

An Audit of Political Engagement (3)

Research Study Conducted for
The Electoral Commission and The Hansard
Society

Draft 2

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of a research study conducted by the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society. It looks at key indicators of political engagement in the UK and updates trends from similar surveys conducted in December 2003 and December 2004.

Methodology

Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative quota sample of 1,209 UK adults aged 18+, face-to-face, in home, between 1 – 5 December 2005. Data are weighted to the national population profile.

Report Layout

Following this introduction, the report contains:

- An **Overview and Commentary** outlining the key findings and discussing some of the main themes to emerge;
- Separate chapters covering each of the **Political Indicators** developed by The Electoral Commission, plus analysis of new or additional questions asked in this survey.

A marked-up questionnaire showing the percentages giving each response to each question, and technical details of the survey methodology, are appended.

Interpretation of the Data

It should be remembered that a sample, and not the entire population of the UK, has been interviewed. In consequence, all results are subject to sampling tolerances, which means that not all differences are statistically significant. A guide to statistical reliability is appended.

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 the volume, an asterisk (*) denotes any value less than half a per cent but greater than zero.

Acknowledgements

MORI would like to thank Ben Marshall and Catherine Johnson at The Electoral Commission, as well as colleagues from the Hansard Society, for their help and advice in developing this project. Special thanks also go to the 1,209 people who took part in this survey.

Publication of the data

As The Electoral Commission has engaged Ipsos MORI to provide an objective and representative programme of research, it is important to protect The Commission's interests by ensuring that it is accurately reflected in any press release or publication of the findings. As part of our standard terms and conditions, the publication of the data in this report is therefore subject to the advance approval of Ipsos MORI. This would only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misinterpretation of the findings.

Ipsos MORI is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules on disclosure of data and methodology from published surveys. The rules can be seen on the BPC's website, www.britishpollingcouncil.org.

Overview and Commentary

If we judge the findings of this third Audit of Political Engagement purely by reference to the ten Core Indicators, with no attempt to put the figures into any context, we find that only one of the ten figures has changed to a statistically significant degree in the last year, and that (feeling knowledgeable about politics) has moved downwards rather than upwards. But this would give a misleadingly bleak impression. Nevertheless, there might be cause for some disappointment that the general election has effected no significant – or at least lasting – improvement in political engagement.

The third annual Audit is the first of the series to be conducted at the end of a year during which a general election was held, and this will inevitably colour the findings, both in respondents' own view of the political process and their place in it, and in the significance we place on their answers. Taken together with the first two audits we are now in a position to compare the key indicators in "peacetime", during the early pre-election build-up and a few months post-election, once the dust has had a chance to settle. Furthermore, we can make use of some surveys conducted during the election itself for media or academic clients, using the same or comparable questions to some of those measured in the Audits, throwing even more light on the extent to which these measurements may be affected by "seasonal" factors within the parliamentary four- or five-year-cycle.

The surprise is how little difference the general election seems to have made. Not only would we expect an election in itself to have a potential effect on public awareness of, and perhaps engagement with, politics, but it is of course a landmark political event which can radically alter the context in which the abstract aspects of political engagement and commitment operate. The 2005 election was not perhaps a dramatic one that ushered in radical new policies or took the public by surprise in its outcome, but like any other election it took over the airwaves and newspapers for a month, and mobilised more of the public into political activity – even if this extended only to the act of voting – than any event since the previous general election four years before. Although the same party remains in office under the same Prime Minister as a year ago, the fall in Labour's parliamentary majority, and perhaps even more the comparatively narrow margin of victory in terms of percentages of the popular vote, might easily have led some of the public to view the political landscape and the political process differently from the way in which they viewed it when interviewed in December 2004.

The election of a new Conservative leader, too, might be a relevant consideration for many respondents. At the time of the survey fieldwork the result of the leadership election had yet to be declared, but it was already widely assumed in the media that David Cameron would be chosen, and the coverage of the pending announcement was among the most prominent news stories while fieldwork was taking place, and might easily have been influential on the reactions of some respondents.

It would be by no means unexpected, therefore, if we were to find significant shifts in some of the indicators in the third Audit. Yet this has not been the case. The public declare themselves very slightly more likely to vote in an immediate general election than was the case last year, a little more interested in politics and by contrast a little less knowledgeable about the topic than before, but certainly nothing has been radically transformed; indeed, strictly speaking only the last of these three shifts can be taken as established by the Audit survey, since the other two did not quite pass the test of statistical significance, but both fit the evidence implied by other surveys during the year.

The fall in perceived knowledge of politics, taken together with the small increase in “interest in politics” might seem paradoxical, but both these changes might arise from the public beginning to take a wider view of the concept of “politics”, as The Commission’s advertising campaigns have tried to encourage; it is perfectly possible that some of the public are simultaneously beginning to accept that “politics” is not so narrow as they might once have believed and therefore more relevant, a subject in which they wish to take an interest, but about which they also realise in the light of their new-found awareness that they have more to learn. A fall in the perceived knowledge of politics could be considered the least damaging negative change that might occur in the Indicators, provided it is not linked to a deterioration in any of the other measures of engagement. But in any case, the changes is comparatively modest and might just as easily reflect only short-term factors (such as the effect of the election), and it would be unwise to draw firm conclusions at this stage.

But what is certainly striking is the failure of the election to effect any significant lasting change in interest in politics or propensity to vote, since it certainly caused a temporary one. During the election campaign, MORI found 61% saying they were interested in politics and, in the final pre-election poll, 71% who claimed to be absolutely certain they would vote (though this presumably included a degree of wishful thinking or “social desirability bias”, since this exceeded the official turnout by ten percentage points). Yet seven months later the indicators have fallen back, if not quite to their previous level at least so near to it that our survey is not sufficiently sensitive to detect the difference and label it “significant”. (See the trend graph on p 17).

Perhaps the most intriguing finding in the survey, though, emerged not from among The Commission’s core indicators but in one of the supplementary questions. The previous Audit research has suggested the importance of a good relationship between elected members and their constituents to a healthy level of political engagement. Consequently the ability of members of the public to name their MP is more than merely a test of general knowledge. We found 44% able to do so – little different from MORI’s previous measures for the Electoral Commission in 2001 and 2003, though lower than was the case in surveys up to the early 1990s. All other things being equal we might expect recall to be higher during or soon after an election, which naturally gives MPs at least briefly a high local profile in their role as candidates; yet the 2001 measure, taken during the campaign itself, was in fact the lowest of all the measures (41%).

In fact it does seem that the election may have boosted recall of MPs' names slightly, once we make allowance for the fact that many MPs retired or were defeated in May to be replaced by a new incumbent. Of those who were still represented by the same MP at the time of the Audit survey as had been their MP in the last Parliament, 50% could give the right name, significantly better than the 42% who could name their MP in the first Audit survey (December 2003), when there had been no general election for two-and-a-half years.

Predictably, people were considerably less likely to be able to name their MP in December if a new MP had been elected for their constituency in April. Nevertheless, the extent of the difference is worth noting – only 28% of those with a new MP could come up with the right name, and 8% mistakenly named the previous incumbent. A further 11% came up with a different wrong name – many, no doubt, remembering that their MP had changed but struggling to come up with his or her name. (By way of comparison, in constituencies where the MP was re-elected only 6% came up with a wrong answer.) Seven months, it seems, is not sufficient for a new Member of Parliament to make a very deep impression on his or her constituency, and this clearly has implications for levels of political engagement.

