

‘Citizens participate in elections and government both because they go to politics and because politics goes to them’.

Rosentone and Hanson, *Mobilisation, Participation and Democracy in America*, 1993.

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An audit of
political engagement 2

Politics is about relationships between people and how we organise our lives. But it is also about power. Democracy is about ensuring that every citizen has a say in who holds power and that the power they hold is accountable and legitimate. The extent to which people are politically engaged, therefore, is of critical importance to the health of a democratic society.

This is the second audit of political engagement undertaken jointly by The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society. Like the first, it measures the nature and extent of the UK public's political engagement and does so via our annual Political Engagement Poll. It also reviews how political engagement has changed over the past 12 months.

Unlike last year, however, this is a smaller, update audit. It focuses on six indicators selected from the 16 we used last year. Our selection was informed by a detailed statistical analysis of last year's audit conducted for us by MORI and previously published in the report *Rules of Engagement?*

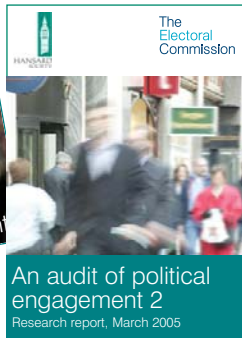
As last year, we do not seek to offer solutions. Rather, we hope this report enhances the evidence base for those involved in facilitating greater levels of engagement and provides a platform for further debate about what might be done in this regard by those involved in UK politics.

What next?

The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society will be using this research to inform our respective programmes of work aimed at stimulating greater political engagement. With this in mind, if you have any comments or ideas about what this research says or what might be done in response to it, please contact us by email at info@politicalengagement.org.uk

Further information

The two audit reports and *Rules of Engagement?* are available to download from www.electoralcommission.org.uk and www.hansardsociety.org.uk and in hard copy from The Electoral Commission or Hansard Society offices.



Political engagement indicators

Knowledge and interest



Action and participation



Efficacy and satisfaction



The Political Engagement Poll, undertaken for us by MORI, involved interviews with a representative sample of 2,065 adults aged 18+ across the UK. Some of the questions were asked of 1,107 adults.

Interviewing took place face-to-face in respondents' homes, between 2–6 December 2004 in Britain and between 14–21 December in Northern Ireland. The data have been weighted to the known population profile.

Knowledge and interest

According to our indicators, political knowledge and interest is higher than last year but not to a statistically significant degree. Forty-five per cent of people say they know 'a fair amount' or more about politics, compared to 42% found by the previous audit. Just over half, 53%, say that they are fairly or very interested in politics, an increase of three percentage points.

Action and participation

There has been no significant change in the two indicators we used in this category. Just over half the public, 52%, say they are certain to vote at an immediate general election, little improvement on 51% last time. One in six, 16%, are politically active, a slight increase on last

year's figure of 14%. At the same time, there has been an increase in some political activities.

Efficacy and satisfaction

There is also little change in the two attitudinal indicators, one measuring the public's perception of the efficacy of political participation, the other overall satisfaction with the way the system of governing Britain works. Neither has moved significantly in the past year.

Table 1: Political engagement indicators, Audit 1 and Audit 2

	Audit 1 %	Audit 2 %	Change* +/-
Knowledge and interest			
Feel they know about politics	42	45	+3
Interested in politics	50	53	+3
Action and participation			
Propensity to vote (general election)	51	52	+1
Political activists	14	16	+2
Efficacy and satisfaction			
'Getting involved works'	36	36	0
Think present system of governing works well	36	34	-2

Audit 1: 1,976 UK adults, 18+, December 2003.

Audit 2: 2,065 UK adults, 18+, December 2004 (some indicators based on 1,107 adults).

Note: *None of these changes are statistically significant.

Conclusions

The latest audit findings provide further insights into the nature and extent of political engagement in the UK:

- A basic comparison of the Political Engagement Polls in 2003 and 2004 suggests that political engagement in the UK has remained remarkably stable.
- However, while our six indicators are little changed year-on-year, there have been fluctuations in the interim period.
- People's propensity to vote and interest in politics increased sharply, albeit fleetingly, during the summer of 2004.

Our second audit has found political engagement to be both a complex and a fluid phenomenon. It is multi faceted, with no single predominant facet and while the headline findings from our second Political Engagement Poll suggest that political engagement is not much changed from the level recorded 12 months ago, other measures taken at different points during the year reveal a more fluid picture.

At certain moments in the political calendar – notably around the June 2004 elections – public interest in politics and propensity to vote suddenly and sharply increased. Of course, we have always known by the degree of fluctuation in turnout that the degree of public

engagement with politics and elections varies from one election to another. Some elections capture the public's imagination more than others and mobilise them to vote. But to what extent do these fluctuations reflect those elections alone, something more deep-seated, or both? The measures we take in our annual Political Engagement Poll in December will provide us with a valuable adjunct to post-election surveys and will give us some further valuable clues about patterns in engagement.

This year's audit findings are important ones. They show that the political pulse of the nation changes and, crucially, that it is changeable: quickening at moments of political excitement

and when mobilising agencies provide sufficient stimulation. While this provides some encouragement for those working to increase the nation's political heartbeat in what might be a general election year, it also highlights the more difficult challenge of keeping people sufficiently stimulated so that they remain engaged beyond such moments of high political drama.

The Electoral Commission is an independent public body that was set up by the UK Parliament. It aims to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the UK.

www.electoralcommission.org.uk

The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan educational charity, which exists to promote effective parliamentary democracy. It works to strengthen the UK Parliament by encouraging greater accessibility and closer engagement with the public.

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