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An audit of political engagement 2

Research report, March 2005



This is the second annual audit of political engagement undertaken jointly by The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society.

Like the first, it measures the extent and nature of the UK public's political engagement and does so via our annual Political Engagement Poll, but it is a smaller, update audit and focuses on how political engagement has changed in the last 12 months.

This report and the first audit are available at: www.electoralcommission.org.uk and www.hansardsociety.org.uk and in hard copy from The Electoral Commission or Hansard Society offices.

The Electoral Commission is an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters, and regulating political parties.

The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan educational charity, which exists to promote effective parliamentary democracy. The Society 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.



Contents

Preface	3
1 About this report	5
2 Political engagement indicators	7
3 Overview	17
4 Conclusions	25
Appendices	
Appendix A – Technical details	27
Appendix B – Political Engagement Poll ‘topline’ findings	29



Preface

This is the second audit of political engagement undertaken jointly by The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society. Like the first, it measures the extent and nature of the UK public's political engagement and does so via our annual Political Engagement Poll, but it is a smaller update audit and focuses on how political engagement has changed in the last 12 months.

The past year has seen a number of academic and social research projects providing further insights into political engagement and numerous seminars, conferences and several new inquiries have considered potential solutions to disengagement. Additionally, there have been nationwide European Parliamentary elections, local elections in many parts of England and throughout Wales and a referendum in the North East of England.

All of these have added to our knowledge of electoral participation, but political engagement is much more than just voting. This report looks at several different facets of political engagement and comments on each of this year's six indicators. It also draws on further detailed statistical analysis of the first Political Engagement Poll. This analysis provided us with some clear pointers about what 'drives' engagement and which of the 16 indicators used in the first audit should be repeated in this update.

As last year, we do not seek to offer solutions. Rather, we have written this report to enhance the evidence base for those involved in facilitating greater levels of engagement. Certainly, the Commission and the Society have found the two audits invaluable in understanding contemporary dynamics in political engagement as we take forward our respective programmes of work.

We also hope that this report contributes useful material to advance the debate about what might be done to increase public participation in UK politics and generate better

4

understanding of Parliament and the democratic process. 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.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the expertise and assistance provided by the MORI team. While overall responsibility for the content of this report rests with us, we have drawn heavily on MORI's own analysis of the survey data.



Sam Younger
Chairman, The Electoral Commission



Lord Holme
Chairman, Hansard Society

1 About this report

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

The indicators

1.1 This year’s audit report makes use of six indicators selected from the 16 we used last year. Our selection was informed by the detailed statistical analysis conducted for us by MORI, published in the report *Rules of Engagement?*¹ The analysis used factor, regression and cluster analysis to provide a deeper understanding of political engagement and the factors that make people likely to vote and to take part in other political activities. MORI’s report, published in August 2004, is available to download from www.electoralcommission.org.uk/about-us/publications.cfm and www.hansardsociety.org.uk/programmes/parliament_and_government/roe.

1.2 This research provided us with some useful pointers about which indicators were worthy of repeating on a regular basis. In the light of these, we decided to repeat two indicators from each of our three main broad groupings:

- **knowledge and interest:** percentage feeling they know about politics, percentage interested in politics;
- **action and participation:** percentage ‘absolutely certain’ to vote at a forthcoming UK Parliamentary general election,² percentage politically ‘active’; and
- **efficacy and satisfaction:** percentage believing that ‘getting involved works’, percentage who think that the present system of governing works well.

¹ MORI (2004) *Rules of Engagement? Participation, involvement and voting in Britain*, commissioned by The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society.

² Hereafter referred to as a ‘general election’.

6

1.3 The indicators have been supplemented by other survey questions including measures of people's interest in issues and their desire to have a say in how the country is run. Some of these questions were also asked in the first audit enabling us to measure change over time.

Research methodology

1.4 The Political Engagement Poll involved interviews with a representative sample of 2,065 adults aged 18+ across the UK. Some of the questions were asked of about half the sample which means that several of the tables and figures in this report are based on 1,107 UK adults.

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

1.6 The full topline survey results can be found in Appendix B of this report. Further technical information relating to the interpretation of the data, social class definitions and statistical reliability is also provided.

1.7 The Political Engagement Poll was designed to provide data at a UK-wide level. As such, it cannot substitute for targeted research in particular parts of the UK and among particular sub-groups – for example, among young people or black and minority ethnic communities (other Electoral Commission and Hansard Society research projects have looked in detail at engagement among these and other groups).

1.8 All survey findings and comparisons of findings between the first and second audits are subject to sampling tolerances depending, in part, on sample sizes. This means that not all differences are 'statistically significant' and, where they are not, we cannot be certain that there has been any real change. Full details are provided in Appendix A.

Next steps and future audits

1.9 Following publication of this report, we will log the full survey dataset at the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) archive at the University of Essex to make it available for others to use. As part of our respective research programmes, we may undertake further research projects investigating electoral and political engagement and we will publish the findings from these on our websites. We would also be grateful for information regarding research by others on this subject, via info@politicalengagement.org.uk.

1.10 Looking further ahead, this update audit will be followed by a similar one in 2006. A second 'full' audit, similar in scale and content to the first, is scheduled for 2007.