There is also a dramatic regional aspect to the figures: in both Scotland and Wales far fewer of the public were able to name their MP correctly than in England or Northern Ireland, and far more offered a wrong name instead. Although the constituency boundary changes in Scotland, and the reshuffling of sitting MPs that occurred as a result, might have accounted for this north of the border, the fact that recall was almost as low in Wales suggests this was not the primary factor.¹

¹ Strictly speaking, the sub-sample in Wales is so small that the difference in the figures from those in England is not quite statistically significant; but they are so much in accord with the figures in Scotland that it seems probable that they do, indeed, give an accurate reflection of the true situation.

What is the name of your local Member of Parliament for this constituency since May 2005?

	All	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
	<i>n=1,209</i>	<i>n=1,107</i>	<i>n=124</i>	<i>n=59</i>	<i>n=67</i>
	%	%	%	%	%
Gave correct answer	44	46	27	34	54
Gave name of former MP (up to May 2005)	2	2	5	0	3
Gave other wrong answer	7	6	16	14	6
Don't know	46	46	51	52	38

Source: Ipsos MORI

Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

The obvious suspicion is that the reason for this discrepancy is the devolution arrangements in Scotland and Wales, and that many of the wrong answers offered may have been the names of local MSPs and AMs rather than MPs. It may of course be that this simply results from some of the burden of political representation within those nations having been shifted from Westminster to Holyrood and Cardiff Bay, in which case it could be argued that it is less important that the Scots and Welsh should be able to name their MP than that the English should be able to do so. If, though, this is in any sense a confusing of the lines of political responsibility or a dilution of the engagement between the electors and the elected, it should be regarded as a disturbing finding.

The ability to correctly name one's MP is also considerably lower in London than in the rest of England, at just 35%. Although we might conceivably also connect this with devolution (since the capital is the only part of England with elected government at regional level), this may also owe something to demographic factors such as high population mobility (and therefore less strongly established local roots) and a much-higher-than-average foreign population (who cannot – except for Irish and Commonwealth citizens – vote at general elections, and might reasonably therefore take less interest in the identity of their local MP). It is worth noting that Londoners also express a lower than average interest in politics, which is not the case in either Scotland or Wales. (But it may also not be entirely irrelevant that while on 35% of Londoners know who their MP is, 81% were able to correctly name Ken Livingstone as Mayor of London at the end of 2004.)²

² Annual London Survey conducted by MORI for the Greater London Authority, 27 October-20 December 2004.

And what do the public want from their MPs, whether or not they know who they are? First and foremost, it seems, that they should be “independent minded” – more prominent in this survey than in the British Social Attitudes surveys in the 1980s and 1990s. The steady increase in the number calling for MPs to be “independent minded” shows a clear trend, and fits well with other evidence that the public are becoming increasingly impatient with and distrustful of party politics, and value “independence” in many circumstances as a panacea against the perceived ills of the system. Since the entire constitutional structure of modern representative democracy in Britain (and most other countries) is built on the assumption that political parties are an indispensable part of the mechanism, and since some degree of party loyalty, group-mindedness and ideological orthodoxy would seem prerequisites to the effectual working of such a system, this seems problematic.

Yet the public do not necessarily see any contradiction between an MP being “independent minded” and being loyal to his party; they are almost as likely to say that party loyalty is important if they do call for independence as if they do not. We might also note the reluctance of the public to consider voting against “their” party as a means of influencing government decisions (although it is possible that expresses a belief in the futility of such gestures rather than any vestigial party loyalty among voters, a phenomenon we are usually expected to believe has long been a thing of the past). It may be, therefore, that the preference for independent minded MPs is more one of personal qualities than of any expectation that this should affect their behaviour in Parliament. Perhaps the voters are content that it should still be true that

When in that House MPs divide
If they’ve a brain, and cerebellum too,
They have to leave that brain outside
And vote just as their leaders tell ’em to.³

as Private Willis has been explaining to audiences since 1882. But more likely this is a case where the public’s instincts are confused and contradictory, because they do not fully understand the working of the system or the purpose of many of the functions and institutions of which they are instinctively suspicious. Better that the political establishment should set itself to explaining and reconciling the public to its apparent imperfections than that the voters should feel able to use politicians’ failure to live up to an impossible ideal as justification to themselves for continued reluctance to engage with politics.

³ Gilbert and Sullivan, *Iolanthe*, Act Two.

The Core Indicators

	Dec 2003	Dec 2004	Dec 2005
	%	%	%
A: Knowledge and interest			
Feel knowledgeable about politics	42	45	39
Interested in politics	50	53	56
B: Action and participation			
Have discussed politics	38	38	39
Propensity to vote	51	52	55
Have contacted MP/councillor	13	17	15
Electoral activist	16	19	19
Political activist	14	16	14
Political membership/giving	44	46	46
C: Efficacy and satisfaction			
“Getting Involved Works”	36	36	33
Think present system of governing works well	36	34	34

A: Knowledge and Interest

The first of the three themes is people's knowledge of, and interest in, politics, which is measured by two of the Core Indicators. The findings this time around suggest that perceived knowledge of politics (39%) is lower than either 2004 (45%) or 2003 (42%). Interest in politics, by contrast, has risen significantly over two years, from 50% in 2003 and 53% in 2004 to 56% in 2005.

In addition, this survey measured people's interest in issues at three levels – local, national and international – repeating the same questions asked in December 2004. The proportion of the public interested in each of these three types of issues is the same in 2005 as in 2004, and as before, more people are interested in each of these than say they are interested in politics.

As an objective test of political knowledge, respondents were asked whether they could name their MP. Rather less than half (44%) were able to do so, not a significant improvement on the December 2003 performance despite the publicity afforded to MPs by this year's general election.

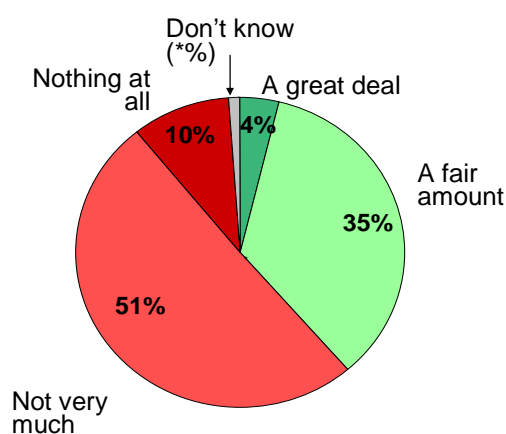
Perceived political knowledge

More than half of the public feel they know, at best, “not very much” about politics; however, 35% say they know at least “a fair amount”, though only 4% are confident that they know “a great deal”.

In the last survey, 45% of the public felt they knew at least a fair amount about politics; hence the figure of 39% in the 2005 survey represents a significant fall.

Perceived political knowledge

How much, if anything, do you feel you know about ‘Politics’?



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

Men are much more likely to say they feel knowledgeable about politics (49%) than are women (30%); while 7% of men feel they know “a great deal” only 1% of women said the same. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is also a certain amount of differentiation in the level of knowledge by age, with older people tending to claim greater knowledge: 44% of those aged 55+, and 47% of 45-54 year olds know a great deal or a fair amount, as compared with 22% of 18-24 year olds.

