

‘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.

www.electoralcommission.org.uk
www.hansardsociety.org.uk



The
Electoral
Commission



An audit of
political engagement

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.

At the heart of our audit are 16 indicators of political engagement based on findings from the Political Engagement Poll undertaken by MORI involving interviews with 1,976 UK adults aged 18+, conducted in December 2003.

The research provides those working towards facilitating greater levels of political engagement with material on which to base strategy and action. The indicators also provide a baseline for future audits and surveys.

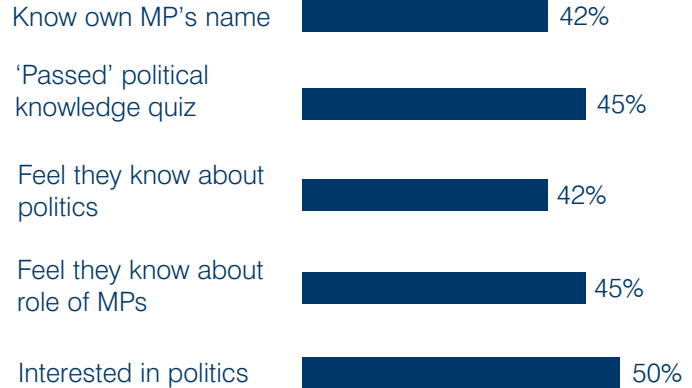
What next?

The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society will be inviting others to take part in a series of discussions about political engagement. 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:

info@politicalengagement.org.uk

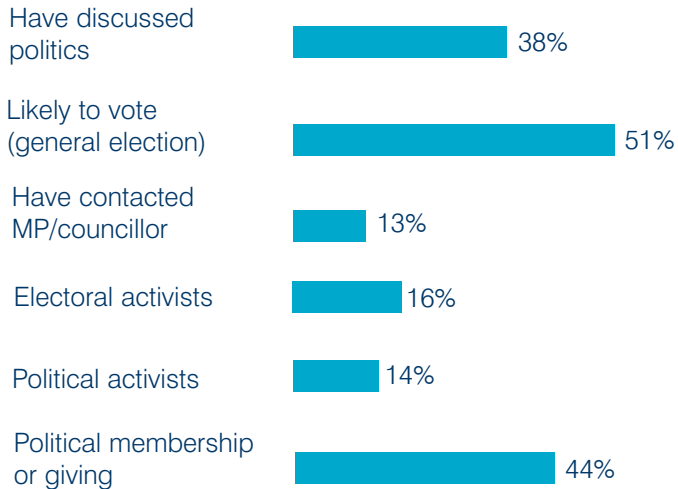
Knowledge and interest

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.



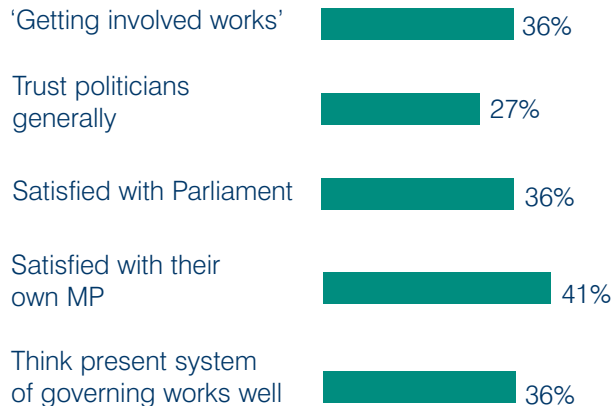
Action and participation

Participation varies with the degree of commitment or interest that various activities require. One in seven people are politically active (14%). Under half the public (44%) have either paid to join or donated money to some charity, campaigning organisation or political party.



Efficacy and satisfaction

For four in five of the attitudinal measures, the proportions with positive attitudes fall within a five-point band (36% – 41%). But trust in politicians generally is considerably lower than this, at only 27%.



Conclusions

The audit 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. It tends to be seen as something done by, and for, others.
- '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 'I 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, the 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.

The full audit report (including commentary on all 16 indicators) is available from:
www.electoralcommission.org.uk and
www.hansardsociety.org.uk

The Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is an independent public body established by the UK Parliament on 30 November 2000 under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA). The Commission is independent from Government and is accountable to, and receives its funding from, the Speaker's Committee.

Its aim is 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. 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. It works to strengthen Parliament by encouraging greater accessibility and closer engagement with the public.

www.hansardsociety.org.uk