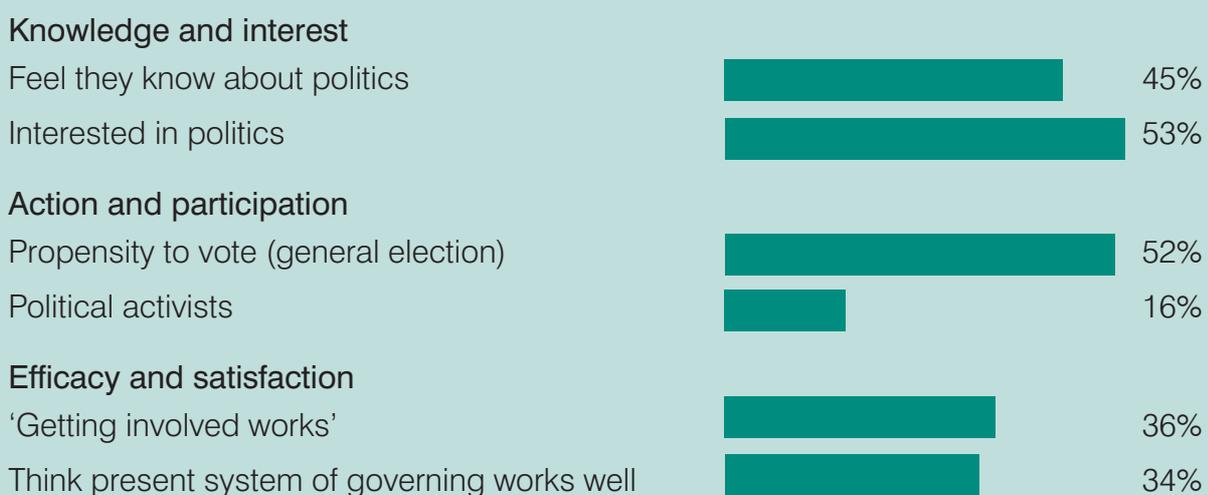
2 Political engagement indicators

This section of the report provides detailed commentary on the six 'update' indicators of political engagement. There are two indicators from each of the three broad groups we identified in last year's audit: knowledge and interest, action and participation, efficacy and satisfaction.

Summary of indicators

2.1 The six indicators used in this year's audit are shown in Figure 1. They show that most of the public do not feel they know much about politics, barely a majority find it of interest and only a minority are politically active. Slightly more than half say they are 'absolutely certain' to vote at an immediate general election and political activism remains very much a minority pursuit. A third feel that the present system of governing Britain works well and a similar proportion believe that 'When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the country is run'.

Figure 1: Political engagement indicators – audit 2



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

Source: MORI

Knowledge and interest

2.2 The first of the three groupings of indicators is people's knowledge of, and interest in, politics and as part of this year's audit we updated two indicators: perceived knowledge of politics and interest in politics. Both figures are higher this time but not quite to a statistically significant degree meaning, essentially, a finding of no change (full details on statistical significance are provided in Appendix A).

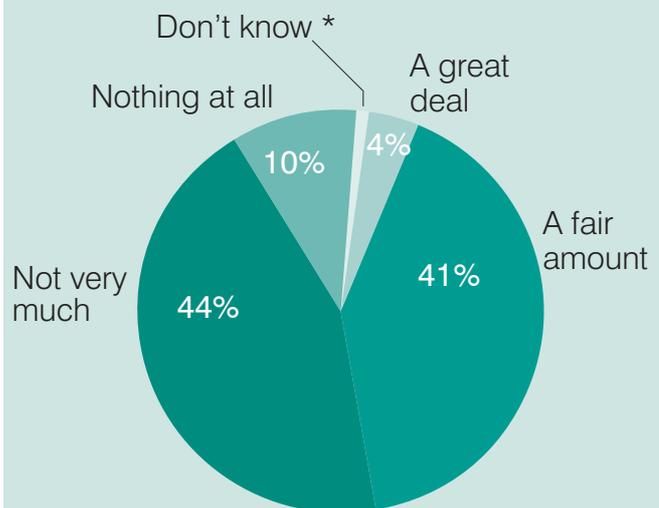
Perceived knowledge of politics

More than half of the public feel they know either 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about politics (Figure 2). Forty-five per cent say they know 'a fair amount' or more (although only 4% are confident that they know 'a great deal') compared to 42% recorded in the previous audit. The increase is not statistically significant.

2.3 Men are very much more likely to feel knowledgeable about politics than women: 58% compared to 33%. At the same time, there is much less difference by age. While the youngest age group (18–24 year olds) feel less knowledgeable than those in older age groups, even among older age groups those who do not feel they know much outnumber those who have some confidence in their knowledge. A third, 34%, of members of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities feel knowledgeable about politics, compared to 46% among all adults.

Figure 2: Perceived knowledge of politics

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



Base: 1,107 UK adults 18+, December 2004

Note: * denotes <0.5%

Source: MORI

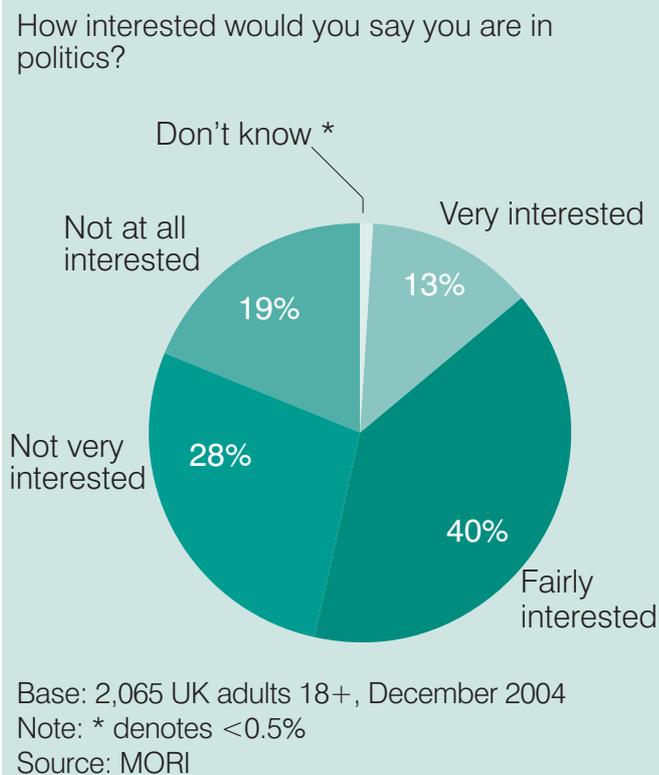
2.4 The strongest link is with educational attainment. Of those who have achieved A-levels or above, two-thirds (65%) feel they know 'a fair amount' or a 'great deal' (8% say they know 'a great deal'). This compares with just over a quarter (28%) among those with no formal qualifications.

2.5 This differential is reflected in other factors that are related to educational attainment. There is, for example, a strong difference by occupational class: professional/non-manual workers (ABC1s) are more likely to feel knowledgeable than manual workers/non-working people (C2DEs) by 58% to 31%.

Interest in politics

Just over half the public, 53%, say that they are fairly or very interested in politics (Figure 3). This is marginally higher than the 50% figure found by the previous audit. Again, the difference is not statistically significant and both figures are well below the 59% recorded in both April 1997 and May 2001.

Figure 3: Interest in politics



2.6 Interest in politics is, unsurprisingly, closely associated with professed knowledge of politics and the same demographic patterns mostly apply: interest is higher among men than

women (61% as compared to 45%), higher among ABC1s than among C2DEs (66% to 39%) and lower among BME groups (44%). It also increases with educational attainment.