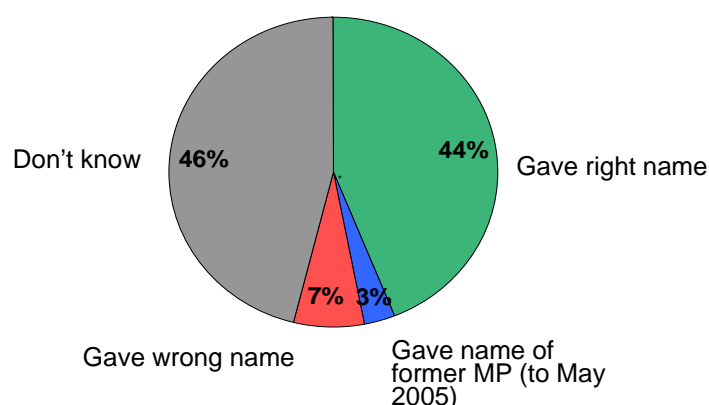
The most striking link, however, is with educational attainment: of those who have achieved A-levels or above, 44% feel they know a fair amount and 8% say they know a great deal; among those with no formal qualifications, less than a quarter (22%) think they know a fair amount about politics, and only 3% know a great deal. This differential is reflected in other factors that are related to or correlated with educational level: there is, for example, a strong difference by occupational class - middle-class (AB) respondents being more likely to feel knowledgeable than working class (DE) ones (by 60% to 22%), and black or mixed race respondents somewhat less so than their white counterparts (40% amongst white respondents, compared with 17% for black and 25% for mixed race respectively). Notably, however, Asian respondents are almost as likely as white respondents to claim at least a fair amount of knowledge (38%).

Knowledge of MPs' names

When asked to name their Member of Parliament, 44% of the public were able to do so. A further 3% mistakenly named the man or woman who had been their MP until the general election, but is no longer, and 7% gave the wrong name. The remaining 46% admitted that they did not know.

Demonstrated political knowledge

What is the name of your local Member of Parliament for this constituency since May 2005?



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

This level of knowledge is consistent with other recent measurements, but rather lower than was the case some years ago. In May 2001, 41% of the public could accurately recall the name of their Member of Parliament, while in December 2003 the figure was 42%; there is therefore no noticeable difference in the level of recall in the middle of an election campaign (2001), seven months after an election (2005) or in mid-Parliament (2003). But surveys up to the early 1990s tended to put recall of an MPs' name at over 50%: the first British Election Study, conducted in 1963 and reported by Butler and Stokes⁴, found 51% giving the correct name; similarly the Granada TV "State of the Nation" survey in 1973 found the figure at 53%, and MORI's 1991 survey for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, also entitled "State of the Nation", measured it at 52%.

Young people are much less likely to be able to name their MP than their older counterparts (22% of 18-24 year olds compared to 54% of those aged 45-and-over could do so), and middle class (ABC1) respondents have a higher recall than do those in the working class (C2DE). Recall is also much higher in England and Northern Ireland than in Scotland or Wales, possibly an effect of the devolution arrangements in the latter two countries. Interestingly, there is virtually no difference between men and women, even though men are much more likely to claim they feel knowledgeable about politics.

⁴ David Butler & Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain* (London: Pelican, 1971), p 509.

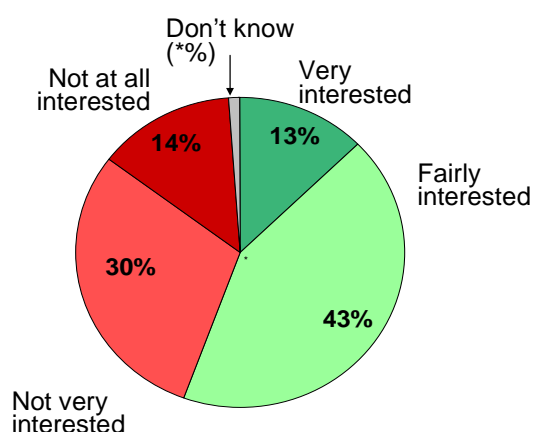
Interest in politics

Over half the public (56%) say that they are either very interested in fairly interested in politics. This is the highest level of interest in politics recorded in any of the three audits: the December 2003 figure was 50%, and the December 2004 figure was 53%. However, even this increased figure is well below the level measured by MORI at the start of the 2005 General Election campaign which was in line with the very consistent findings at previous general elections.

It seems plain that, as might have been expected, interest in politics was higher during the general election (when a MORI survey found 16% of adults “very interested” and 61% at least “fairly interested”) than at either end of the year; whether the December-to-December increase merely shows that the stimulating effect of the election is taking some time to wear off, or marks a permanent improvement, is not yet clear.

Interest in politics

How interested would you say you are in “Politics”?



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

Interest in politics is closely associated with professed knowledge of politics, and the same demographic patterns mostly apply – interest is higher among men than women (62% as compared to 51%, with twice as many men as women “very interested”), among ABs than DEs (76% to 37%), among whites than blacks (57% to 18%), and increases with educational attainment.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a strong relationship between the likelihood to vote and the intention to vote, with only a quarter (24%) of those certain *not* to vote expressing an interest in politics, as compared with 70% of those who are certain to vote.

⁵ For further details see <http://www.mori.com/polls/2005/ft050411.shtml#q2>

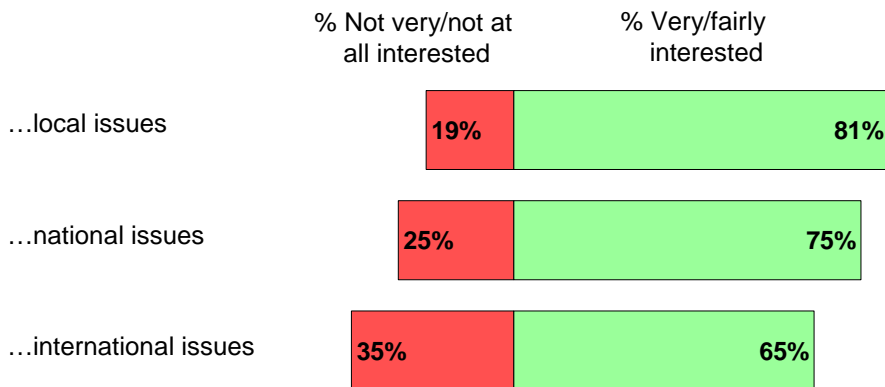
Interest in local, national and international issues

Overall, a greater level of interest is expressed in local issues than in national or international ones; this has not changed significantly since 2004.

Four-fifths of the public say that they are interested in local issues and three-quarters in national issues, but only two-thirds expressed an interest in international issues. Similarly, 30% are *very* interested in local issues, 23% in national issues and just 18% in international issues.

Interest in local, national and international issues

How interested would you say you are in...



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

In demographic terms, the pattern here is broadly similar to the 'interest in politics' question discussed above; older and middle class, as well as white, respondents tend to be more likely to express an interest. However, it is also notable here that interest in all of these types of issues remains higher than the level of interest in politics per se.

Interest in issues on all three levels correlates strongly with interest in politics: for instance, 87% of those who are interested in politics are also interested in international affairs, compared to 36% of those who say they are not interested in politics. Political activists (as defined on p 21) are also more likely to be interested than non-activists, but the correlation is weaker. Interest in local issues is also associated with voting in local elections, but not perhaps as strongly as we might expect, except that those who are "not at all interested" are very unlikely to have voted: 79% of those who are very interested and 64% of those who are "fairly interested" but also 51% of those who are "not very interested" in local issues say they voted at the last local elections. It may be, of course, that combining the county council elections with the general election in 2005 was one factor in this,

getting voters to the local polls who would otherwise have lacked sufficient interest to turn out.

B: Action and Participation

The Audit Survey measures six indicators based on respondents' reports of their own behaviour, and gauging the extent of their active involvement in electoral and other political activities. The overall impression from the three Audit surveys is that there has not been a significant variation in participation levels throughout 2005 as compared to 2003 or 2004.

