Audit of Political Engagement 15

The 2018 Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Electoral events over the last few years may have acted as 'electric shock therapy' for political engagement. Compared to the first Audit in 2004, people's certainty to vote and interest in and knowledge of politics are all higher, but their sense of political satisfaction and efficacy have declined

- The share of the public saying they are certain to vote is at a new Audit high of 62%, 11 points higher than in the first Audit in 2004. The number saying they are interested in politics is seven points higher than in Audit 1 (57% vs 50%), knowledgeable about politics 10 points higher (52% vs 42%), and knowledgeable about Parliament 16 points higher (49% vs 33%).
- But, compared to 2004, satisfaction with the system of governing Britain is down seven points (36% to 29%), and people's sense of being able to bring about political change (our efficacy measure) is down three points (37% to 34%).

Public engagement has generally improved in the year immediately after every general election. 2018 repeats this pattern

- Compared to last year, certainty to vote is up three points to 62%, interest in politics four points to 57%, self-assessed knowledge of politics three points to 52%, knowledge of Parliament four points to 49%, and the number of people who have undertaken a political activity in the last year six points to 75%.
- 27% feel they have influence locally, up four points from last year. This is the highest score for this indicator in the Audit series.
- This year saw some notable rises in political engagement among some traditionally less engaged groups, namely those in social class DE, BME respondents and women.

Youth engagement has risen but only in line with the population overall: a tremor, not a quake

- Among 18-24s, certainty to vote rose five points from last year to 44%, the highest in the Audit series. Compared to Audit 1 in 2004, it is 16 points higher.
- 18-24s' knowledge of politics is also up since Audit 1 in 2004, by eleven points (28% to 39%), as is their interest in politics (by six points, 35% to 41%) and their sense of political efficacy (also by six points, 35% to 41%).
- However, like the population overall, 18-24s are less satisfied with the system of governing Britain than they were at the start of the Audit series. 18-24s' satisfaction with the system of governing Britain has deteriorated by seven points since Audit 1 in 2004 (35% to 28%).

In Scotland, political engagement is mostly higher compared to 2004, but the post-independence-referendum upsurge has not been sustained, and political dissatisfaction is high

- Only 14% of Scots say they are satisfied with the system of governing Britain, a decline of three points in a year and 22 points since the first Audit in 2004.
- Compared to last year, interest in and self-assessed knowledge of politics are both up four points, to 62% and 56% respectively. But certainty to vote dropped 10 points, to 59%, below the Britain-wide average.
- Compared to Audit 1 in 2004, certainty to vote is up five points, political interest 16 points and knowledge 25 points. But people's sense of political efficacy is down nine points at 36%.

Support for the greater use of referendums has declined again

- Overall support for the greater use of referendums stands at 58%, down three points in the last year.
- Before the EU referendum (Audit 13 in 2016), this stood at 76%.

Barely more than two in 10 people think the system of governing Britain is good at performing any of its key functions, apart from protecting the rights of minority groups

- Overall, 31% think the system of governing is good at protecting minority rights. However, BME respondents are more likely than white respondents to think it is bad at doing this (40% compared to 31%).
- For other functions, the numbers of people saying the system performs well are just 26% for 'providing political parties that offer clear alternatives to each other', 22% for 'providing a stable government' and 'ensuring the views of most Britons are represented', and 21% for 'allowing ordinary people to get involved with politics'. The system is seen to be worst at 'encouraging governments to take long-term decisions': 17% think it does this.

In people's party choice, trust matters most, followed by policies and representation, with competence some way behind, but most people think political parties are just ineffective

- As the most important factor in determining their vote, 32% said whether a party 'can be trusted to keep its promises', 30% that it 'has policies I fully support', 28% that it 'represents the interests of people like me' and 20% whether it 'is the most competent'.
- Among the functions of political parties, people rate parties most poorly for their capacity to provide a way for ordinary people to get involved with politics; just 16% think they are good at this.
- Of 'leave' voters, 48% think political parties are bad at telling voters about the issues they feel are most important to Britain and how they will work to solve them, against 36% of 'remainers' saying the same.
- 50% say they were happy with the choice of political parties available to them at the June 2017 general election, 29% that there was more than one party that appealed to them at that election, and 37% that they are a strong supporter of a party.

Among different sources of news and information respondents used to inform their decision-making at the 2017 general election, party leaders' debates and political interviews were the most important

- 74% of those who used them said the party leaders' debates and political interviews were at least 'fairly important' in their decision-making, and 72% that they were influenced by face-to-face discussions or conversations with other people.
- 49% were aware of parties' printed campaign publicity, but just 34% of them said it was important in deciding whether and for whom to vote, the lowest score for any of the sources of election news and information tested.

Digital and online are still far from overtaking traditional sources of information, but sharp digital divides suggest our future democracy will be shaped by the tools used by the youngest

- News or news programmes on TV or radio were the leading source of election-related news or information at the 2017 general election: at 69%, they had a reach 20 points beyond any other source.
- 48% of the public report having undertaken no form of online political engagement in the last year.
- Age divides are stark: watching politically-related videos online was done by 43% of 18-34s but 15% of over-55s; visiting the social media account of a politician or political party by 29% of 18-34s but 12% of over-55s; sharing something politically-related online by 21% of 18-34s but 11% of over-55s.
- 55% think social media help broaden political debate by giving a voice to people who would not normally take part, and 40% that social media help break down barriers between voters and politicians and political parties.
- But 49% think social media are making political debate more divisive, and 46% that it is making political debate more superficial.

2017: YEAR IN REVIEW

JANUARY

In a speech at Lancaster House the Prime Minister set out her government's Brexit objectives, including the negotiation of 'a new, deep and special partnership with the EU'. A few days later a Supreme Court ruling against the government determined that under the UK's constitutional arrangements ministers could not trigger Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) without prior authorisation by an Act of Parliament.

Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th US President. The following day, millions of women worldwide marched in protest. Theresa May became the first world leader to meet the new President. Her extension of a State Visit invitation prompted protests, with an e-petition to stop the visit gathering nearly two million signatures in days.

FEBRUARY

Queen Elizabeth II became the first British monarch to celebrate a Sapphire Jubilee, marking 65 years on the throne.

By 498 votes to 114, the House of Commons gave a second reading to the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill. In line with the January Supreme Court ruling, the legislation authorises the Prime Minister to notify the EU of the UK's intention to withdraw from the organisation, under Article 50 TEU. Forty-seven Labour MPs joined former Conservative Chancellor Ken Clarke MP, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats to oppose the Bill. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair urged opponents of Brexit to 'rise up' and fight it.

MARCH

The European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill received Royal Assent. The Prime Minister duly invoked Article 50 TEU, paving the way for the UK to leave the EU on 29 March 2019 after the prescribed two-year period. The Prime Minister rejected the Autumn 2018 timeframe put forward by Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon for a second Scottish independence referendum.

The appointment of former Chancellor George Osborne as editor of the London Evening Standard while still an MP prompted widespread criticism.

Five people died and dozens were injured in a terrorist attack on Westminster Bridge and the Palace of Westminster. A police officer guarding the gates to the parliamentary estate was among those killed, when he was stabbed trying to apprehend the terrorist.

APRIL

Prime Minister Theresa May called for a snap general election on 8th June, stunning Westminster. Accusing opposition parties and the House of Lords of jeopardising the government's Brexit preparations, she argued that the country needed certainty, stability and strong leadership to deliver Brexit. As required under the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act, the government laid a motion before the House of Commons calling for a general election and secured for it the necessary two-thirds majority.

Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen came first and second in the first French presidential election round, paving the way for political forces of left and right to rally successfully around the 'En Marche!' candidate against the Front National in May.

MAY

The Conservatives made significant gains at Labour's expense in the local government elections, seizing control of 11 councils. UKIP lost all 145 seats it was defending. However, the Conservative Party's general election campaign, particularly the Prime Minister's 'robotic' performances on the campaign trail, came under heavy criticism. Denounced for considering a so-called 'dementia tax', just four days after launching their election manifesto the Conservatives were forced to back-track on their promise to reform social care.

All major parties temporarily suspended election campaigning when 22 were killed and over a hundred injured, most of them young people, in a terrorist bomb attack at Manchester Arena after a pop concert by US star Ariana Grande.

JUNE

After a poor election campaign, Theresa May's Conservatives lost seats at the general election while Labour gained 32 seats. The result was a hung Parliament, with the Conservatives dependent on the support of the Democratic Unionist Party to maintain a minority government.

A few days after the election, the country awoke to the haunting image of the Grenfell Tower housing block in West London engulfed by fire. Seventy-one people died in the conflagration. In the aftermath, the skyscraper's charred remains served as a stark reminder of social inequality in one of the capital's richest boroughs.

Eight people were killed and dozens injured in further London terrorist attacks, on London Bridge and Borough Market and near Finsbury Park Mosque.

JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER

The first round of substantive UK-EU Brexit talks ended without agreement on EU citizens' rights or the size of the UK's future payment to the EU to settle outstanding financial commitments.

The G20 summit discussions in Hamburg were dominated by the ongoing war in Syria. The summit also marked the first public meeting of Presidents Trump and Putin, following allegations about Russian interference in the US presidential election.

On US Independence Day, North Korea tested its first inter-continental ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States.

Sir Vince Cable was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats, unopposed, following the resignation of previous leader Tim Farron after the general election.

The chimes of Big Ben fell silent at Westminster to enable a four-year renovation programme on the famous clock tower.

The Duke of Edinburgh completed his final official engagement before retiring from public duties aged 96.

Another terrorist attack, this time in Barcelona, killed 12 people and left many more wounded after a van was driven into crowds on the popular pedestrian tourist street La Rambla.

In the United States, category-four Hurricane Harvey brought record-breaking floods and caused catastrophic damage in Texas, especially in the Houston metropolitan area.

A further provocation from the North Korean government saw it fire a missile 2,000 miles over the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido.