2.7 There is also a strong geographical aspect to the pattern of interest in politics. This is less a regional effect – although differences here are also detectable – than it is a neighbourhood effect, with interest in politics markedly lower in areas with greater deprivation. Only 35% of residents in the most deprived 10% of areas of the country³ say they are interested in politics while 69% say the same in the most affluent 10% of areas.

2.8 This is not simply because residents in the more affluent areas tend to be from the demographic groups which are more interested in politics. Only 26% of C2DEs in very deprived areas are interested in politics but 64% of C2DEs in very affluent areas say the same. In fact, C2DEs living in very affluent areas are more likely to be interested in politics than ABC1s in very deprived areas.

2.9 As with knowledge of politics, there is an age effect when it comes to interest in politics but it is less dramatic than might be supposed, with much less contrast between the young and old than is found when comparing other indicators such as propensity to vote.

³ Our analysis uses the Index of Multiple Deprivation which is an official classification of wards across England on the basis of their 'deprivation', calculated by combining statistics from a number of different sources. For the purposes of analysing the Political Engagement Poll data by this variable, the deprivation scores of all of MORI's sampling point base units were ranked, with the most deprived 10% classed as 'very deprived', the next 15% 'deprived', the middle 50% 'middle England/average', the next 15% 'affluent' and the least deprived 10% as 'very affluent'.

Action and participation

2.10 This year's audit focuses on two of the six indicators used last year: being 'absolutely certain' to vote at an immediate general election and broad political activism. The overall impression from a comparison of the two audits is that there has been no significant change since the first audit, although there has been an increase in some political activities.

Propensity to vote

Just over half, 52%, assess their certainty of voting at an immediate general election as 10 on a 10-point scale where 10 is 'absolutely certain'. This represents little improvement on the 51% found in the previous audit.

2.11 This applies equally if the strictness of the definition is relaxed: in the December 2003 survey, 65% rated their chances of voting at 8 or better on a 10-point scale; now the figure is 67%.

2.12 If this number were to vote in practice⁴ and the turnout at the general election were really to be 52%, it would of course be even lower than the record low recorded at the 2001 general election. However, there have, of course, been several subsequent measures in regular opinion polls providing a more contemporary picture and past experience suggests that the number 'certain' to vote will increase as the election approaches, meaning that our

December 2004 measure should not be seen as a prediction of turnout levels.

2.13 The same phenomenon can be observed on a smaller scale during 2004. While the 'absolutely certain' to vote figure is steady year-on-year, it has not been static in the interim: MORI's fortnightly surveys throughout the year repeated the same measure,⁵ and found one period of significant divergence from the average (shown in Figure 4). In every survey bar three, the percentage absolutely certain to vote was within a plus-or-minus-two percentage point range of 52%. On one isolated occasion it fell slightly below this range but, far more importantly, it was 57% during the two surveys falling on either side of the 10 June close of poll for the European Parliamentary and local elections.

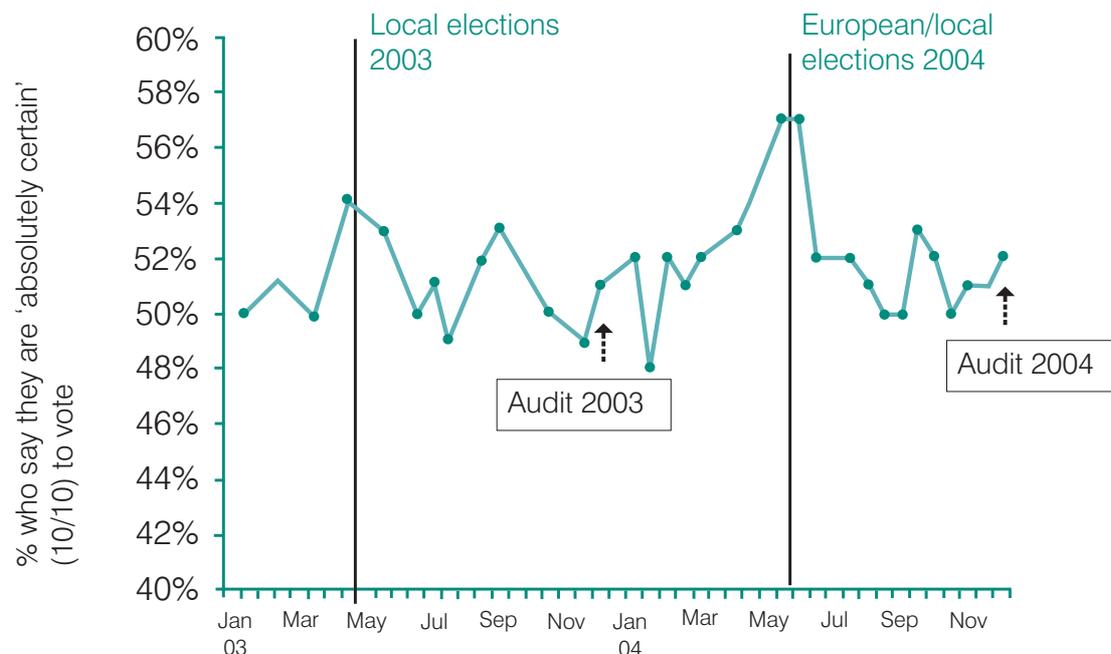
2.14 In terms of differences among demographic groups, older people and professional/non-manual workers are more certain to vote. Younger age groups and BME communities are less certain (see Figure 5 on page 12). This is, however, one of the few indicators where women score as highly as men (only two points lower – 51% against 53%). This pattern broadly matches other evidence on actual turnout patterns at elections.

4 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 in terms of likelihood to vote (58%) was the best predictor of turnout (59%).

5 These monthly trend figures are based on surveys conducted only in Great Britain, excluding Northern Ireland, while the Political Engagement Poll includes a sub-sample in Northern Ireland (the overall percentage 'absolutely certain to vote' for the UK has been the same as the percentage for Great Britain alone).