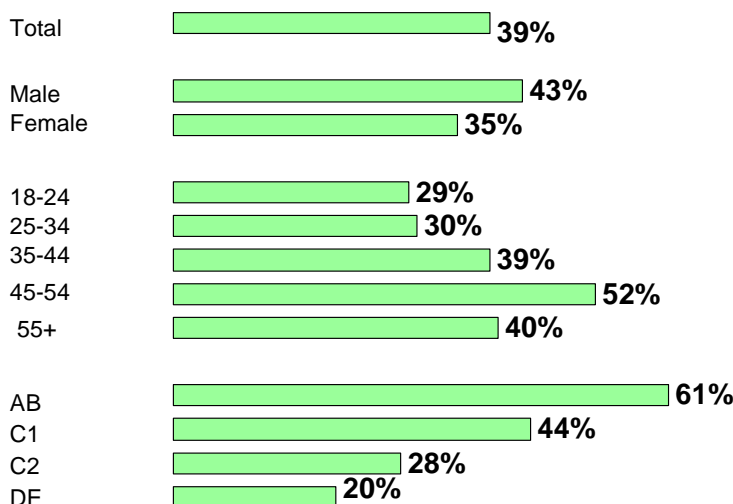
In addition, two new questions were devised for this survey to measure the extent to which the public (a) say they would be willing to, and (b) have already done, a list of activities in order to influence or protest against a decision by a local or national governing body. We have termed this "Political influence".

Discussing politics

Around two in five UK adults (39%), say they have discussed politics or political news with someone else in the last two or three years. This represents virtually the same level as was recorded in the previous two Audits (38%).

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: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

As the chart above shows, as with other indicators, there are substantial differences by sub-groups of the population, particularly by social class, but also by gender, men being significantly more likely to have had such discussions than women.

Of course, these results reflect what the public think of as “politics or political news”, rather than literally meaning that three in five have not held a conversation about anything that the political community themselves might consider political. Therefore, to help test this, we asked all respondents what they understood by “politics” and have then coded their unprompted answers; multiple answers were encouraged. The most frequent spontaneously given explanations of “politics” are shown in the chart on the next page.

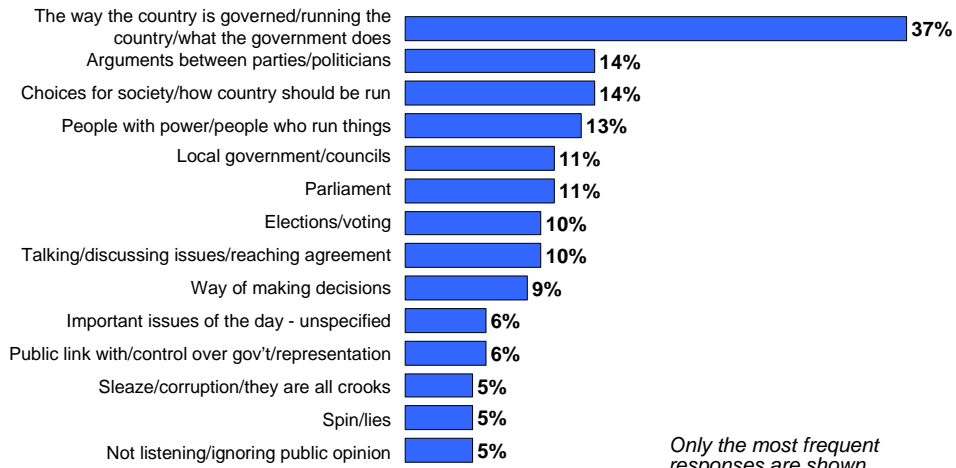
More than a third characterised “politics” as being “the way the country is governed”, “running the country” or “what the government does”, an understanding that would be easy to feel is a little remote from the everyday lives of ordinary people; and while 14% mentioned that it involves “choices for society” or of how the country is run, an equal number see it simply as being about arguments between parties or politicians.

There were none of the most frequently chosen descriptions that were significantly more likely to be chosen by those not interested in politics than by those who are interested – it is those who are interested who are most press what

they feel they mean by “politics”, both positive and negative. At the lower end of the frequency scale, though, the uninterested *were* more likely – in fact twice as likely, 7% as opposed to 3% - to hit on “not listening” or “ignoring public opinion” as a description.

What is understood by “politics”

What do you understand by “politics”?



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

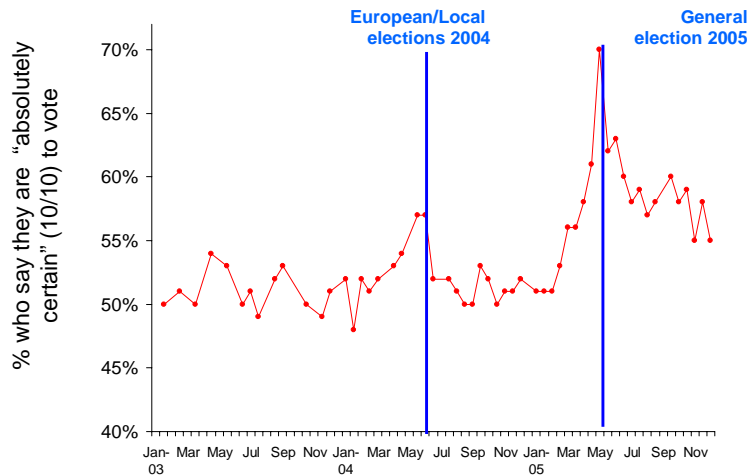
Propensity to vote

Only just over half the public, 55%, say they are absolutely certain they would vote in an immediate general election, though the percentage of the public certain to vote increases significantly with age.

The 55% who are certain to vote is a minor improvement on the 52% who said the same in last year's Audit survey, but of course is considerably lower than the proportion of the public who actually voted at the general election (61%), or who said that they were certain to vote in surveys conducted over that period.⁶

Propensity to vote: 2003 – 2005

How likely would you be to vote in an 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?



Base: c. 2,000 GB adults each survey except 3-4 May 2005 (c. 1,600)

Source: Ipsos MORI

As can be seen from the graph tracking MORI's fortnightly measures of propensity to vote since the start of 2003, declared certainty of voting rose to a peak at the time of both the 2004 European and local elections and (much more sharply) of the 2005 general election, then began to fall back immediately afterwards. Nevertheless, after the general election the fall-off was comparatively slow, remaining in the high fifties for several months and still at a higher level than at any time in the previous three years except for the two surveys at the European election period. This suggests that the effect is not simply the making up of minds to vote in an impending election as it approaches, but a deeper effect by which either the political interest that an election engenders or the changes in political circumstances following that election convince some adults that they would vote in the hypothetical situation of an immediate general election. It is therefore, it would seem, a genuine measure of an aspect of political engagement and not merely a behavioural predictor.