In a speech in Florence, the Prime Minister proposed a roughly two-year Brexit transition period to enable people and businesses to adjust to new post-Brexit arrangements in a 'smooth and orderly way'. She also promised that the UK would honour financial commitments made as an EU member so that no remaining member state would have to pay more or receive less during the current EU budget period ending in 2020.

The EU (Withdrawal) Bill survived its second reading vote in the House of Commons, despite frequent criticism that it amounted to a 'power grab' by ministers.

Angela Merkel secured a fourth term as German Chancellor following federal elections, but the radical right-wing AfD party emerged as the third-largest in the Bundestag.

Theresa May's Conservative Party Conference speech turned into a fiasco, prompting more questions about her leadership. An incessant cough, interruption by a prankster handing her a P45 and letters falling off the set behind her all overshadowed her address.

Fifty-eight people were killed and hundreds injured in the deadliest mass shooting in US history, when a lone gunman opened fire on an open-air concert crowd in Las Vegas.

Hundreds were injured in Catalonia when police tried to prevent voting in the region's independence referendum, after Spain's Constitutional Court declared the poll illegal. After the pro-independence vote, the Catalan Parliament declared independence; the Spanish government suspended the region's autonomy.

Michael Fallon MP resigned as Defence Secretary amid accusations of inappropriate behaviour towards women. A number of MPs from all parties were subject to investigation as Westminster responded to the global #MeToo movement arising from revelations about Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's alleged harassment of women in the film industry.

Priti Patel MP resigned as International Development Secretary after secretly meeting Israeli officials while on holiday.

After 37 years in power, Robert Mugabe resigned as President of Zimbabwe after a military intervention and Parliament's decision to begin impeachment proceedings.

Prince Harry announced his engagement to US actress Meghan Markle.

The UK and EU finally struck a deal allowing progress to the Phase 2 Brexit talks on transition and the future partnership. Brexit Secretary David Davis MP admitted to the House of Commons Brexit Select Committee that the government had not conducted an economic impact assessment for Brexit. Chancellor Philip Hammond said the Cabinet had not discussed its preferred final Brexit outcome. Eleven backbench Conservative MPs rebelled against the government to back an EU (Withdrawal) Bill amendment requiring primary legislation before delegated powers to implement the exit agreement could be used.

Deputy Prime Minister Damian Green resigned from the Cabinet after an investigation concluded he made 'inaccurate and misleading' statements about the findings of a police inquiry several years earlier.

INTRODUCTION

The precipitous decline in voter turnout at the 2001 general election inspired the creation of the Audit of Political Engagement. It was widely feared that the lowest turnout in 80 years would trigger a downward spiral in public interest in and engagement with the political process. The first Audit study was published in 2004. After 15 annual surveys, the state of political engagement is not one of robust health, but it has enjoyed something of a recovery, particularly in recent years.

Attitudes to politics are highly complex and often contradictory. But looking at the Audit results overall over the 15 annual studies, there is a fundamental stability that underpins the public's views of politics and the political process regardless of the ebb and flow around them. The results fluctuate from year to year, but they tend not to rise or fall dramatically. There have been periods when the indicators have been marked by a strong sense of indifference, disillusion and disengagement, particularly during the period of coalition politics after the 2010 general election. But across several indicators there has been a marked improvement in the last few Audits, with some of them scoring at the upper end of the scale recorded in the life of the study, and some scores rising to the highest ever recorded in the series.

This year's study, the fifteenth in the Audit series, is published at a time when the political scene is at its most tumultuous for decades. In leaving the European Union, the UK is pursuing the most far-reaching change in its economic and foreign relations since it joined what was then the European Economic Community 45 years ago. The UK's constitutional arrangements - the relationships between Parliament, the executive and the courts, between Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the UK, and between elected and unelected authorities - are being strained by the process. Both major UK political parties are divided on central questions, and both have leaders whose positions are subject to repeated internal bouts of questioning. In 2017, the government triggered a snap election and lost its majority, after a campaign which saw some of the largest shifts in public opinion in recent memory. The country now has a minority government for the first time since 1974. The political uncertainty – and the stakes – are uncommonly high. But against this background of political turmoil a notable feature of the Audit results is, once again, the relative underlying stability in public attitudes to politics.

In the first chapter we look at the picture of engagement after 15 Audits, comparing the situation today with that in the first Audit published in 2004. The impact of recent electoral events as a form of 'electric shock therapy' for political engagement is explored, as is the trajectory of engagement among key groups - primarily Scottish respondents in the context of the 2014 independence referendum; and younger voters, whose political engagement levels have long been a source of concern.

Looking in detail at the latest wave of results, chapter two focuses on the question of whether current political engagement levels are entirely due to the usual post-election movements or whether there is a delayed EU referendum effect in play. Following a general election which resulted in a hung Parliament, we also take a closer look, in chapters three to five, at what the public think about the system of governing Britain, how they view political parties, and the role that different forms of traditional and social media play in informing and influencing the electorate.

Guide to the results

Each annual Audit is based on a survey of the public undertaken in late winter with the report published the following spring. This fifteenth Audit report is based on a survey of the public undertaken by Ipsos MORI between 1 December

and 18 December 2017 with a representative quota sample of adults aged 18+ across Great Britain. Booster samples were included to make comparisons between England, Scotland and Wales and between the white and black and minority ethnic (BME) populations more statistically reliable. The data was then weighted to match the national population profile.

Figures in some graphs and tables may not add up to 100% as 'don't knows' or refused responses are not always included. Percentages may not always add up to exactly 100% because multiple answers were permitted for a question, or because of computer rounding.

Throughout the report we refer to previous Audits – for example, Audit 1 published in 2004, and Audits 3, 8 and 13 published in 2006, 2011 and 2016 at the same stage of the post-general-election cycle as the present survey.

Unless otherwise specified, any date associated with the Audit refers to the date of publication. For example, Audit 4 (2007) was published in Spring 2007, but the data was derived from a survey undertaken in early December 2006. Because of space constraints, particularly in the topline table results, the Audits are sometimes referred to by the acronym APE (Audit of Political Engagement) and the series number – e.g. APE4.

1. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: THE PICTURE AFTER 15 AUDITS

Improvements since the first Audit can be discerned particularly in relation to certainty to vote and interest in and knowledge of politics. Broader action and participation measures, along with satisfaction with the political system and views about the efficacy of political participation, have not changed much over the course of the Audit series.

The key indicators: 2004-2018

Six in 10 people (62%) now say they are certain to vote in the event of a general election, compared to just half (51%) who said the same in 2004. As Figure 1 illustrates, the public's propensity to vote has never been higher in the Audit series. And this trend is reflected in the successive, albeit gradual, improvements in turnout registered at each of the four general elections held since the Audit began.

A clear majority of the public (57%) also say they are interested in politics. This indicator is now seven points higher than it was in the first Audit and has scored higher only once in the Audit series (at 58% in Audit 8).

People feel significantly more knowledgeable about politics than they did a decade and a half ago: at 52%, this indicator has risen by 10 points since the first Audit. Again, only in Audit 8 (53%) and Audit 13 (55%) has people's self-assessed knowledge about politics stood at a higher level.

Knowledge of Parliament has improved even more starkly, by 16 points: almost half the public (49%) now say they feel knowledgeable about the core institution of our democracy, compared to just a third (33%) who said the same in 2004.

However, satisfaction with the system of governing Britain has declined by seven points over the life of

the Audit, to three in 10 (29%), and people's sense of the efficacy of their own involvement in national politics has marginally declined over the years, despite the recent run of close general elections and referendums.

Whether people feel influential over decision-making locally and nationally were questions asked for the first time in Audit 6 (2009). The scores on these indicators are now at the upper end of the range recorded for the series, but have improved by just two points since they were first asked, and sit at a low level of just 27% and 16% respectively. Similarly, people's desire for involvement in decision-making locally and nationally is also at the upper end of the recorded range for the series (48% and 40% respectively).

Their willingness to vote aside, most people remain political bystanders rather than active citizens. The combination of increased knowledge and particularly interest in politics, coupled with a desire for involvement, suggests there is some potential for broader improvements in public engagement. But how to harness that desire and make it a reality remains as distant and elusive as ever. A range of interventions are needed, but no politician or party has grappled sufficiently with the complexities and nuances of political engagement over the last decade to develop the required tools, not least how best to stimulate public engagement between, as well as during, general elections.