Figure 4: Propensity to vote: 2003–4

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, 2003–4

Source: MORI

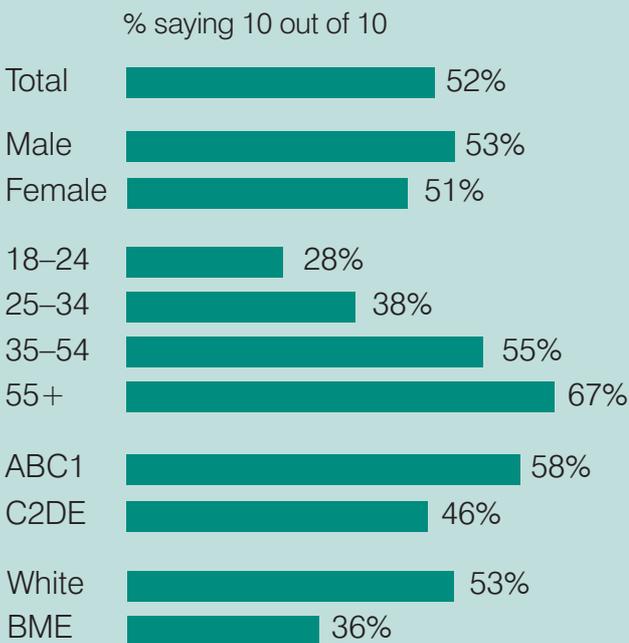
Political activism

One adult in six, 16%, are 'political activists', defined as having done at least three from a list of eight political activities (excluding voting and other election-related activities) in the last two or three years. This is higher, but not statistically significantly so, than last year's finding of 14%.

2.15 While the overall trend is one of little change, there have been detectable, and in some cases statistically significant, increases in the more frequent activities (see Figure 6 on page 13). The proportion who say they have signed a petition in the past two or three years has risen from 39% to 44%. Similarly, in

Figure 5: Propensity to vote at an immediate general election

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: 2,065 UK adults 18+, December 2004
Source: MORI

December 2003 half the public (49%) said they had not done any of the eight listed activities. This has now fallen to 44%.

2.16 There have also been increases in the numbers boycotting products for political, ethical and environmental reasons (from 18% to 20%) and urging somebody else to get in touch

with a local councillor or MP (up from 14% to 16%) but these are not statistically significant.

2.17 Participation in those activities demanding more time, commitment or energy are much rarer: only 6% have taken part in a demonstration, picket or march, up from 5% last time (not statistically significant) and 3% have been involved actively in a political campaign, representing no change.

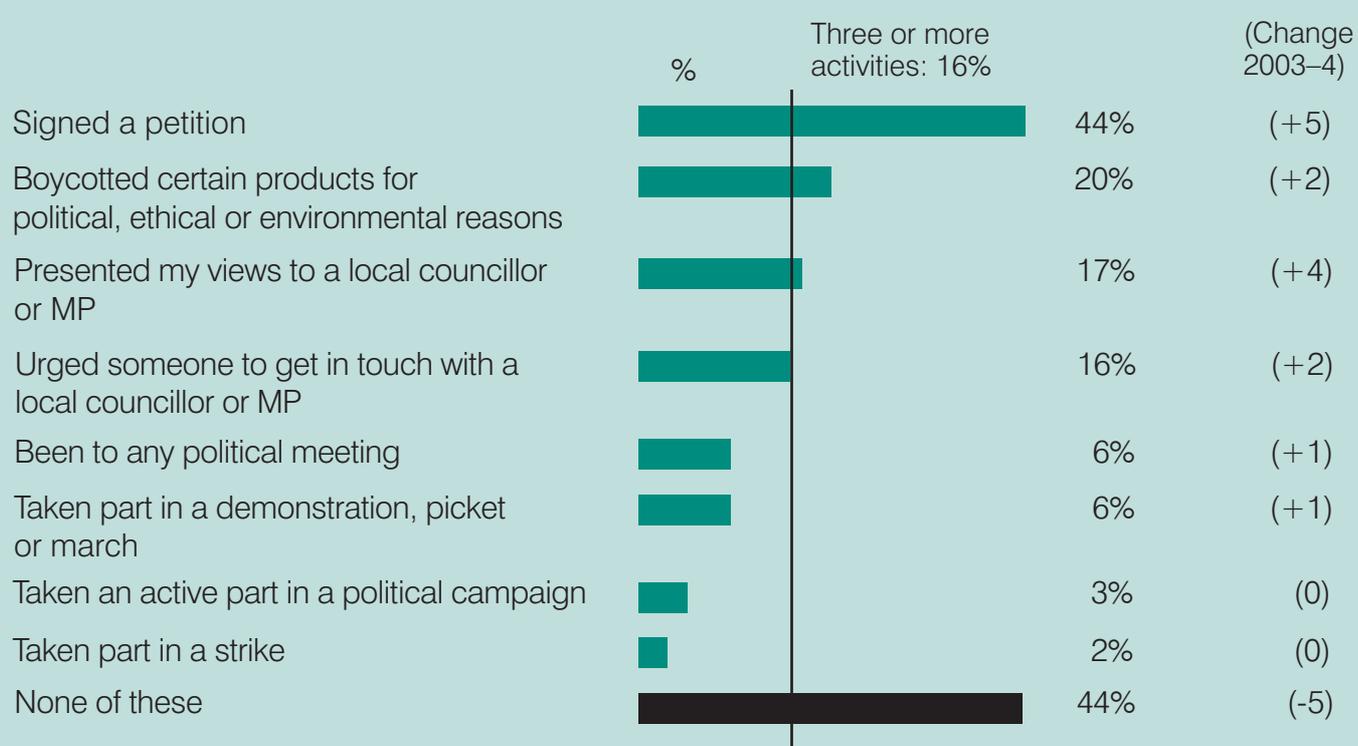
2.18 The young are much less likely to be active than their older counterparts: 9% of 18–34 year olds said that they had done three or more of the things on the list, compared to 20% of 35–54 year olds and 24% of 55–64 year olds, though activism falls away again among the oldest (65 and over) age group, to 10%. 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 than anybody else to have taken part in a demonstration, picket or march (11% against 6% overall) and to have been to a political meeting (8% against 6% overall).

Efficacy and satisfaction

2.19 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 of governing Britain works. Neither has changed significantly in the past year.