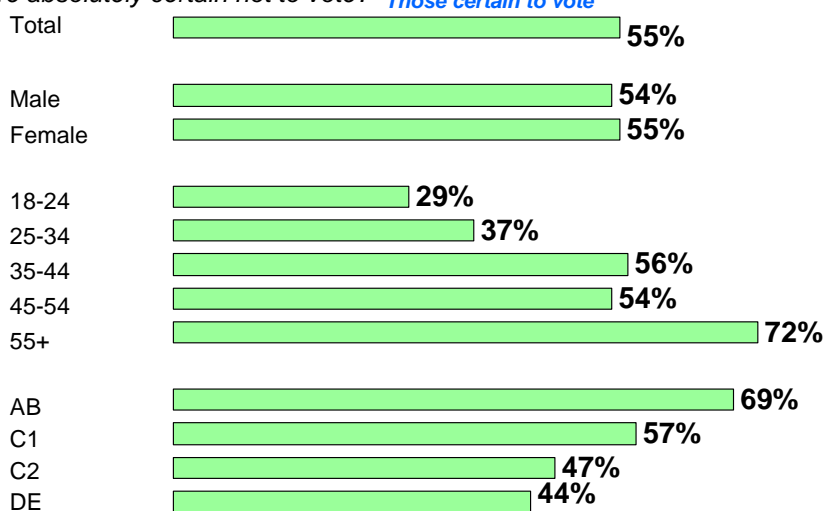
⁶ MORI's surveys over the month between the announcement of the election date and polling day, using the same propensity to vote question as is used in the Audit surveys, found an average of 61% "absolutely certain to vote", matching the eventual turnout; but the number who said that they were certain to vote in the final pre-election poll was as high as 71%, and most of the other polling companies found similar figures.

As with a number of other indicators, the most striking difference in willingness to vote is by age. Nearly three quarters of adults aged 55 or over (72%) say that they are absolutely certain that they would vote in an immediate general election, while only 56% of 35-44 year olds, 37% of 25-34 year olds and 29% of 18-24 year olds say the same.

There is also a wide gap in propensity to vote by ethnic group (56% of white respondents, but only 23% of black respondents and 34% of Asian respondents said they were absolutely certain to vote), and a slightly narrower one by social class (ABC1s being more likely to be certain to vote than C2DEs by 63% to 45%).

Propensity to vote

*And how likely would you be to vote in an immediate general election, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 means you are absolutely certain to vote and 1 that you are absolutely certain not to vote? **Those certain to vote***



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

Those in deprived areas are also considerably less likely to vote than their more affluent counterparts: 44% are certain to vote in the most deprived areas, 54% in average (“middle England”) and 60% in the least deprived neighbourhoods. Similarly, those in urban areas are less likely to vote than those in mixed or rural areas (52% compared to 58% and 63% respectively). Notably, there is no appreciable difference in the likelihood of men and women voting, despite the greater interest in politics amongst men discussed above.

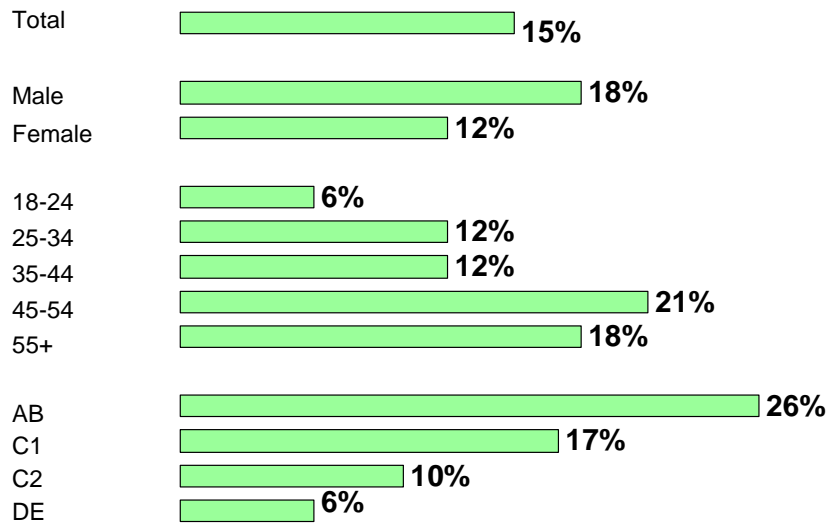
Contacting elected representatives

One in six (15%) say that, in the last two or three years, they have presented their views to a local councillor or MP.

The overall figure of 15% does not represent a significant change on the number of people who contacted their representatives in 2004 (17%), nor the 2003 figure of 13%. Moreover, the measure is one that is included in MORI's fortnightly surveys, and the average has been steady at about 15% for a number of years.

Contacting elected representatives

*And which 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: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

The middle class are more likely to take advantage of the opportunity to contact their elected representatives than are the working class, indeed ABs are four times as likely than DEs to do so; viewed from another angle, two-thirds of those who present their views to their councillors or MPs are ABC1s. The age difference is also striking, with those aged 45-or over almost three times as likely as 18-24 year olds to have attempted to put their views across.

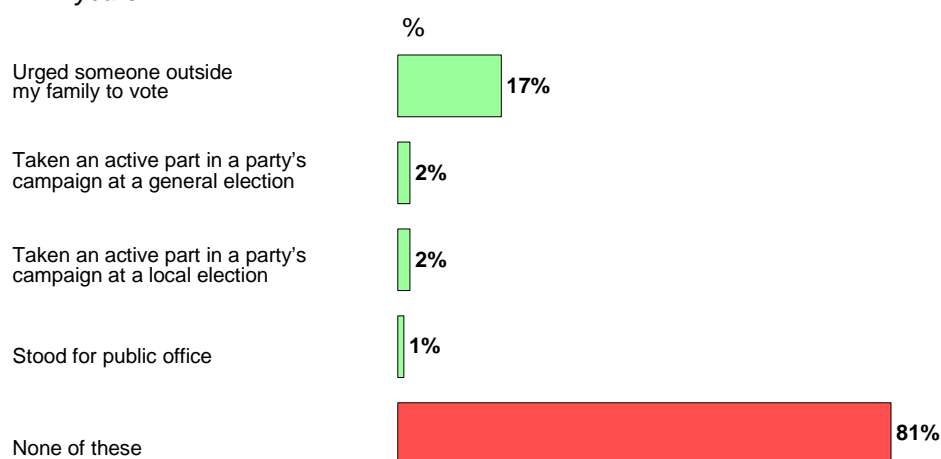
Electoral activism

Only 19% of the public are classified as “electoral activists”: the remaining four in five take no active part in the electoral process beyond voting (if they do even that). These figures are the same as in 2004.

The only one of the four activities measured which is not confined to a tiny minority is having urged somebody outside the family to vote, which around one in six of the public say they have done in the last two or three years. There has been no increase in this figure since 2004, despite there having been a general election this year. It seems likely that respondents interpret “the last two or three years” fairly loosely, and that most of those who in the 2003 and 2004 surveys said they had urged somebody else to vote did so at the 2001 general election, rather than at intervening local, European or devolved elections; this implies that the level of activity in the 2005 election was the same as had been the case in 2001 (which, of course, shared the same disappointing level of turnout).

Electoral activism

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



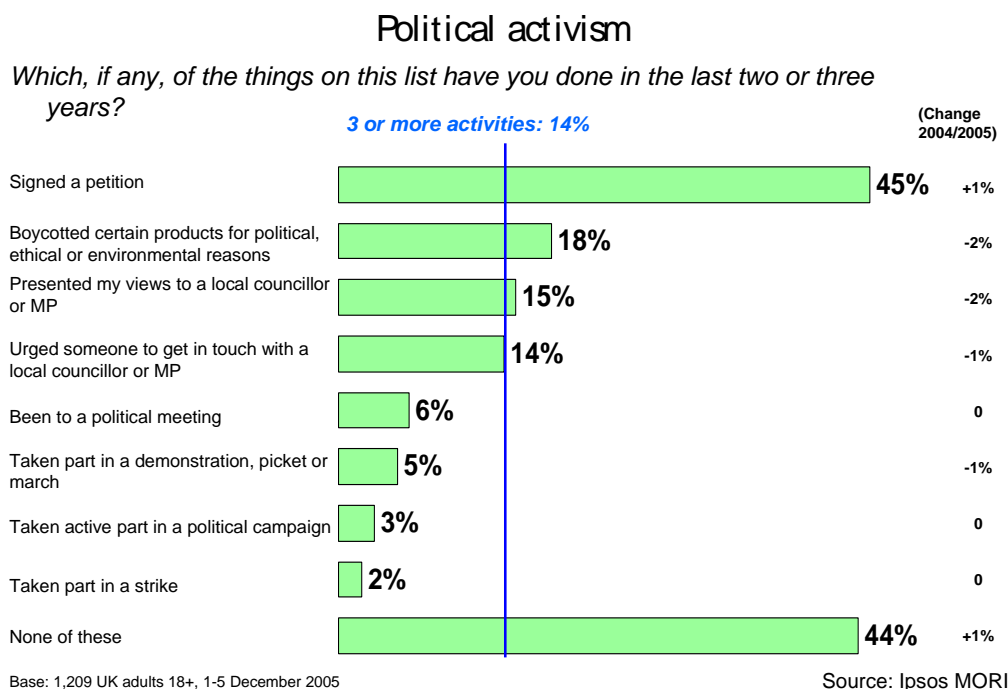
Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