The policy focus of successive governments has tended to fall heavily on voter registration. It is this which sits at the heart of the current government's recently published five-year democratic engagement plan, '*Every Voice Matters: Building A Democracy That Works For Everyone'*. But democratic engagement is about more than voting. By adopting a narrow interpretation of political
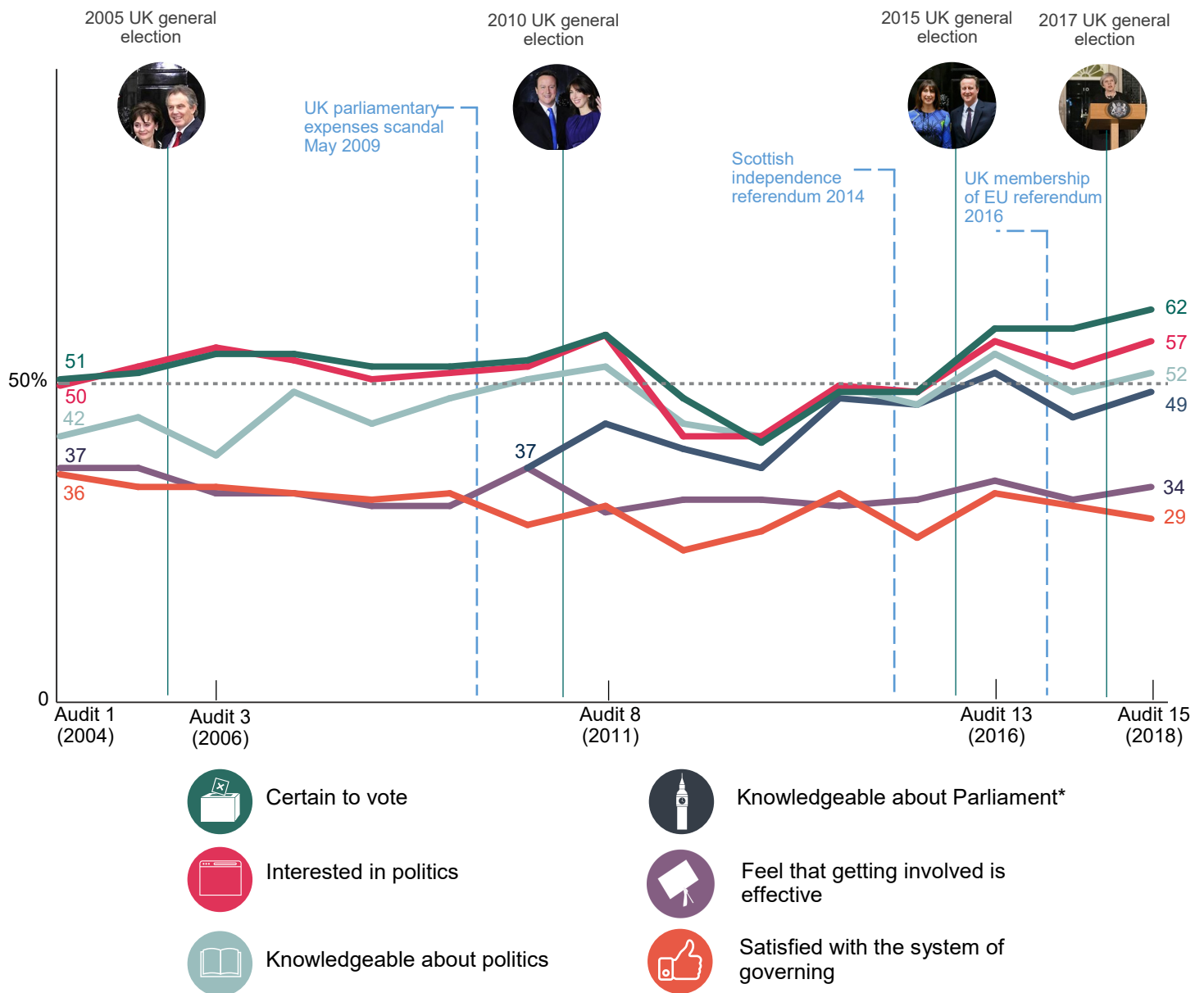
Figure 1: *% Core engagement indicators and major political events*

People's claimed knowledge about Parliament was only explored periodically prior to Audit 8 (Audits 1, 4 and 7). However, it was asked as 'The Westminster Parliament' so comparisons with later waves are only indicative.

engagement, successive governments have lacked imagination in determining a strategic response to the challenges highlighted in this and previous Audits. Too often the political reform agenda has been driven not by constitutional principle but by the requirements of party or media management.

As a consequence it fails to rise to the scale of the challenge when what is needed is a comprehensive examination of our electoral and constitutional arrangements, and the culture and practice of politics.

Electoral events: 'electric shock therapy' for political engagement

Public engagement has broadly improved after every general election since the Audit began. The key political indictors, particularly certainty to vote, and political interest and knowledge, have generally risen in the Audit wave immediately following a general election (Audits 3, 8 and 13) and the same appears to have happened again this year, as the next chapter sets out in more detail.

Across the 15 Audit waves, the political engagement pulse of the nation generally beats slowly and steadily. But as Figure 1 illustrates, the unusually high incidence of four major electoral events in the last four years – two general elections and two referendums – appears to have provided 'electric shock therapy' to the political engagement patient, driving some of the indicators to their highest-ever levels.

But, hitherto, no post-election political engagement legacy has endured; any improvements have usually dissipated within a year. Even in Scotland, where engagement levels increased significantly after the 2014 independence referendum, the improvements have not been sustained (as detailed further below).

There is thus concern that, rather than a genuine, organic and long-term shift in attitudes to political engagement, the electoral process alone is responsible for driving some of the core indicators upwards, and that these changes may not be sustained if a period of 'normal' politics is restored.

Scotland

The most remarkable change in political engagement in the Audit series occurred after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. In the Audit wave that followed (Audit 12), a 'referendum effect' was clearly discernible. The certainty to vote of Scottish respondents climbed 11 points in a year to 72%, standing 23 points higher than the British average. Interest in and knowledge about politics, and the sense of the efficacy of their own political involvement, also rose among Scots, who scored significantly more highly than British respondents as a whole. Conversely, however, they were less likely than average to be satisfied with the system of governing Britain.

As Figure 2 shows, the engagement picture in recent years in Scotland has changed quite a bit. The upsurge in engagement has not been sustained but the pattern of change is not universal or consistent across all the key indicators.

In this year's Audit, the certainty to vote of Scots has fallen by 10 points from last year to 59%, and now stands a little below the GB average (62%) but higher than it did in Scotland at the start of the Audit series (54%). In contrast, interest in and knowledge of politics has increased a little this year, by four points each to 62% and 56% respectively. Taking the longer view, both these indicators have improved dramatically over the course of the Audit series: in Audit 1 just three in 10 Scots (31%) said they felt knowledgeable about politics, and just 46% said they were interested in it.

However, although the perceived efficacy of their involvement in politics improved considerably among Scots in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, the trend line for this indicator has declined since the first Audit. In this latest study, just over a third of Scottish respondents (36%) agreed that if they got involved in politics they could change the way the UK is run. In contrast, in the first Audit in 2004, 45% agreed with this proposition; that remains the second-highest score on this indicator among Scots in the Audit series (a marginally higher 46% agreed in Audit 2 the following year).
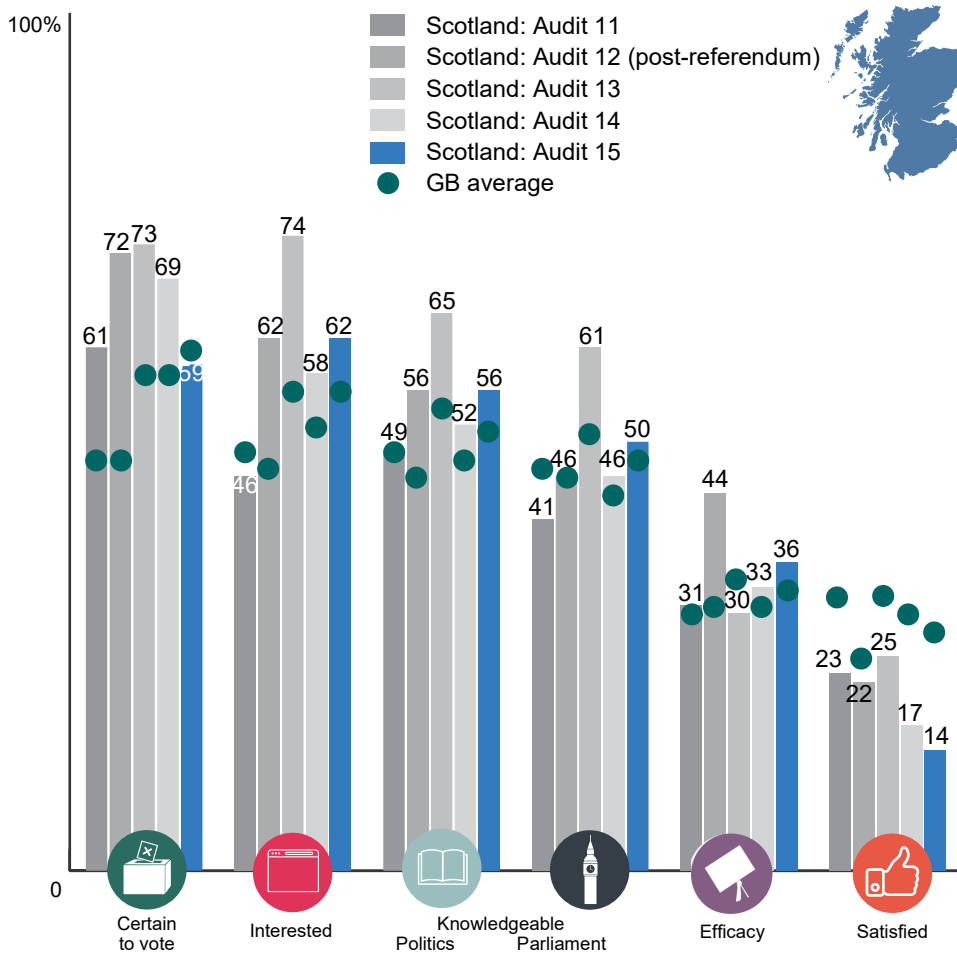
Figure 2: % *Core indicators: Scotland*

The most worrying indicator across the Audit series is the public's satisfaction with the system of governing Britain. Across Britain the indicator has been on a slow, generally downward trajectory, with rarely more than one-third of respondents ever saying they are satisfied with how the system of governing Britain works. It has been a feature of this indicator that it is subject to few of the usual demographic disparities of age, gender and social class: all groups tend to have a broadly similar view.

In Scotland the deterioration in satisfaction across the Audit series is particularly marked. Just 14% of Scots claim to be satisfied with the system of governing Britain in this latest study, a decline of three points in a year but a massive 22 points

below the score recorded by Scottish respondents in Audit 1 in 2004.

A youth tremor?

In the immediate aftermath of the 2017 general election it was widely asserted that the closer-than-expected result was due to an increase in turnout among 18-24 year-olds. The assumption has since been debunked by the findings of the British Election Survey. The Audit series does not examine actual voter turnout, but sheds light on young people's attitudes to politics and participation more broadly. The results show that although there have been improvements in key areas of political engagement, these generally reflect the improvements registered in the overall population,

and despite the positive changes, young people remain less engaged, across the range of indicators, than older age groups.