Figure 6: Political activism

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



Base: 1,107 UK adults 18+, December 2004
Source: MORI

‘Getting involved works’

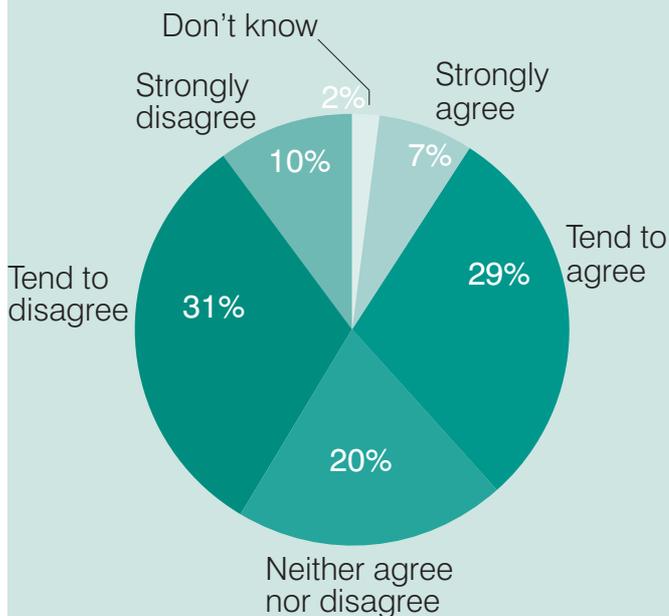
Just under two-fifths of the public, 36%, believe that ‘When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the country is run’, and just over two-fifths, 41%, disagree. The remaining one in five express no opinion either way (see Figure 7 overleaf). The figures are little different from the previous audit, when they were 36% and 40% respectively.

2.20 Views on participation are fairly consistent among demographic sub-groups of the population although those without formal qualifications or from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to agree than others: 31% and 34% compared with 36% overall. Regional differences are also quite marked, with adults in Scotland, the South of England and London more likely to agree with the statement than disagree.

Figure 7: 'Getting involved works'

To what extent do you agree or disagree ...?

'When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the country is run'.



Base: 1,107 UK adults 18+, December 2004
Source: MORI

Ratings of the present system of governing Britain

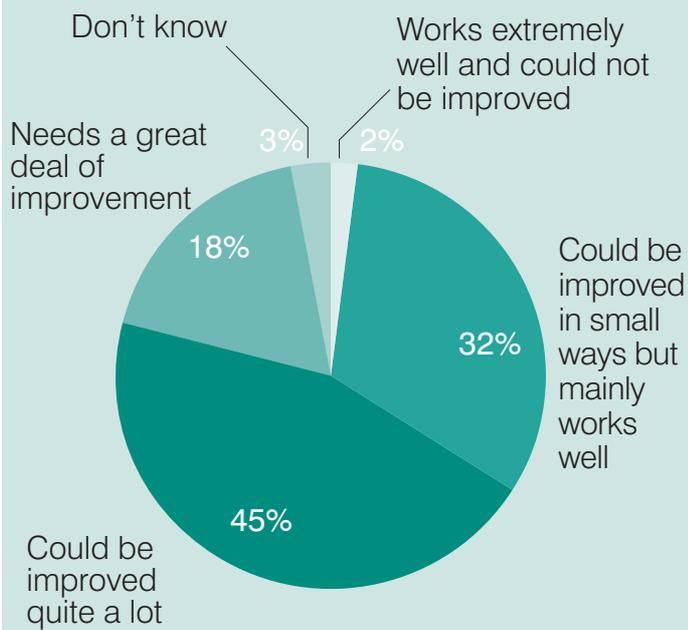
Just a third of the public, 34%, feel that the present system of governing Britain⁶ works well and only 2% see no room for improvement (Figure 8). While not a statistically significant fall from the last survey, this represents the lowest level of approval since April 1997 (see Table 1 on page 16).

2.21 Perhaps contrary to popular wisdom, the young are slightly more likely to feel that the system is satisfactory than their older counterparts – it seems their lower levels of participation are not caused by alienation. But ABC1s are almost half as likely again as C2DEs to think that the system works well, and those who are interested in politics or feel knowledgeable about it are also more likely to feel the system works well.

⁶ This question was asked as '...the system of governing Britain' in England, Scotland and Wales (to ensure consistency with past measures) and as '...the system of governing the UK' in Northern Ireland.

Figure 8: Ratings of the system of governing Britain

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



Base: 1,107 UK adults 18+, December 2004

Source: MORI

2.22 Table 1 below provides trend data for this indicator since 1973 and shows that the current level of approval is at the lowest level since April 1997, but is higher than three of the four measures taken in the 1990s. As we observed last time, opinion on the system of governing Britain is likely to be linked to support for the governing party.

Table 1: 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	April 2003	Dec 2003 Audit 1	Dec 2004 Audit 2
Works extremely well and could not be improved	5	4	3	2	4	3	2	2
Could be improved in small ways but mainly works well	43	29	19	26	37	42	34	32
Could be improved quite a lot	35	40	40	40	39	38	42	45
Needs a great deal of improvement	14	23	35	29	15	13	18	18
Don't know	4	5	3	3	5	3	4	3
Works well	48	33	22	28	41	45	36	34
Needs improving	49	63	75	69	54	51	60	63

Note: all figures are based on GB adults, except December 2003 and 2004 which are UK adults. Figures are percentages.
Source: MORI

3 Overview

This second annual audit of political engagement – the first ‘update’ audit – is smaller in scale than last year’s and focuses on six of the 16 indicators we used previously. It presents the same picture of political engagement identified 12 months ago: most of the public do not feel they know much about politics, barely a majority find it of interest and only a minority are politically active.

3.1 As last year, more than half the public, 54%, feel they know either ‘not very much’ or ‘nothing at all’ about politics. Many fewer, 45%, say they know ‘a fair amount’ or ‘a great deal’ and while this is an improvement on last year’s figure it is not a statistically significant one. Meanwhile, just over half, 53%, say that they are either fairly or very interested in politics – a marginally higher figure than last year (50%) but not of statistical significance. Moreover, both figures are well below the 59% recorded in both April 1997 and May 2001.

3.2 Propensity to vote is similarly unchanged. Slightly more than half, 52%, say they are ‘absolutely certain’ to vote at a forthcoming general election – a minimal improvement on the 51% figure last year. Nor is there any significant change if the strictness of the definition is relaxed: in our December 2003 poll, 65% rated their chances of voting at 8 or better on a 10-point scale, now the figure is 67%.