The demographic pattern of electoral activism is much the same as for other aspects of political engagement, except that it tails off among the oldest age group, probably reflecting the failing of social networks among the elderly, especially those living alone (who ther

Political activism

One adult in six, 14%, is classified as a ‘political activist’, defined as having done at least three from a list of eight political activities (excluding voting and other directly election-related activities, which are measured in other indicators).



This is a slightly (but not significantly) lower figure than last year’s finding of 16%. Indeed, there has not been a significant shift in any of the activities mentioned since 2004. More than half the public have done at least one of these in the past few years, but 45% have done none.

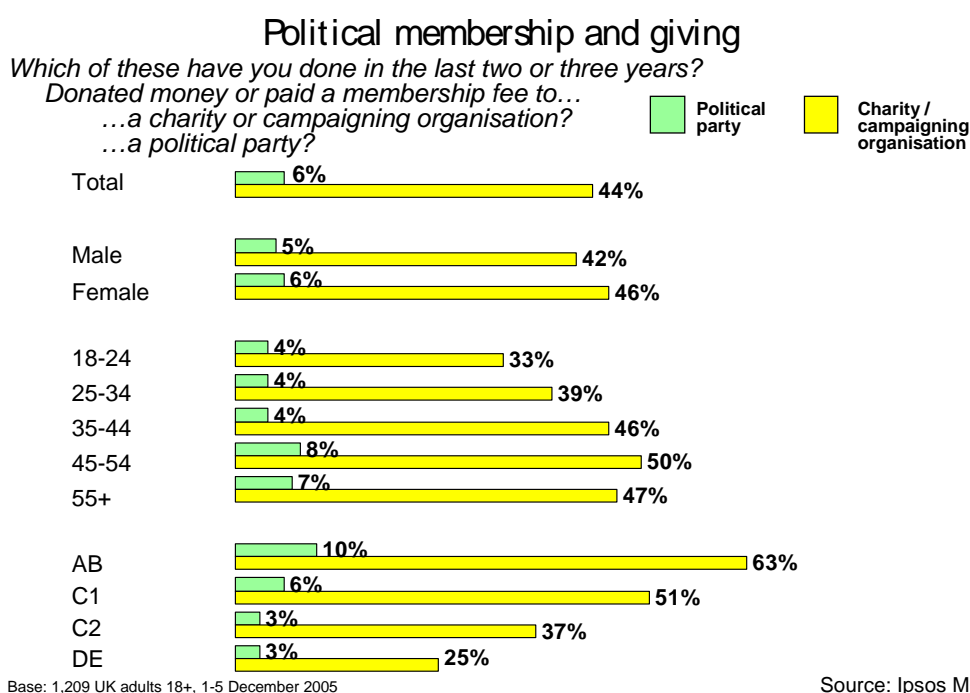
There is no significant difference between men and women in their likelihood of being political activists (14% of men and 13% of women in the survey are so classified), but there is a substantial age effect, with 22% of the most active group, those aged 45-54, coming within the definition, but only 9% of 18-24 year olds and indeed only 12% of those aged 65-and-over clearing the same hurdle.

As in the past, having signed a petition is much the most widespread of the eight activities measured – almost half the public say they have done this, whereas not much over one in six have done the next most frequent item on the list, having boycotted a product for political, ethical or environmental reasons. The difference in behaviour by age is much less for signing a petition than for the other activities listed: as many as 40% of 18-24 year olds have signed a petition, not far below the average of 45%, but on none of the other seven activities do more than 6% of the youngsters say they have been active.

Political membership or giving

A little less than half the public have paid to join or given money to a political party, charity or campaigning organisation – but the balance is firmly against the parties: only 6% have donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party; by contrast 44% have done the same for a charity or campaigning organisation.

Both of these figures remain statistically unchanged from the 2003 and 2004 Audits. Two-thirds of those who have given to political parties (4% of the public) have also given to charitable or campaigning organisations, but more than half (53%) say they have not donated or paid a membership fee to either in the last two or three years.



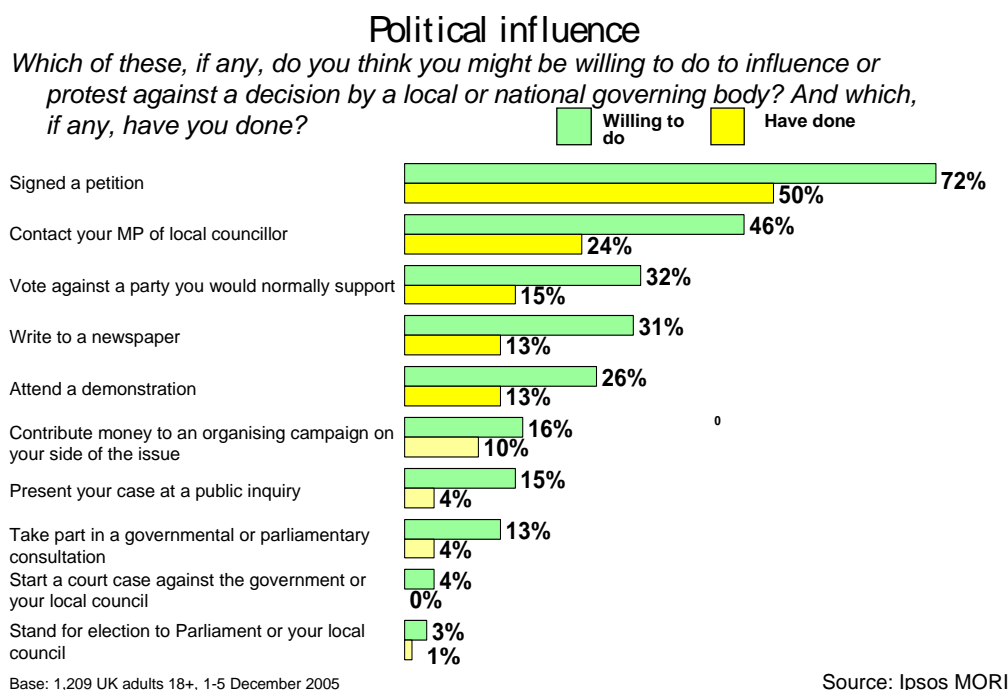
Overall, women are more likely than men to donate to charity (42% as compared with 46%); men, in contrast, are more likely to have donated money to a political party than women (5% as compared with 6%).

In general, older people are more likely to donate to charity (with 45-54 year olds the most likely to donate, at 50%). Middle class people are also more likely to donate both to charity and political causes, with some 63% of ABs donating to charity, and 10% to political parties, as compared with a quarter of DEs who donate to charity, and only 3% who donate to a political party.