The Britain-wide certainty-to-vote indicator has risen three points in a year to 62%. In contrast, among 18-24-year-olds the indicator has increased by five points to 44% in the same period. Although a welcome improvement, the increase in the propensity of young people to vote is not of the scale that would support the assertions of a 'youthquake', and the measure remains well below the national average.

Broadly speaking, as Figure 3 shows, the increase in certainty to vote among the youngest voters follows the trend line in the certainty to vote of the population as a whole, although the gap has narrowed in recent years following a divergence between Audits 9 and 12 (2012-15).

This year the 44% certainty-to-vote score of those aged 18-24 is the highest level recorded in the Audit series, and 16 points higher than in Audit 1 in 2004. So too, the certainty to vote of the next age group, 25-34s, has risen by 16 points from 33% to 49% compared to Audit 1. Looking at both age groups combined, 47% of 18-34-year-olds say they would be certain to vote in the event of an immediate general election, a record for the Audit series. However, the certainty to vote of every age group has improved across the Audit lifespan— not by as much as for 18-34s, but the voting propensity of older age groups started from a higher base.

Young people's knowledge about politics has also improved across the Audit series. In the first Audit in 2004, just 28% of 18-24s said they felt knowledgeable; in this latest study 39% claim to do so. Only once, in Audit 13 (2016), has the knowledge indicator for this age group been higher. Again, the improvement in perceived levels of
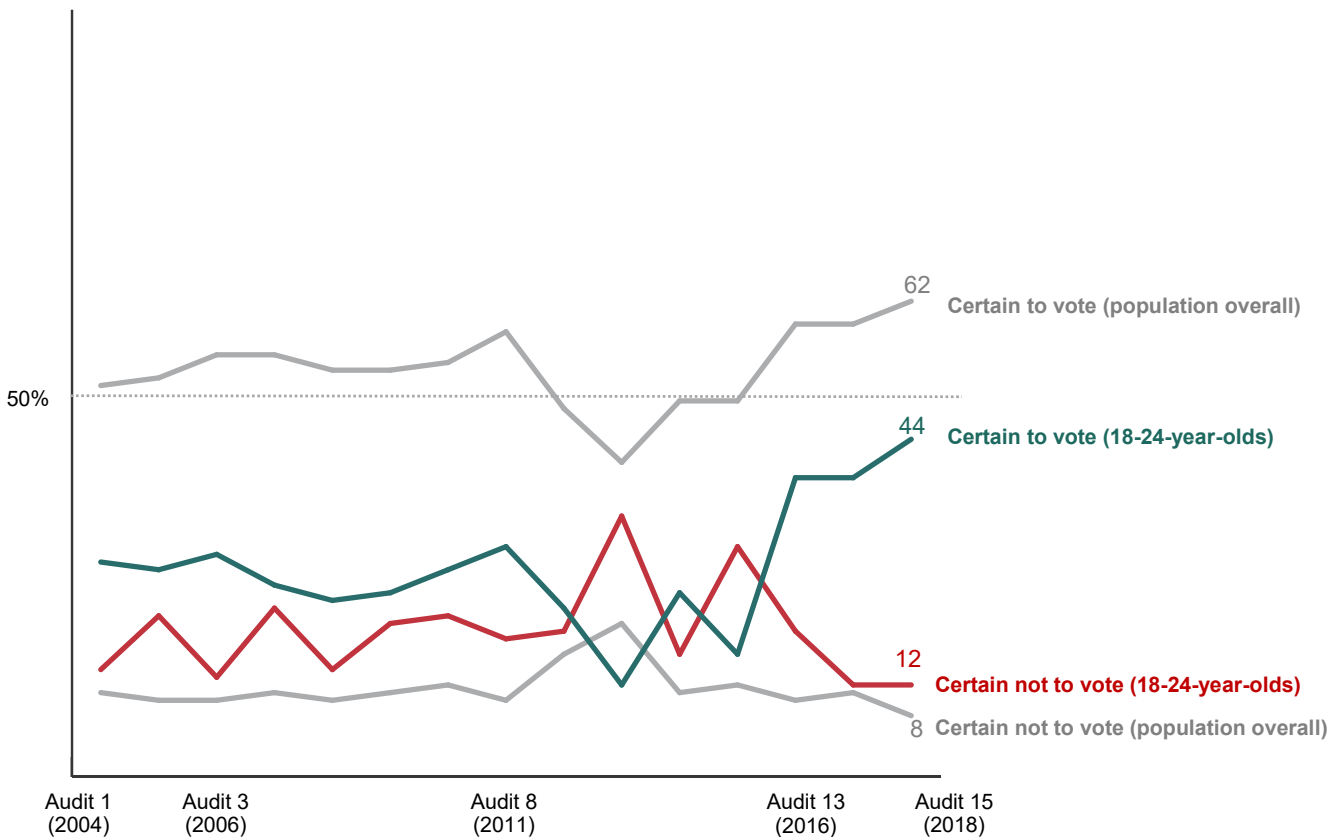
Figure 3: % Certainty to vote: 18-24-year-olds vs population overall (absolutely certain to vote - score 10 out of 10 and absolutely certain not to vote - score 1 out of 10)

knowledge has occurred against a national backdrop of a 10-point increase in self-assessed knowledge about politics across the Audit series.

Interest in politics has similarly improved, although to a lesser degree: four in 10 young people (41%) aged 18-24 claim to be interested in politics compared to 35% who said the same in 2004. This six-point increase reflects the seven-point nation-wide increase in interest in politics across the Audit lifespan. Unlike knowledge levels, interest in politics among the youngest voters has been more unpredictable and has scored more highly on five previous occasions than it does in this latest study.

Reflecting the national picture, satisfaction with the system of governing Britain among young people remains low, and has fallen a little over the 15 Audit studies: in Audit 1 just over a third (35%) of 18-24-year-olds said they were satisfied with the system; today, just 28% say the same. The sense of political efficacy of this age group is marginally higher today than it was in 2004 but at just six points (35% in Audit 1 compared to 41% today) the rise is not statistically significant.

2. A 'GENERAL ELECTION EFFECT'?

Most indicators of political engagement have risen in the last year. The boost to political engagement could have come from the 'normal' effects of a post-election year, or, in addition, a delayed impact from the 2016 EU referendum - it is hard to disentangle the two effects. Significantly more people continue to want a greater use of referendums than not. Overall support for more referendums is down, but it is up among 'remainers'.

Almost all our core indicators of political engagement have risen compared to last year. Certainty to vote has risen from 59% to 62%, interest in politics from 53% to 57%, self-assessed knowledge of politics from 49% to 52%, and agreement that getting involved can bring about change (political efficacy) from 32% to 34%. Self-assessed knowledge of Parliament is also up, from 45% to 49%.

The number of people who undertook one of 13 listed political activities in the last year has also risen, from 69% to 75%, as has the number of people who would take such action if they felt sufficiently strongly, from 82% to 88%. Those feeling that they have influence over local decision-making has risen from 23% to 27%, and those saying that they would like to be involved in such decision-making is up from 46% to 48%. The number of people identifying as at least a 'fairly strong' supporter of a political party has also increased, from 31% to 37%.

However, these rises come with several caveats.

First, the increases in political engagement are mostly not large - only a few points in many cases. Where there have been significant increases of four points or more, these are largely explained by the improvement in the public's willingness to vote.

Absolutely certain to vote (score 10)

Likely to vote (score 6-9)

Unlikely to vote (score 2-5)

Absolutely certain not to vote (score 1)
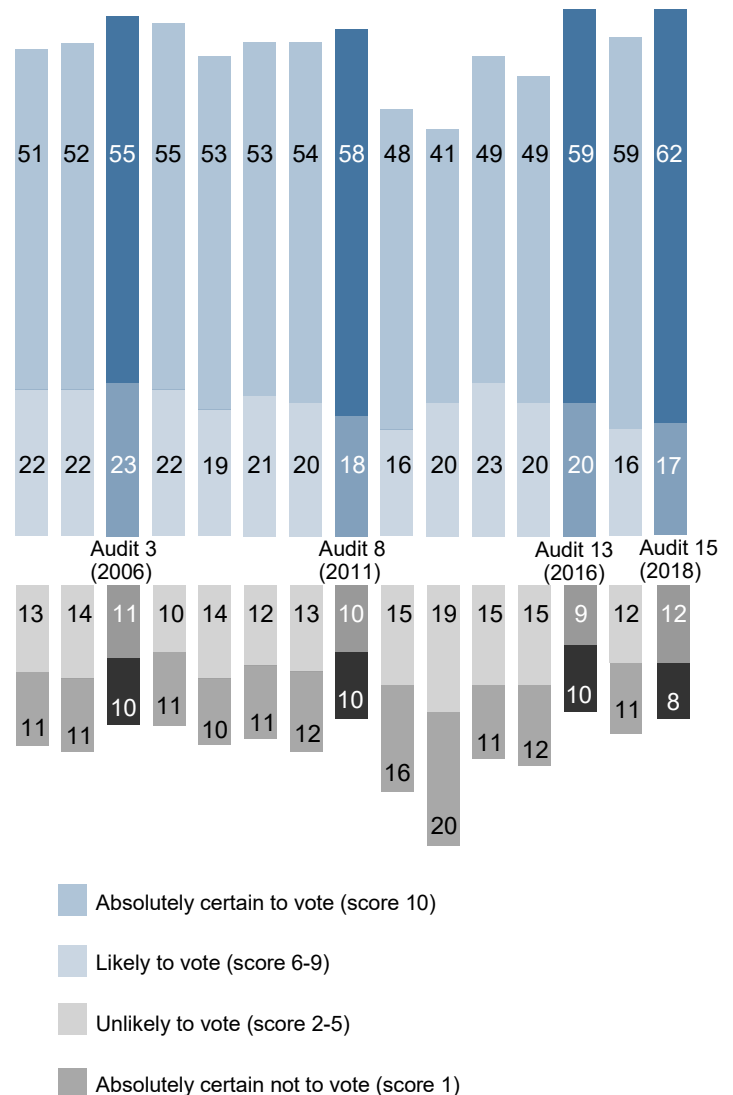
Figure 4: % Certainty to vote

Second, as noted in the previous chapter, the rises in the core political engagement indicators this year fit the pattern of previous post-general election years. Certainty to vote, and political interest and knowledge, have mostly all risen in all three previous post-election Audit waves (Audits 3, 8 and 13).