3.3 Political activism remains very much a minority pursuit, with just one adult in six (16%) being a ‘political activist’, a slightly, but not significantly, higher figure than last year’s finding (14%). In 2003 half the public, 49%, said they had not done any of eight activities, but the number has now fallen to 44%. At the same time, the past 12 months have seen a statistically significant increase in the number who say they have signed a petition over the past two or three years (from 39% in December 2003 to 44% in December 2004). There have also been detectable increases, albeit not statistically significant ones, in the numbers who have boycotted a product for political,

ethical or environmental reasons (18% to 21%) and urged somebody else to get in touch with a local councillor or MP (14% to 16%).

3.4 The remaining two political engagement indicators measured the public's perception of the efficacy of political participation and overall satisfaction with the way the system of governing the country works. Again, neither has moved significantly. Just a third of the public, 34%, feel that the present system of governing Britain works well, down slightly from 36% last year. A similar proportion (36% and unchanged from last time) believe that 'When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the country is run'.

3.5 In keeping with numerous polls that measured the public's almost unchanged support for the various political parties over the past 12 months, a basic comparison of the audit polls in 2003 and 2004 suggests that political engagement in the UK has remained stable. This comes despite what many in Westminster consider to have been an eventful and, at times, controversial year in politics (although, of course, politics is wider than Westminster alone).

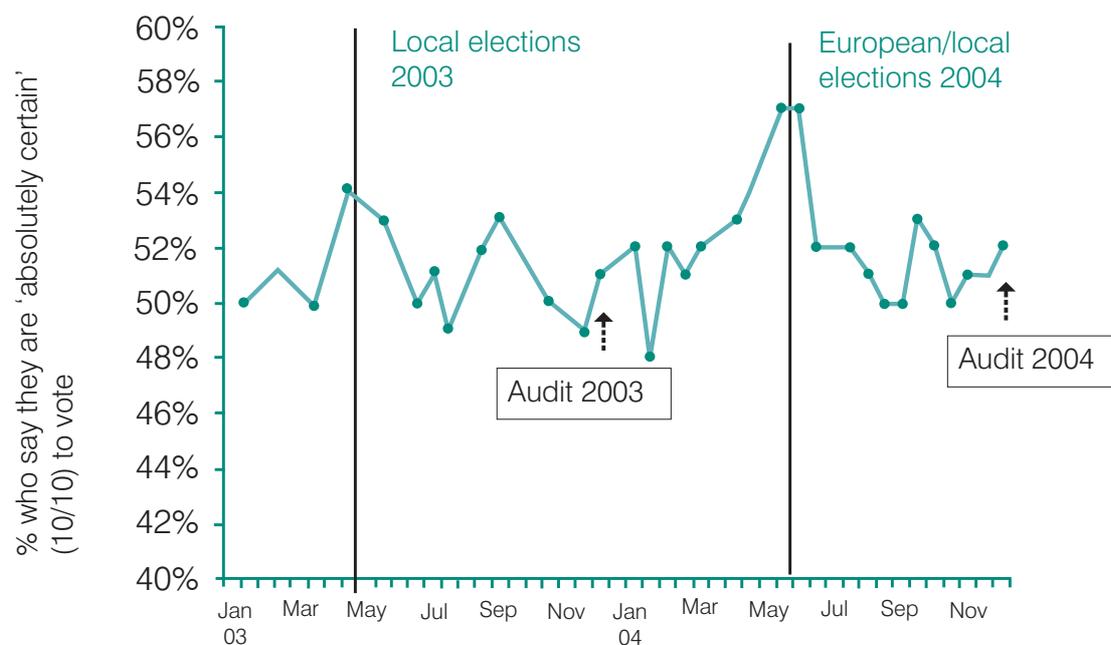
3.6 But while the headline findings from our Political Engagement Poll suggest a stable level of political engagement, a closer examination of public opinion throughout the year points to a more complex picture. As part of this year's audit we have worked with MORI to explore the dynamic in public attitudes within, as well as across, the 12-month period and have found that two of our six 'core' indicators – propensity

to vote at a forthcoming general election and interest in politics – have fluctuated.

3.7 The public's reported likelihood of voting at an immediate general election, as measured by MORI's fortnightly surveys, was steady throughout the year except for a single short period around the European Parliamentary elections and local government elections in June 2004, when two successive surveys found that propensity to vote was higher – not dramatically so, but to a statistically significant degree – than at any other point in the last two years (shown again in Figure 9). At the same time, the European Parliamentary elections themselves recorded a turnout increase: 38.5% across the UK, up from 24.0% in 1999.

Figure 9: Propensity to vote: 2003–4

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, 2003–4
Source: MORI

3.8 In the first audit we reported the lowest level of interest in politics since the question was first asked by MORI in 1973. We also cautioned that the fall could be as much a seasonal effect as a reflection of a distinctive political climate: our Political Engagement Polls are undertaken in December in contrast to the previous

springtime surveys which have largely been taken during or immediately after election campaigns. Since 2003 we have supplemented our trend data with several measures within the same year, something not measured by survey evidence before (shown in Table 2 overleaf).

Table 2: Interest in politics 1973–2004

How interested would you say you are in politics?

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

Note: All figures are percentages. * denotes <0.5%.

Base: 1973–1997 GB adults, 2001–4 UK adults.

Source: Political Engagement Polls – December 2003 and 2004. All other measures from MORI except May 2002 NOP/Electoral Commission (telephone) poll, Nov 2003 ICM/Electoral Commission (telephone) poll.

3.9 A separate ICM/Electoral Commission survey following the June 2004 European Parliamentary elections also measured public interest in politics. While not directly comparable to our indicator and the trend data shown in Table 2, this did allow comparison with past British Social Attitudes survey measures dating back to 1986 (shown in Table 3 on page 22). Intriguingly, while our two December audits have found historically low levels of interest in politics, the June 2004 survey measure found quite the opposite.

3.10 In addition to being asked about their level of interest in politics, respondents to our

Political Engagement Poll were asked about their interest in local issues, national issues and international issues. In every case, interest in issues is higher than in politics and this is even more striking when analysing the percentage of those who said they were very interested. Twice as many people are very interested in national issues as in politics and even more are very interested in local issues (see Table 4 on page 23).