Political influence

Nearly three-quarters of the public say that they would be prepared to sign a petition to influence a governmental decision, and half that they have in fact done so in the past, making it the most popular means of attempting to exert influence in both respects. A little less than half state that they would be willing to contact a local MP or councillor – though only a quarter have ever done so, and just 3% would actually stand for election themselves.

Being prepared to vote against the party one would normally support comes in third place on both scales, though only a third of voters think they would be willing to exercise their voting power in this way. The unwillingness of the remaining two-thirds to do so puts a premium on government's willingness to consult and to be responsive if it wishes to govern in line with the will of the people; but since only 13% of the public would be willing to take part in a government or parliamentary consultation, this would not necessarily be easy.



Another way to view the figures is to note that two-thirds of those who say they would be willing to sign a petition to influence a decision have indeed done so for this purpose, and a similar proportion of those who say they would contribute money have put their money where their mouth is. But only half of those who would contact a local representative, vote against their usual party or attend a demonstration have ever put that willingness into practice, while only a quarter of those who feel they would be prepared to appear at a public inquiry and a third of those who would take part in a consultation have in fact done so – but in both the latter cases, of course, opportunity as well as willingness to participate may have been lacking.

Over three-quarters of those in social class ABC1 (77%) state that they would be willing to sign a petition about a particular issue, as compared with 72% of C2s and 61% of DEs. A similar pattern exists in relation to social class across most of the measurements at this question, with those in higher social grades more likely to try to influence a governing body. For example, 63% of ABs would contact their local councillor or MP, compared with 49% of C1s, 40% of C2s and only a third (32%) of DEs.

The pattern is less clear in the case of age. In general, younger people tend to be less likely to engage in any of the activities listed, as compared with the rest of the population. However, it also appears that willingness to try to influence or protest against a governing body is lower among older people. For example, under half (45%) would contact their local MP or councillor, compared with 54% of those aged 45-54, and just a quarter (26%) would vote against the party they normally support - compared with 40% of those aged 45-54, and 43% of 35-44 year olds. These findings provide an interesting contrast with the overall proportion of people who plan to vote – where the percentage of people certain to vote is much more closely aligned with age.

As with other Audit measurements, ethnicity provides a notable point of difference in responses. Black respondents in particular are much less likely than their white or Asian counterparts to say they would engage in any of the activities listed in order to influence or protest against a decision by a local or national governing body⁷. For example, white respondents are some three times more likely to say they would sign a petition than their black counterparts (74% as compared to 24%), more than twice as likely to say they would contact their MP (47% to 21%), write to a newspaper (32% compared to 17%) or to attend a demonstration (26% compared with 12%). Interestingly, the difference between Asian and white respondents here is less marked - Asian respondents are almost as likely to say they would contact their MP as white people (45% and 47% respectively, vote against a party they don't usually support (32%, as compared with 33% of white people), and or attend a demonstration (17%, as compared with 26% of white people).

⁷ It should be noted that the relatively small number of both Black and Asian respondents means that these results are indicative rather than representative.

C: Efficacy and Satisfaction

The final two indicators are attitudinal – one measuring the public’s perception of the efficacy of political participation, the other overall satisfaction with the way the system works. Neither has moved significantly in the past year.

Three further questions were asked in this survey to explore further what the public wants from the political system. Two of these were also asked in December 2003, looking at the extent to which the public want to have a say, and feel they currently do have a say, in how the country is run. The third, covering the qualities the public thinks are important in MPs, is new to the Audit but replicates questions asked in the British Social Attitudes survey in the 1980s and 1990s.

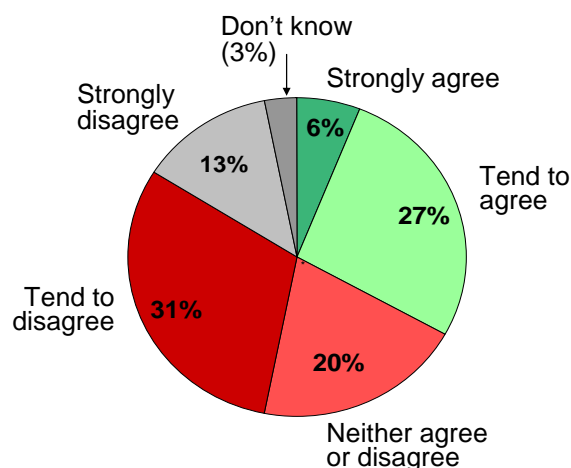
“Getting involved works”

One third of the public (33%) believe that “When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the country is run”, and 44% disagree.

Comparison with the figures from the previous two Audits suggest that the trend here is towards people becoming less likely to agree with the statement: in 2003 some 37% agreed that they can really change the way the country is run, and the 2004 figure was 36%.

Efficacy of participation

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
“When people like me get involved in politics, they can really change the way that the country is run”



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

As with other measurements in the Audit, responses are differentiated by social class. For example, 42% of those in class AB agree that they can really change the way the country is run, as compared with under a third (30%) of those in class C1 or C2, and 32% of DEs.

Interestingly, however, responses here are less strongly distinguished by age than other measurements, with between 30% and 35% across all age groups agreeing that they can really change the way that the country is run. The story is similar in the case of ethnicity, which in other Audit questions provided a major point of difference in responses: 34% of white respondents agree that they can make a difference, as compared to 38% of black and 30% of Asian respondents. (This finding matches the conclusions of MORI's post-election survey for The Electoral Commission among Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) adults⁸, using a

⁸[http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/ECBMEReportFINAL\(2\)_18810-13883__E__N__S__W__.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/ECBMEReportFINAL(2)_18810-13883__E__N__S__W__.pdf)

bigger and more robust sample of BMEs, which also concluded that although BME groups were less politically active and less politically engaged than whites in many respects, they were nevertheless more likely to believe in the efficacy of voting than the rest of the public.)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the strongest points of difference here are related to other feelings about the political system: those who are interested in politics are also more likely to believe they can make a difference (42%, compared with 22% of those uninterested), as are those who claim to be knowledgeable about matters political (some 44% of whom agree with the statement, compared with 26% of those who claim to know little or nothing).

Having a say

Over two-thirds (67%)⁹ of people agree that they would like to have a say in the way that the country is run; however a significantly smaller proportion (23%) actually agree that they currently *do* have a say.

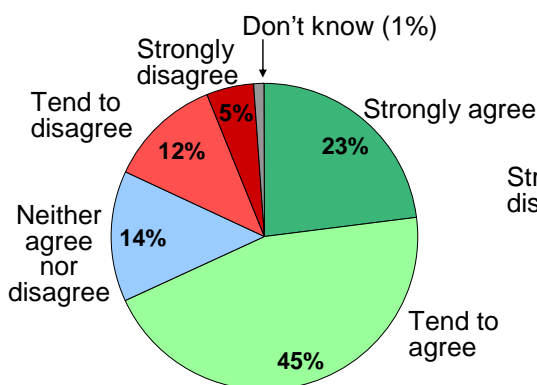
The proportion of people who want to have a say in the way the country is run is consistent with the findings from the 2004 Audit (67%), but both these findings are significantly lower than the 2003 Audit (75%).

There has been a fall off in the proportion of the public who believe that they have a say in how the country is run at the moment between December 2004 and December 2005 (from 27% to 23%). The difference is bigger when we examine the proportion who disagree with this statement: in December 2004, 55% of the public disagreed that they had a say in how the country is run (including 19% who strongly disagreed); by December 2005, this has risen to 62%¹⁰ (and 30% who strongly disagree). While the reasons for this change are not entirely clear it is noticeable that the change has been greater among those dissatisfied with the government than those who are satisfied with it, and it may well reflect either disillusionment at some particular government decision or disappointment with the result of the general election.