The increases in political engagement this year also reverse declines that we saw last year in Audit 14, after the June 2016 referendum on EU membership.

One of the standout findings of Audit 14 was that, unlike the 2014 referendum on independence in Scotland, the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership was not followed by any immediate positive effect on political engagement. In Audit 14, certainty to vote was unchanged from the previous year, and political interest, knowledge and sense of efficacy all fell.

These latest results thus raise the question of whether the increases in political engagement in 2018 are just the normal post-election increases, with the EU referendum still having had no effect; or whether the referendum might be having a delayed impact, and be now helping to drive higher engagement in a way that augments the normal pro-engagement effects of a general election.

Voting *versus* other forms of political engagement

It is too soon to be able to distinguish the normal effects of a post-election year from any longer-term consequences of the EU referendum.

One notable feature of these latest political engagement indicators, however, is that voting appears to be performing more strongly than other forms of political activity.

As Figure 4 shows, certainty to vote has hit a new high in the Audit series, rising by three points to 62%. In our question about political activities undertaken in the past year, the number of those saying that they had voted has risen by more points than for any other activity, as has the number of those saying that they would vote if they felt sufficiently strongly about an issue. In both the 'have done' and 'would do' questions, results have hardly changed from last year for other forms of political participation.

It is not clear whether respondents understand questions about voting in an election as including voting in a referendum. (Our 'certainty-to-vote' question refers explicitly to 'an immediate general election'.) However, the unprecedented run of UK-wide votes in three successive years is, at the least, not obviously producing the kind of electoral fatigue that was encapsulated in Brenda from Bristol's famous 'Not another one!' reaction to the calling of the snap 2017 general election.
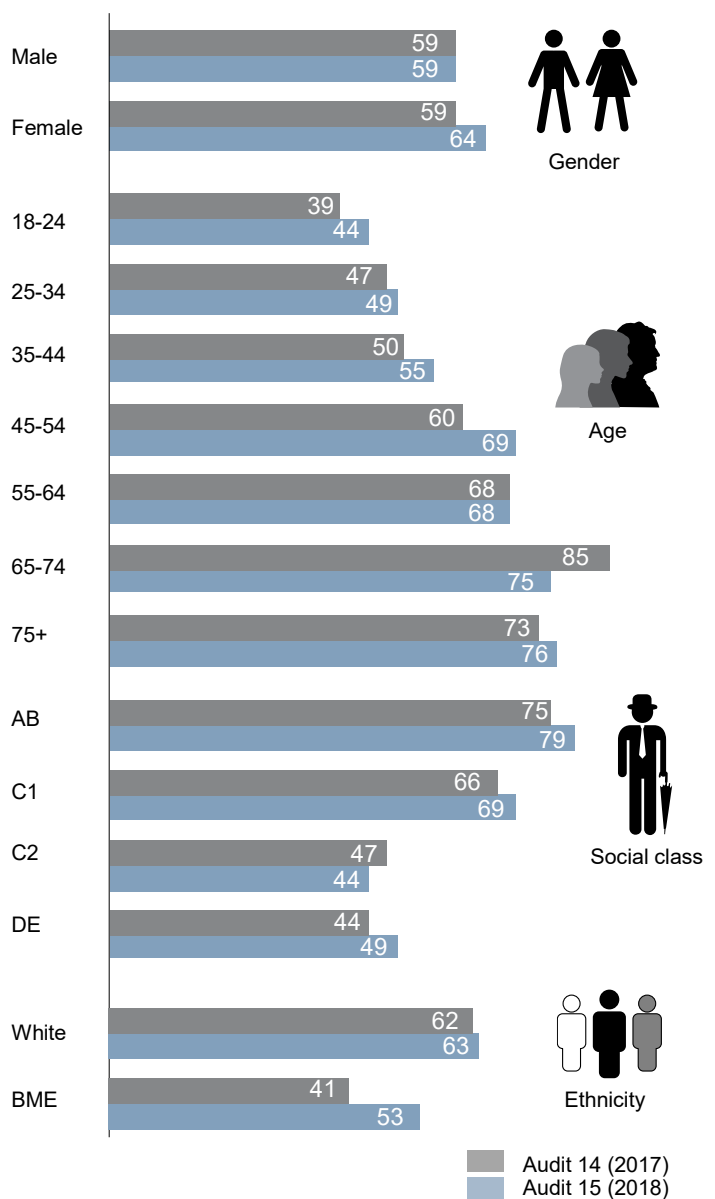
Figure 5: % Certainty to vote by demographic group (absolutely certain to vote - score 10 out of 10)

A 'GENERAL ELECTION EFFECT'?

That election, more than any other in the life of the Audit, saw a restoration of sharp differences between the two major UK parties. There was a clear left-right political choice: the parties at the election were clearly not 'all the same'. That this has had a positive impact on the public's attitudes to voting and the political process more generally cannot be discounted. It could also be that the indecisive nature of the 2017 general election is boosting people's willingness to vote. Equally, it could be that as the Brexit process unfolds, appreciation is increasing of the importance of the 2016 referendum vote - and of voting in any possible second Brexit-related referendum. It is hard to disentangle what may be entirely general election effects from possible referendum effects.

Referendum attitudes stabilising?

Many more people continue to agree than disagree that referendums should be used more often to determine important questions: 58% to 36%.

As Figure 6 shows, the number of people supporting more referendums has fallen again this year but only by three points, while the number opposing more referendums barely moved, rising by just one point. After the number supporting greater use of referendums fell by 15 points last year, in the immediate aftermath of the EU vote, this year's result suggests some stabilisation in this indicator. This might in turn suggest that people are not engaging in any longer-term reflection on the 2016 referendum that is significantly altering their attitudes.

The strongest supporters of a greater use of referendums tend to be younger (60% of under-35s against 54% of over-55s), to have less formal education (62% of those with no formal qualifications, compared to 43% of graduates) and to be in lower socio-economic groups (over 60% of

all groups other than ABs, where support was 45%). As in Audit 14, these differences are much wider than before the EU referendum.

'Leave' voters remain more supportive of the greater use of referendums than their 'remain' counterparts. However, the gap has narrowed from Audit 14 immediately after the referendum: support for more referendums among 'leave' voters has fallen by six points from 74% to 68%, but it has risen among 'remain' voters by four points from 47% to 51%, so the gap has shrunk from 27 points to 17. The rise could be linked to hopes among some 'remainers' of another referendum to prevent, delay or soften Brexit.
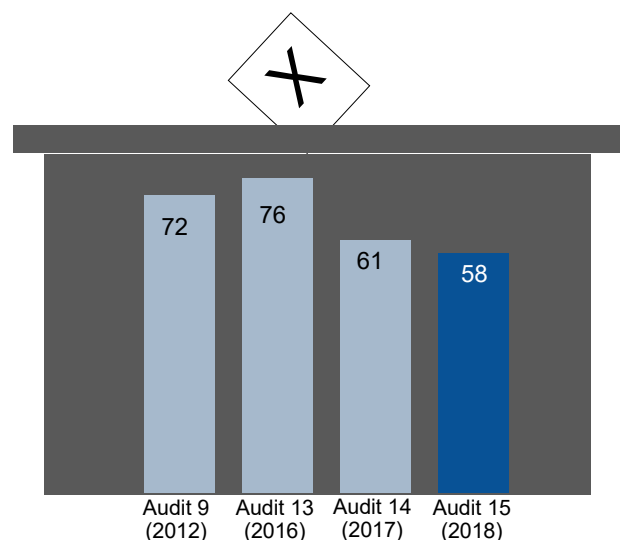
Figure 6: % Important questions should be determined by referendums more often than today (agree)

3. SATISFACTION WITH THE SYSTEM OF GOVERNING BRITAIN

Satisfaction with the system of governing Britain remains stubbornly low. Two-thirds of the public think the system needs significant improvement. The further someone lives from Westminster, the more likely they are to think this. Across the Audit series this indicator is consistently poor, regardless of events, and the demographic differences we see tend to be smaller than those for other measures of political engagement. The public think the system is not good at encouraging governments to take long-term decisions, but does a better job at protecting minority rights.

Just 29% of the public report being broadly satisfied with the system of governing Britain; two-thirds (67%) think the system either needs 'a lot of improvement' or 'could be improved quite a lot'.

This year's result makes for the second successive small fall in satisfaction. This could mark a return to the smaller year-on-year movements that were seen in this indicator in the Audit's early years. As Figure 7 shows, between 2010 and 2016, movements in the satisfaction score were somewhat larger and more erratic.

Over the whole life of the Audit, the trend in the satisfaction score appears slightly downwards: the measure was above 30% in 2004-2009 but has been below this mark for five of the nine years since.

In at least one respect, this year's results differ slightly from the results of the Audits conducted after previous general elections. Following the 2005, 2010 and 2015 general elections, satisfaction with the system of governing Britain rose (modestly) along with other indicators of political engagement, or it at least did not fall (Audit 3, 2006). In this year's Audit, satisfaction has fallen for the first time in a post-election year, albeit by only a statistically insignificant two points.

