very dissatisfied	9
Don't know	5
Satisfied	36
Dissatisfied	32

**Q10. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way MPs in general are doing their job?**

	Per cent
Very satisfied	1
Fairly satisfied	31
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	26
Fairly dissatisfied	26
Very dissatisfied	10
Don't know	5
Satisfied	32
Dissatisfied	36

<sup>52</sup> N.B. It is a legal requirement to return a completed annual electoral registration form with details of everyone eligible to vote, but there is, technically, no legal requirement on an individual to register to vote if they do not receive an annual electoral registration form.

**Q11. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way your MP (INSERT NAME) is doing his/her job?**

	Per cent
Very satisfied	8
Fairly satisfied	33
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	26
Fairly dissatisfied	9
Very dissatisfied	4
Don't know	21
Satisfied	41
Dissatisfied	13

**Q12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Agree	Disagree
A) Being active in politics is a waste of time	4	18	20	42	13	3	22	55
B) I feel a sense of satisfaction when I vote	12	41	20	16	7	4	53	23
C) It is my duty to vote	37	37	10	10	5	1	74	15
D) I want to have a say in how the country is run	31	44	12	9	4	2	75	13
E) When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run	5	31	20	30	10	4	36	40

Figures are percentages.

**Q13. Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing Britain?**

	Per cent
Works extremely well and could not be improved	2
Could be improved in small ways but mainly works well	34
Could be improved quite a lot	42
Needs a great deal of improvement	18
Don't know	4

**Q14. From this list, which two or three of the following do you believe have most impact on people's everyday lives? You can select up to three options**

	Per cent
Civil Service	22
Business	41
Cabinet	8
European Union	17
Local councils	47
Media	52
Prime Minister	25
Westminster Parliament	30
Scottish Parliament (Only asked in Scotland)	3
National Assembly for Wales (Only asked in Wales)	2
Northern Ireland Assembly (Stormont) (Only asked in Northern Ireland)	1
None	*
Don't know	6

Base: 1,064 UK adults 18+

**Q15. From what you know or have heard, how easy or difficult is it to contact your MP?**

	Per cent
Very easy	14
Fairly easy	44
Fairly difficult	12
Very difficult	5
Don't know	25
Base: 1,064 UK adults 18+	

**Q16. How much would you say you trust politicians generally?**

	Per cent
Very easy	1
Fairly easy	26
Fairly difficult	51
Very difficult	19
Don't know	2
Base: 1,064 UK adults 18+	