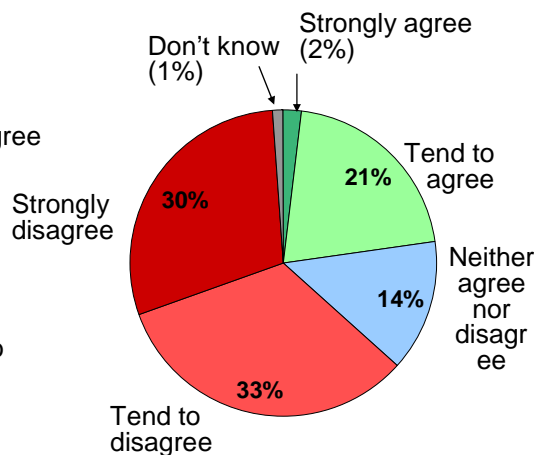
Having a say

To what extent do you agree with the following statements..?

...I want to have a say in the way the country is run



...I have a say in how the country is run at the moment



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

⁹ The graphic below shows the percentage who agree to be 48% because of the effect of computer rounding.

¹⁰ The graphic below shows the percentage who agree to be 63% because of the effect of computer rounding.

Social class plays a role in responses to the questions here, with those in class AB most likely both to *like* a say in the way that the country is run (82%, compared with 53% of DEs), and who believe that they already have a say running the country at the moment (27%, compared with 19% of C2s and 20% of DEs).

Despite their greater propensity to vote, those aged 55+ are actually *less* likely to either want to have a say in how the country is run than respondents slightly younger than themselves (some 67% agree, compared with 71% of those aged 35-54), or to believe that they currently have a say (24% aged 55 or above believe that they have a say, compared with 30% of those aged 45-54). In both measurements, however, 18-24 year olds are less likely than other groups to want or believe that they have a say in the way the country is run (63% and 19% respectively).

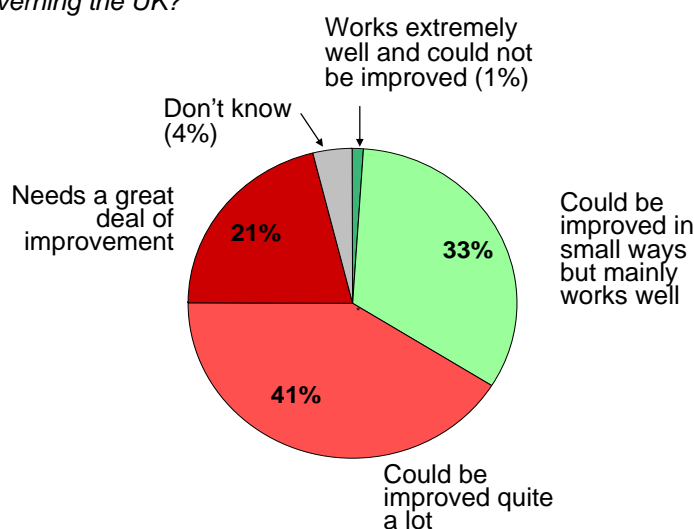
The present governance system

As in 2004, just a third of the public (34%), feel that the present system of governing Britain works extremely well or could only be improved in small ways. These findings represent a small but statistically significant fall in satisfaction over the two-year period covered by the three Audit surveys: in 2003, 36% agreed that the present system worked mainly or extremely well.

Confidence in the present system of governance varies to a small degree between age groups, but not in a consistent way, with those aged 55+ and 35-44 the least likely to say that the system works mainly or extremely well (32% respectively) and those aged 18-34 and 45-54 the most likely (37% and 38% respectively).

The present system of governing the UK

Which of the following statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing the UK?



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005

Source: Ipsos MORI

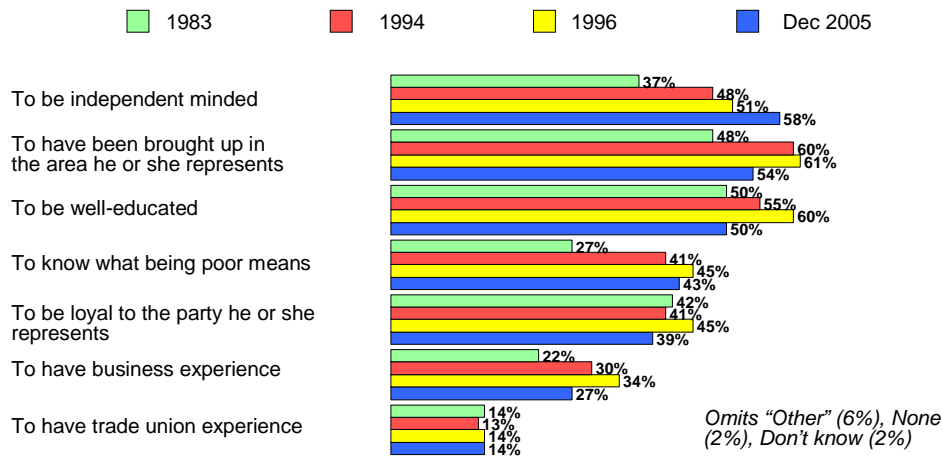
The middle classes also tend to be more likely to feel that the system works extremely well, or could only be improved in a small number of ways: some 38% of ABs feel this way, as do 37% of C1s, compared with 32% of C2s and 30% of DEs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this pattern is repeated when we look at the level of education: under a third (30%) of those with no formal qualifications feel that the system works extremely or mainly well, compared with 40% of those with A levels or above.

Important qualities for MPs

More of the public say it is important for an MP to be “independent minded” (58%), than choose any of the six other options offered. In the 1980s and 1990s, being local to their constituency and being well educated were ranked ahead of independent-mindedness by the public, but these both now trail a little behind, though still important to half the public.

What We Want From MPs

Now thinking of MPs, which of the qualities shown on this card would you say are important for an MP to have?



Base: 1,209 UK adults 18+, 1-5 December 2005;
British Social Attitudes surveys (NCSR) 1983, 1994, 1996

Source: Ipsos MORI

The three British Social Attitudes surveys in which this question was previously asked were all conducted under the different political context of the Thatcher and Major Conservative governments, and changes in the answers chosen may reflect political issues of the day as well as an abstract ideal of a perfect MP. To “know what being poor means” was rated less important in the 1980s than either in the 1990s or now, while “to have business experience” grew in prominence somewhat in the 1990s but seems now to have receded towards its earlier lower level.

The increased desire for independent minded MPs, however, is clear, while demands for loyalty to the party he or she represents have fallen. Nevertheless, the public do not necessarily see a contradiction between these two desires: although those who want MPs to be independent minded are marginally less likely to demand party loyalty than those who do not, the difference is not a massive one: 36% of those calling for independence, compared to 43% of the rest of the public, chose loyalty to party as also being important.

There are some interesting demographic differences in the public’s view of the ideal MP. Women are considerably less likely than men (44% as against 56%) to feel it is important that an MP should be well educated, and set a little less store by having business experience (24% rather than 30%); but they think it slightly

more important that MPs should have brought up in the area they represent (chosen by 57% of women, as many as thought being “independent minded” was important), and are also more likely than men to mention the importance of party loyalty. In terms of class differences, ABs are much more likely to feel being independent minded is important (71%) than party loyalty (39%), while DEs give the two qualities almost equal importance (44% and 42%).

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Appendices

MORI