The demographic differences on this indicator tend to be smaller than those we see for other indicators. Men (31%) are somewhat more satisfied than women (27%) with our governing system, as they have been throughout the life of the Audit. By age, the least satisfied with our governing system are the 35-44s (22%), and the most satisfied the over-75s (35%). By socio-economic group, the most satisfied are the ABs (36%), but DEs (25%) are a little more satisfied than C2s (22%) for only the second time in the life of the Audit. BME citizens (32%) are more satisfied with our governing system than their white counterparts (29%), sustaining the pattern seen since 2013.
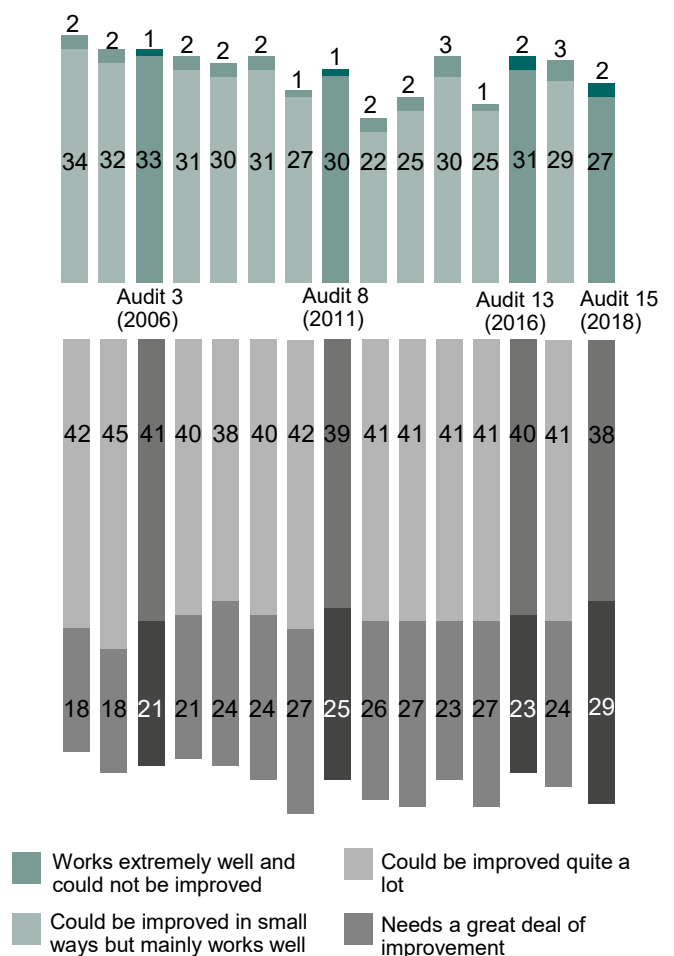
Figure 7: % Satisfaction with present system of governing Britain

SATISFACTION WITH THE SYSTEM OF GOVERNING BRITAIN

Citizens in London (41%) and the South (37%) are significantly more satisfied with our governing system than those elsewhere. Satisfaction in Wales rebounded to 23% from its record-equalling low of 17% last year. This year, it is Scotland's turn to post a new record low in satisfaction, with a three-point fall to 14% (Figure 8).

In last year's Audit, 'remain' voters were more satisfied with the system of governing Britain than their 'leave' counterparts, by 34% to 28%. This year, the positions are reversed: 'remain' voters are now less satisfied with the system of governing Britain than those who voted 'leave', by 28% to 32%. The number of 'remain' voters dissatisfied with the system has risen from 64% to 71%, while 'leave' dissatisfaction has fallen from 71% to 67%.

How well does the system of governing Britain perform key functions?

To explore people's attitudes to the system of governing Britain in more detail we have asked a battery of new questions in this Audit about people's perceptions of the system.

As Figure 9 shows, the results are overwhelmingly negative. Barely more than two in 10 people think the system is good at performing any of the suggested roles, apart from ensuring that the rights of minority groups are protected. Of just as much concern, between 34% and 40% simply have no view or claim not to know.

People are most dissatisfied with the system's capacity to encourage governments to take long-term decisions; only 17% think it does this. Only 21% think that the system is good at allowing ordinary people to get involved with politics.

Just 22% of the public think that the system is good at providing Britain with a stable government. This is perhaps unsurprising after three elections which have delivered two hung parliaments and a wafer-
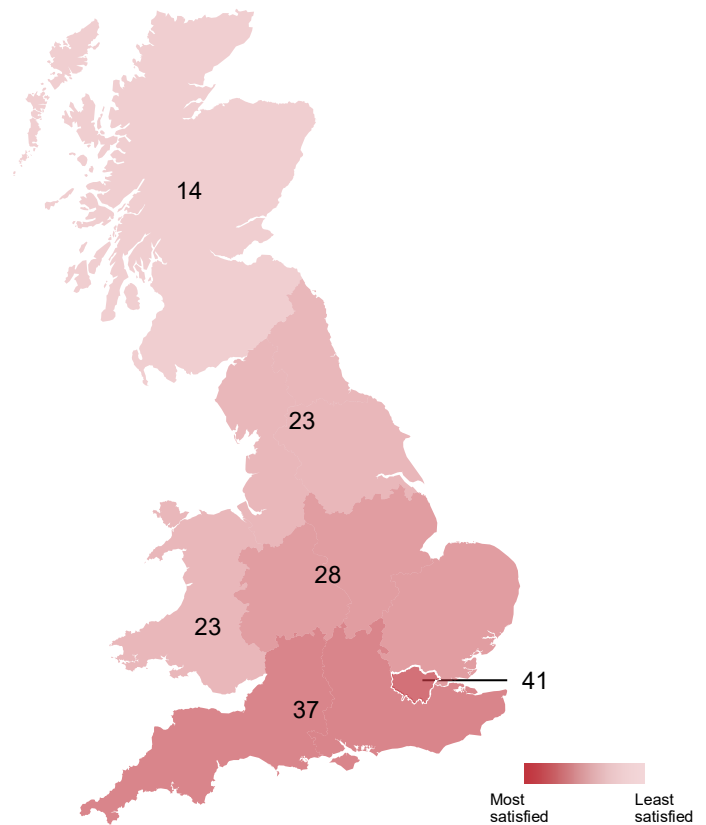
Figure 8: *% Satisfaction with present system of governing Britain (works well)*

thin majority for the Conservatives. Also unsurprising is the fact that those claiming to support the Conservative Party are significantly more likely (by 20 points) to think the system is good at providing stable government than are supporters of the opposition parties.

Overall, only 22% also think that the system is good at ensuring the views of most Britons are represented, and the same number that it is good at allowing voters to have the final say about Britain's direction. This latter question may well have been interpreted in light of the current debate about whether the EU referendum decision will be delivered and whether there will be a second referendum on the terms of withdrawal. This could have affected the responses.

Legend: Very good at it | Fairly good at it | Neither good nor bad | Fairly bad at it | Very bad at it | Don't know

Function	Very good	Fairly good	Neither good nor bad	Fairly bad	Very bad	Don't know
Ensuring the views of most Britons are represented	3	19	35	30	13	
Providing Britain with a stable government	4	19	34	28	15	
Ensuring the rights of minority groups are protected	4	27	36	21	10	1
Encouraging governments to take long-term decisions	2	15	40	27	15	1
Allowing ordinary people to get involved in politics	3	18	36	31	12	
Providing political parties who offer clear alternatives to one another	2	24	38	25	10	1
Allowing for voters to have the final say about Britain's future direction	3	19	37	26	15	

Figure 9: % How well the system of governing Britain performs key functions

Despite the divide between the main political parties being arguably at its greatest for three decades, the public do not think the system of governing Britain is good at providing political parties which offer clear alternatives to each other. Only a quarter (26%) credit it with any efficacy on this score.

By some distance, more people think the system of governing Britain does a good job of protecting minority rights than anything else; three in 10 people (31%) agree. BME respondents, however, are more likely than white respondents (40% compared to 31%) to think that the system is bad at protecting minority rights.

4. ATTITUDES TO POLITICAL PARTIES

The number of Britons who consider themselves a strong supporter of a political party has increased in the last year, and half of all respondents say they were happy with the choice of political parties available to them at the general election. Overall, however, support for parties remains low and few people are satisfied with the way the parties perform important functions in our democracy.

Whether people support a party's policies, trust them to keep promises, and feel they represent the interests of 'people like me' remain the most important factors influencing their decision about which party to support. Leadership is a more important factor in the public's calculations than it was a decade ago. Conversely, a party's willingness to take on board the views of the public is a less important consideration than it used to be.

Support for political parties

Over three in 10 people (37%) describe themselves as a strong supporter of a political party, an increase of six points in a year. As Figure 10 illustrates, this is still below the four in 10 people
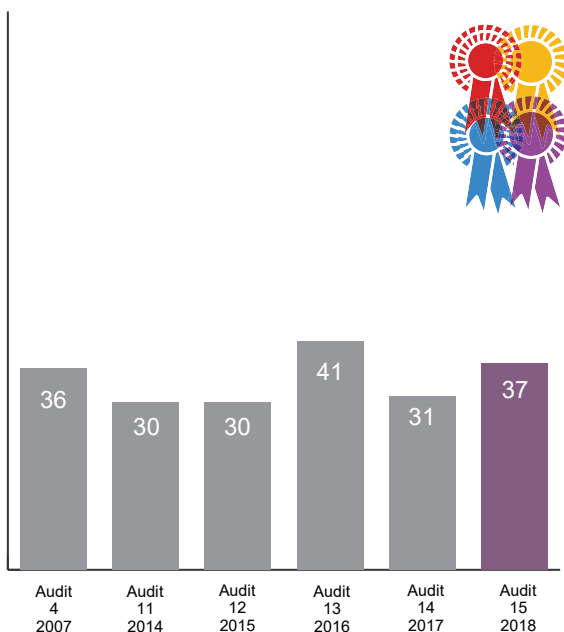
(41%) who said the same in Audit 13, after the 2015 general election, and is comparable with the 36% who said the same when this question was first asked in the Audit series, more than a decade ago (in Audit 4 (2007)).

Support for political parties appears to spike a little after a general election but the number of people supporting parties remains relatively low overall: nearly three in 10 people say they are not a supporter of any political party (28%), and a further third say their support for a party is 'not very strong' (34%).

The likelihood that a person will support a political party increases with age: those aged 55+ are more likely to do so than the national average (44% compared to 37%), whereas 18-24s are less likely to do so (27% compared to 37%). So too, those in the higher social grades, and those with higher educational attainment, are more likely than average to say they are a strong supporter of a political party.