3.11 It seems clear that many of those who say they are uninterested in politics do so because of how they interpret the concept. According to the Political Engagement Poll, 32% of people

	Nov 2003	Dec 2003 Audit 1	Mar 2004	Dec 2004 Audit 2
	9	11	13	13
	42	39	37	40
	30	32	18	19
	19	18	17	19
	*	0	*	*
	51	50	50	53
	49	50	50	47

are interested in local issues but not in politics. An important issue here is what people think 'politics' to be. Our first audit found that only a minority link 'politics' with their own personal involvement; it tends to be seen as something done by, and for, others or as a system with which they are not particularly enamoured. It is closely identified with 'politicians' and with the formal political process, leading us to conclude last year that there was an urgent need to rebuild the relevance of 'politics' as a concept and as an activity worth taking part in. Similarly, previous research has suggested a need for politicians and others to make better 'cause and effect' connections between elections and issues.⁷

3.12 While rebuilding the relevance of politics, and establishing better linkages between 'politics' and the problems that politics ought to solve, may go a long way towards boosting political and electoral engagement, this is not in itself sufficient. *Rules of Engagement?*⁸ found that:

- Political engagement is multifaceted, and various aspects apparently act independently of each other.
- There is no particular facet which acts as a proxy for the others or as an indicator of political engagement.
- There is no 'silver bullet' solution to tackling political disengagement.

3.13 Similarly, numerous studies have identified a range of different factors affecting electoral turnout. These include socio-demographics (especially age), the marginality of the contest, strength of party identification, interest in the campaign, caring who wins, the perceived differences between the parties, the 'rationality' of the individual and administrative factors (including the voting system and the time and method of voting).⁹

7 Marshall, B. and Williams, M. (2003) 'Turnout, attitudes to voting and the 2003 elections'. Paper prepared for EPOP Conference, Cardiff, September 2003; MORI (2005) *Enhancing Engagement* for the Hansard Society.

8 MORI (2004) *Rules of Engagement? Participation, involvement and voting in Britain*, commissioned by The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society.

9 See Franklin, M. (2002) 'The Dynamics of Electoral Participation' in LeDuc, L., Niemi, R. G. and Norris, P. (Eds) *Comparing Democracies 2: New Challenges in the Study of Elections and Voting*, Sage Publications, London; Siaroff, A. and Merer, J. W. A. (2002) 'Parliamentary Election Turnout in Europe since 1990', *Political Studies* 50 (5); King, S. (2002) *Briefing paper: Turnout in Britain and the rest of the world*, paper prepared for The Electoral Commission/Constitution Unit 'Turnout' conference, June 2002 and Denver, D. (2003) *Elections and voters in Britain*, Palgrave, New York.

Table 3: Trends in interest in politics, 1986–2004

Year	Percentage with 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in what is going on in politics
1986	29
1989	27
1990	29
1991	32
1994	32
1996	31
1997	30
1998	29
1999	28
2000	33
2001	31
2002	29
2003	30
2004*	37

Note: * 2004 data sourced from ICM/Electoral Commission telephone survey of 8,512 UK adults 18+, 11–29 June 2004.

Source: 1986–2003 data from British Social Attitudes series (face-to-face interviewing across Britain, summer/autumn) and quoted in C. Bromley, J. Curtice, B. Seyd (2004) *Is Britain facing a crisis of democracy?*

3.14 The fluctuations we have found throughout the past 12 months and the increased turnout at the 2004 elections show that political engagement can be stimulated and that the 'mobilising agencies' identified by Pippa Norris¹⁰ play an important role in this regard.

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

The Electoral Commission's research found that the June 2004 elections reached more people than five years ago and that the public felt better informed. Analysis by ICM and Professor John Curtice found that people were more likely to have voted if they had been contacted by a political party, if they felt they had received the right amount of information about party policies, or if they perceived there to be a 'big difference' between the parties on offer.¹¹

3.15 The corollary of there not being a single 'silver bullet' solution to tackling either political disengagement or electoral abstention is that a substantial arsenal is needed. Political behaviour, knowledge and attitudes are not synonymous and do not work in a linear way. Hence, propensity to vote is distinct from and not exclusively driven by knowledge (real or perceived), satisfaction with the political system and its personnel, or belief in the efficacy of action. Better civic education may therefore be a positive action in itself but it will not lead naturally to increased turnout; nor will MPs better satisfying their constituents. Also, engagement and activism in the non-political sphere do not necessarily follow from these actions or necessarily lead to voting.

3.16 Similarly, our most recent Political Engagement Poll finds a fairly complex picture. While 23% of those who say they never vote think the system needs a great deal of improvement, so do 16% of those who always vote. Moreover, women are much less likely to say they are interested in politics than men or to

11 Boon, M. (ICM) and Curtice, J., *The 10 June elections: The public's perspective*, paper presented at The Electoral Commission's September 2004 seminar on participation and turnout at the European Parliamentary elections.

Table 4: Interest in 'politics' and 'issues'

How interested would you say you are in the following...?				
	Politics %	Local issues %	National issues %	International issues %
(Base:)	(2,065)	(1,107)	(1,107)	(1,107)
Very interested	13	32	25	22
Fairly interested	40	49	52	44
Not very interested	28	14	17	26
Not at all interested	19	4	6	8
Don't know	*	0	0	0
Interested	53	81	77	66
Not interested	47	18	23	34

Note: * denotes <0.5%

Base: UK adults 18+, December 2004

Source: MORI

claim to be knowledgeable about it, but just as likely to be certain that they would vote in an immediate general election and to describe themselves as 'always' voting at general elections.

3.17 Furthermore, while there are some marked age differences across our indicators, we have found very little difference by age in terms of the numbers who have urged somebody else to vote; 14% of 18–24 year olds have done so, 20% of 35–54 year olds and 15% of those aged 55+. It seems that the reluctance of the young to vote is not related to any unusual lack of encouragement among their own age group.

3.18 As well as highlighting the complexity of political engagement, *Rules of Engagement?*¹²

¹² MORI (2004) *Rules of Engagement? Participation, involvement and voting in Britain*, commissioned by The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society.

also revealed significant differences in the extent and nature of engagement within and between various socio-demographic groups. Employing statistical cluster analysis, the report was able to divide the public into nine categories according to the different facets of political engagement including propensity to vote. These ranged from a small group of highly engaged 'enthusiasts' through to a larger group of 'passive onlookers' and the equally numerous 'utterly disengaged'. Political disengagement may be most obviously evident among the young and those from socially excluded communities, but it is by no means confined to those groups.