Satisfaction with the choice of parties on offer

Exactly half the public (50%) were happy with the choice of political parties available to them at the general election in June 2017, and almost three in ten (29%) say that there was more than one party that appealed to them.

As one would expect, those who say they are a strong supporter of a political party are generally more positive about the electoral choices that were available to them; just over two-thirds (68%) of such respondents say they were happy with the choice they faced. However, strong supporters of a party were also more likely than weak supporters to say that there was more than one party that appealed to them (36% compared to 26%).

A similar pattern can be discerned among those who say they are interested in politics. Nearly six in

Figure 10: % Party support (very / fairly strong supporter)

Bar chart values:
- Audit 4 2007: 36
- Audit 11 2014: 30
- Audit 12 2015: 30
- Audit 13 2016: 41
- Audit 14 2017: 31
- Audit 15 2018: 37

Agree

I was happy with the choice of political parties available to me — **50**%

There was more than one party that appealed to me — **29**%
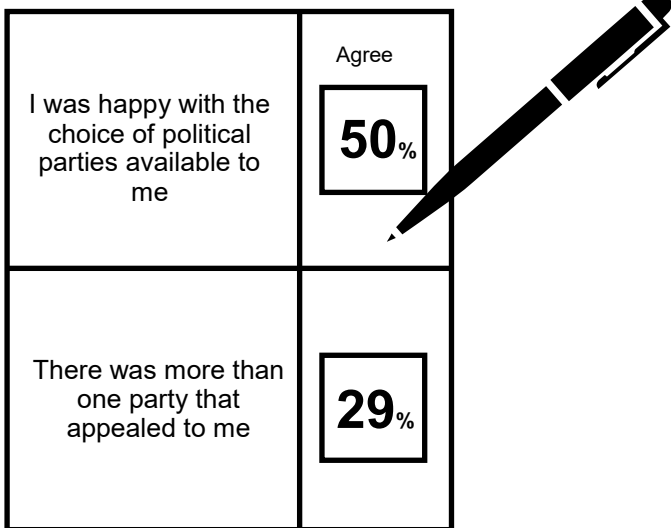
Figure 11: % Satisfaction with choice of parties on offer/ more than one party appealed

10 (60%) politically interested people said they were happy with the party choice at the election, 10 points higher than the national average. But over a third of the politically interested (37%) also claim that more than one political party appealed to them.

Looking at the demographic dimensions to these questions, once again older respondents (aged 55+) were more likely to be happy with the choice of political parties available to them at the election (61%) than were younger age groups (44% of 35-54s and 41% of 18-34s). Those in higher social grades (37% of ABs) and with higher levels of education (39% of those with degree-level qualifications or above) were also more likely to find more than one party that appealed to them.

A higher proportion of those people who say they voted 'remain' in the EU referendum said that more than one party appealed to them (39%) than was seen among those who voted 'leave' (26%).

Labour Party supporters are more likely to describe themselves as a strong supporter of a political party (52%) than are Conservative Party supporters (43%). However, Conservative supporters were happier with the choice of political parties available

to them at the general election (67%) than were Labour Party supporters (54%) (Figure 12).

What matters when deciding which party to support?

We offered respondents a list of 14 possible reasons to vote for a political party, as detailed in Figure 13. Whether a party 'can be trusted to keep its promises' was selected most frequently by respondents (32%), followed closely by 'has policies I fully support' (30%). These factors were also important when this question was asked just over a decade ago, occupying third and fourth place in the list (Audit 4 in 2007). Trust is clearly prioritised over competence or representation.

Previously, a party that 'represents the interests of people like me' topped the list of decision-making criteria (40%), but this has slipped in importance in the intervening years, to third on the list, with just 28% rating it among the two or three most important factors. Similarly, although it continues to sit towards the top of the list, whether a party 'takes on board the views of the public' appears to matter

Con 67 Lab 54 Other 61 None 11

I was happy with the choice of political parties available to me

28 36 32 9

There was more than one party that appealed to me

Figure 12: % Satisfaction by party supporter with choice of parties on offer/more than one party appealed (agree)

ATTITUDES TO POLITICAL PARTIES

Audit 4 (2007)   Audit 15 (2018)

Audit 4 (2007)		Audit 15 (2018)
30	Can be trusted to keep its promises	32
34	Has policies I fully support	30
40	Represents the interests of people like me	28
31	Takes on board the views of the public	24
21	Believes in the same thing as me	23
19	Is most competent	20
9	Has a leader I prefer	14
7	Has a local candidate I prefer	12
8	Is the least worst option	9
6	Draws party candidates from a cross-section of society	8
10	Leads campaigns around local issues	8
5	Promotes the single issue that is most important to me	7
6	Campaigns on the doorstep to meet local voters	5
3	None of these	4
5	I never vote for a political party	4

Figure 13: *% Most important in deciding which political party to vote for*

less today than it used to: 31% said this was an important factor in 2007, but just 24% say the same today.

Attitudes to competence have barely changed over the years; whether a party 'is the most competent' is an important factor in the political calculations of only two in ten people (20%).

This year, as in 2007, the scores for leadership appear to confound the conventional wisdom shared by parties and political commentators alike that leadership is of paramount political importance. More people today say that leadership matters when determining their vote than did so over a decade ago. This factor sits around the middle of the table in importance. But against the nine percent who chose this in 2007, still only 14% say 'has a leader I prefer' is an important factor in their decision-making.

Party choice linked to personalisation of politics can also be discerned in a similar five-point increase, albeit from a low base, in the number of people who say that the presence of a preferred local candidate is an important factor in their decision about the party to vote for (12% compared to 7% who said the same in 2007).

These results would suggest that leadership is not a prominent factor in people's thinking when deciding which party to support – or, at least, in their reporting of such thinking. In truth, the policies of a party, its conduct, campaigns and values, cannot be entirely divorced from the question of leadership, either locally or nationally. The leader plays a central role in helping shape perceptions about whether a party represents the interests of 'people like me' or 'can be trusted to keep its promises'. As chapter 5 sets out, three-quarters of respondents (74%) said 'debates or interviews with party leaders or other politicians' were the most important source of election-related news or information in helping them decide which way to

vote, or not vote, during the 2017 general election.

When it comes to the importance of trust in deciding the party to vote for, the attitude of those who claim to be a strong supporter of a political party is broadly in line with that of the wider population. However, strong party supporters differ markedly on two other factors compared to the population overall. They are much more likely to place importance on whether a party 'has policies I fully support' (41% compared to the 30% national average). They also place greater emphasis on whether a party 'believes in the same thing as me' than does the wider population (31% compared to 23% overall). Issues of competence, leadership, and a preferred choice of local candidate are also a little more important to them. In contrast, whether a party takes on board the views of the public is a bit less important to strong party supporters than it is to the population as a whole.

Full support for a party's policies matters more for those in middle age (37% of 35s-54s) than it does for younger (25% of 18-34s) or older voters (28% of those aged 55+). Younger voters are more likely to rate the importance of trust than are older voters (34% of 18-34s and 35-54s versus 29% of those aged 55 and above). Policy support is also prioritised by those in the higher social grades: it is almost twice as important for ABs (42%) as it is for

DEs (22%). Whether a party is trusted to keep its promises, however, is almost equally important to all social groups.

Are political parties effective at key aspects of their role?

Few people give high ratings to political parties' effectiveness. Asked about five important aspects of a political party's role, as Figure 14 shows never more than a quarter of the public say parties are 'good' at the respective function, and around four in 10 are indifferent, expressing no clear view. On each question, political parties generate a negative 'net good' result of between -14 points and -26 points.

The public think that our political parties are better at telling voters about the issues they feel are most important in Britain, and how they will work to solve them, than they are at performing any of the other functions. And people rate political parties most poorly for their capacity to provide a way for ordinary people to get involved with politics.

Younger people (18-34s) are less optimistic about parties providing a way for ordinary people to get involved with politics than are older respondents. In contrast, those from ethnic minority groups are rather more positive (24%) than white respondents
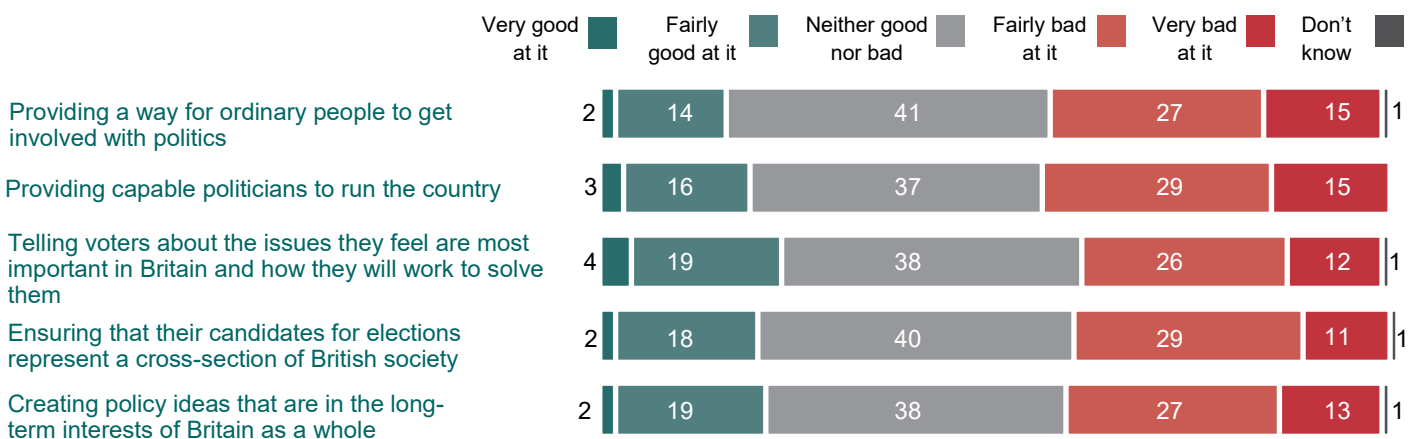
Figure 14: % How well political parties perform their role

(15%), as are those that voted 'remain' in the EU referendum (20% compared to 12% of 'leavers'). Almost half of those who said they voted 'leave' in the EU referendum (48%) think that political parties are bad at telling voters about the issues they feel are most important in Britain, and how they will work to solve them (12 points higher than the proportion of 'remainers' who say the same).