3.19 One of the key themes identified in last year's audit and again this year is that, contrary to claims of political 'apathy', people are interested in the issues that affect them, their families and the world around them. Moreover,

Table 5: Having a say

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

	I want to have a say in how the country is run	I have a say in how the country is run at the moment
	%	%
Strongly agree	22	3
Tend to agree	45	24
Neither agree nor disagree	15	17
Tend to disagree	12	36
Strongly disagree	5	19
Don't know	1	1
Agree	67	27
Disagree	17	55

Base: 1,107 UK adults 18+, December 2004.
Source: MORI

as last year, we found a strong aspiration to have a say in how the country is run (see Table 5). Two-thirds, 67%, of adults take this view (although this has fallen from 75% over the course of the past 12 months without a clear reason why). At the same time, we found a third of people, 34%, wanting to have a say but not feeling that they currently do.

3.20 Significantly, the feeling of having less of a say than one would prefer increases with affluence. While people in affluent areas are only a little less likely than those in deprived areas to feel they have no say at the moment, they are nevertheless more likely to want a say in how the country is run. This points to a

'participation divide' that has been detected in other recent research.¹³ This divide is further evidenced by our finding that ABC1s are twice as likely as C2DEs to take advantage of the opportunity to contact their elected representatives: two-thirds of those who present their views to their councillors or MPs are ABC1s. The age difference is even more startling. According to our Political Engagement Poll, seven in eight of all those contacting MPs or councillors will be aged at least 35, making it that much harder for elected representatives to form a balanced view of the needs and preferences of their constituents.

¹³ See Curtice, J. and Seyd, B. 'Is there a crisis of political participation?' (2003) in Park, A. et al (Eds) *British Social Attitudes – the 20th report*, Sage Publications, London, and ippr (2004) *The State of the Nation: An Audit of Injustice in the UK*.

4 Conclusions

Our second audit has found political engagement to be both a complex and a fluid phenomenon. It is multifaceted, 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 (shown in Table 6 overleaf), other measures taken at different points during the year reveal a more fluid picture.

4.1 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 fluctuations 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 continue to give us clues about patterns in engagement.

4.2 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.

Table 6: Political engagement indicators, audit 1 and audit 2

	Audit 1 (survey: Dec 03) %	Audit 2 (survey: Dec 04) %	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

Note: * none of these changes are statistically significant.

Appendix A

Technical details

Survey methodology

The Political Engagement Poll, undertaken by MORI, involved interviews with a representative sample of 2,065 adults aged 18+ across the UK. Interviewing took place face-to-face in respondents' homes, between 2–6 December 2004 in Great Britain and between 14–21 December in Northern Ireland. The data have been weighted to the known population profile.

Interpretation of the data

It should be noted that MORI interviewed a sample, not the entire population of the UK. 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.

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 7 (overleaf) illustrates the predicted ranges for different sample sizes and percentage results at the '95% confidence interval'.

For example, with a sample size of 2,065 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 or between different surveys, this may highlight differences. These may be 'real', or they may occur by chance (because not everyone in the population has been interviewed). To test if a 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 8 (overleaf).

Table 7: 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
1,007	2	3	3
1,500	2	2	3
2,065	1	2	2

Source: MORI

Table 8: 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	6	9	10
400 and 400	4	6	7
500 and 1,000	3	5	5
1,000 and 1,000	3	4	4
1,000 and 1,500	2	4	4
2,000 and 2,000	2	3	3

Source: MORI

Appendix B

Political Engagement Poll 'topline' findings

- Poll conducted by MORI for The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society.
- These 'topline' findings are based on 2,065 UK adults, 18+, although some questions were asked of 1,107 adults.
- Interviews across Great Britain were conducted face-to-face, in-home, between 2–6 December 2004.
- Interviews in Northern Ireland were conducted face-to-face, in-home, between 14–21 December 2004.
- 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 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?

	%
10 (absolutely certain to vote)	52
9	6
8	8
7	5
6	3
5	7
4	2
3	3
2	2
1 (absolutely certain not to vote)	11
Don't know	1
Refused	0

Q2. 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	17
Written a letter to an editor	7
Urged someone outside my family to vote	17
Urged someone to get in touch with a local councillor or MP	16
Made a speech before an organised group	17
Been an officer of an organisation or club	13
Stood for public office	1
Taken an active part in a political campaign	3
Helped on fund-raising drives	30
Voted in the last general election	61
Flown on business overseas	8
Flown on a business trip within the UK	8
None of these	23

Q3. And which of these, if any, have you done in the last two or three years?

	%
Been to any political meeting	6
Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	20
Contacted my local council	28
Discussed politics or political news with someone else	38
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation	44
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party	6
Done voluntary work	28
Helped organise a charity event	21
Served as a local magistrate	*
Served as a school or hospital governor	2
Signed a petition	44
Taken an active part in a party's campaign at a general election	2
Taken an active part in a party's campaign at a local election	2
Taken part in a demonstration, picket or march	6
Taken part in a sponsored event	22
Taken part in a strike	2
Voted in the last local council election	50
None	16
Don't know	*

Q4. – Q7. How interested would you say you are in the following...?

	Very interested	Fairly interested	Not very interested	Not at all interested	Don't know
Politics	13	40	28	19	*
Local issues	32	49	14	5	*
National issues	25	52	17	6	*
International issues	21	44	26	8	*

Note: Figures are percentages.

Q8. How much, if anything, do you feel you know about politics?

	%
A great deal	4
A fair amount	41
Not very much	44
Nothing at all	10
Don't know	*

Q9 – Q10. 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
When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the country is run	7	29	20	31	10	2
I want to have a say in how the country is run	22	45	15	12	5	1

Note: Figures are percentages.

Q11. Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing Britain (asked as '...the country' in Northern Ireland)?

	%
Works extremely well and could not be improved	2
Could be improved in small ways but mainly works well	32
Could be improved quite a lot	45
Needs a great deal of improvement	18
Don't know	3

Q12. Which of these statements best describes your attitude towards voting at general elections?

	%
I always vote	64
I sometimes vote	20
I never vote	11
I've not been eligible in the past to vote	4
Don't know	*

Base: GB adults aged 18+

**Q13. And now can you tell me the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement?
'I have a say in how the country is run at the moment.'**

	%
Strongly agree	3
Tend to agree	24
Neither agree nor disagree	16
Tend to disagree	36
Strongly disagree	19
Don't know	1



HANSARD
SOCIETY

The Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the United Kingdom by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters and regulating political parties.

The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan educational charity, which exists to promote effective parliamentary democracy. The Society 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.

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