Overall, despite improvements in levels of support for political parties, the picture painted by these Audit results is a broadly negative one. While there may have been significant increases in membership of some parties - particularly the Labour Party - in recent years, the public perception of parties generally is very poor. The same question confronts the political parties today as it did in Audit 4 over a decade ago: what more can they do to recast themselves as inclusive and effective political forces in the future?

5. DIGITAL DEMOCRACY?

Younger people are more politically engaged and active online than any other group. But, for the British public generally, traditional sources of news and information about politics – television and radio and printed campaign material – remained the dominant ones at the June 2017 general election. Debates and interviews with the party leaders and other politicians were the most important source of information in helping people to decide whether to vote and who to vote for. Watching politically-related videos and creating or signing e-petitions were the most popular forms of online engagement, with half the public having undertaken some form of politically-related action online in the last year.

Sources of election-related news and information

Although digital technology and online sources of news and information may be important generally, as far as electoral politics is concerned there is some way to go before they overtake traditional, off-line sources.

As Figure 15 shows, news or news programmes on TV or radio were, by some distance (20 points), the leading source of election-related news or information at the June 2017 general election (69%). Printed campaign publicity from the political parties reached nearly half the public (49%), while news and information in newspaper and magazine print editions reached nearly four in 10 people (39%). Online news sites (such as the BBC or newspapers) were the most mentioned digital source of information used during the election (32%), scoring just below direct face-to-face conversations and discussions with other people about the election (36%). Social media provided election-related news or information for no more than two in 10 people.

However, as Figure 15 illustrates, there is a disconnect between those sources of election news and information with the greatest reach, and those that were the most influential in helping people decide whether to vote and which way. Despite being the leading source of news and information, with a net importance score of +38, TV and radio news and news programmes were only the fourth
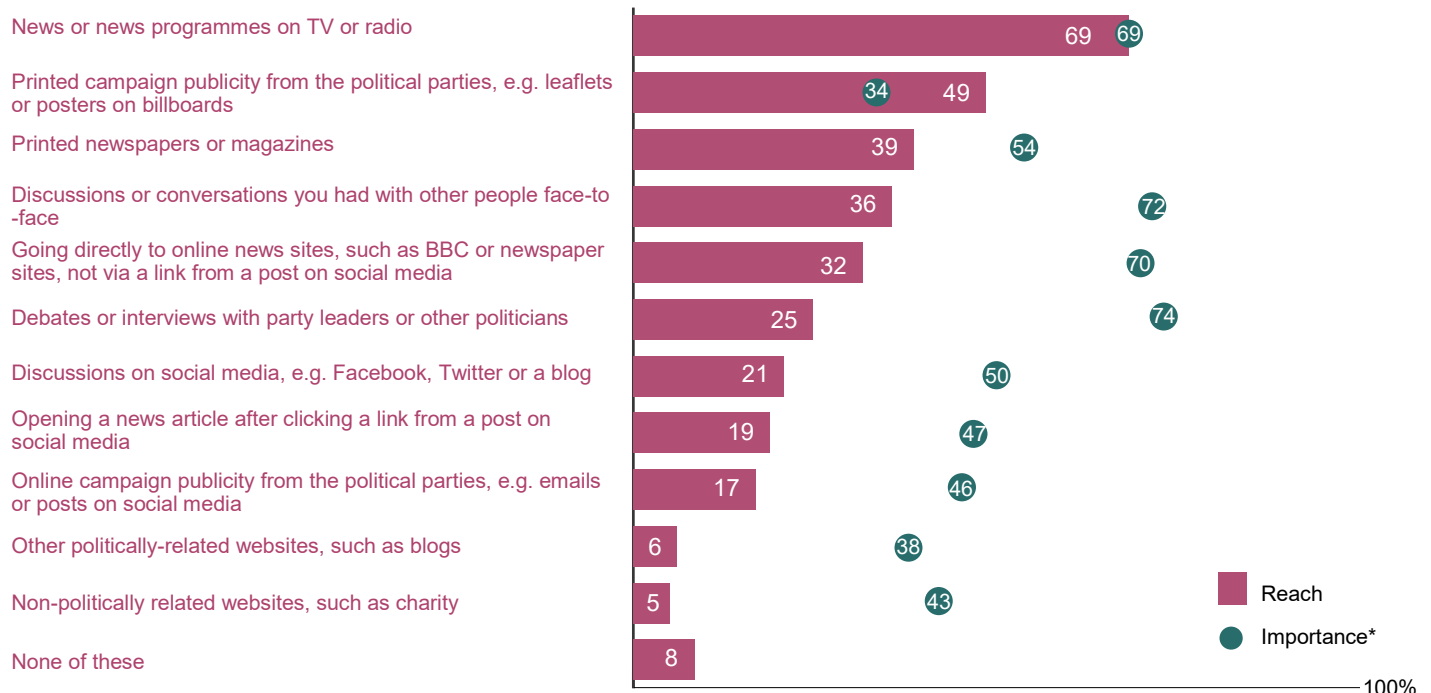
Figure 15: *% Sources of election-related news or information (reach) and importance in deciding how to vote*

Base equals only those who responded to each of the categories

most influential source of election information.

Although people were clearly aware of the printed campaign publicity from the parties, they were wholly unimpressed with it in terms of helping them decide whether and how to vote. With a net importance score of -32, it is deemed the least influential source of all those listed.

The most important source of information that helped people decide what to do at the election was the party leaders' debates and political interviews. Seventy-four percent said these were at least 'fairly important' in their decision-making, with slightly fewer being influenced by face-to-face discussions or conversations they had with other people (72%).

Online political engagement

Presented with a list of eight possible forms of politically-related online actions, nearly half the public (48%) report having done none of them in the last year.

Watching politically-related video content (29%) and creating or signing an e-petition (28%) are the most popular forms of online political activity (see Figure 17).

No more than two in 10 people (19%) have visited the website or social media account of a politician or political party, and only 12% say they follow a politician or political party on social media. Slightly more people (17%) say they have shared something politically related on social media, such as a news story, article or their own political statement.

Age is a significant factor in determining if someone has engaged politically online. While 43% of 18-34-year-olds have watched politically-related videos online, just 15% of

Party leaders' debates: time to secure their future

As these Audit results show, during the 2017 general election many more people were influenced by party leaders' debates than by hourly news bulletins, or any of the leading current affairs political programming. But there is no guarantee that leaders' debates will be a feature of future election campaigns.

In 2017 the party leaders' debates were beset by controversy. Prime Minister Theresa May, with an apparently unassailable poll lead at the start of the campaign, refused to take part in any head-to-head debate, and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn did not confirm his participation in the main debate until very late.

Given the influence that these debates exert on the public's thinking, they ought not to be left to informal, unaccountable negotiations between the main parties and the broadcasters. Other important features of elections (and of our democracy more broadly) operate in accordance with rules that are independently determined and impartially administered. There is a strong case for similarly institutionalising party leaders' debates in the future.

An independent body, for example, could revisit the rules governing the line-up, format and timing of the debates. In doing so, any such body should not lose sight of the broadcasters' wish to deliver content that is entertaining as well as informative, nor of the public's potential desire to participate. But at the heart of its work should be the commitment to deliver a debate model that, above all, meets the primary public interest purpose of better informing the electorate.
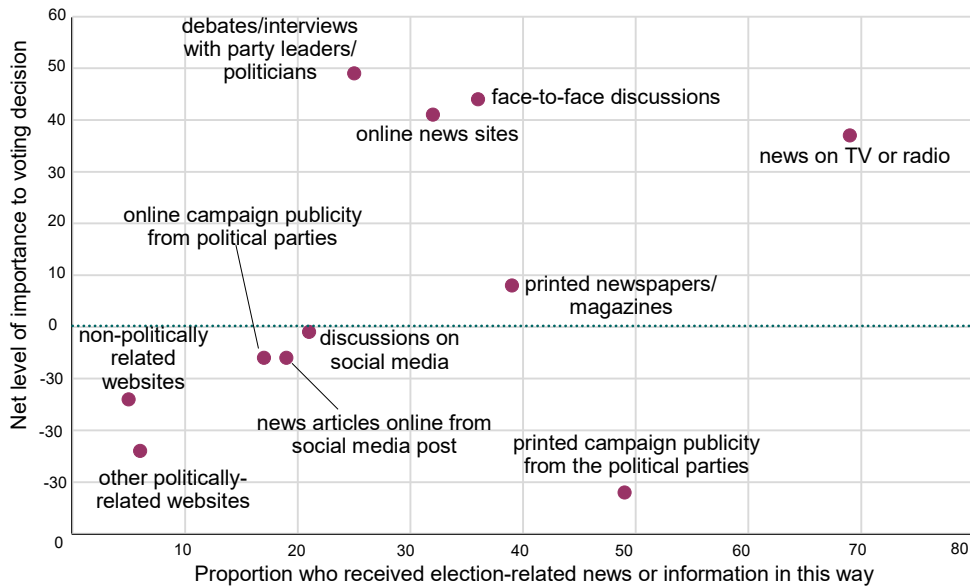
Figure 16: *% Reach vs net importance in helping to decide whether and which way to vote*

those aged 55+ have done the same. Twenty-nine percent of 18-34s report visiting the social media account of a politician or political party compared to just 12% of those aged 55+. And while 21% of 18-34s say they have shared something politically

related online, only 11% of those aged 55+ report having done so.

When controlling for education level, older people are still far less likely to have engaged politically
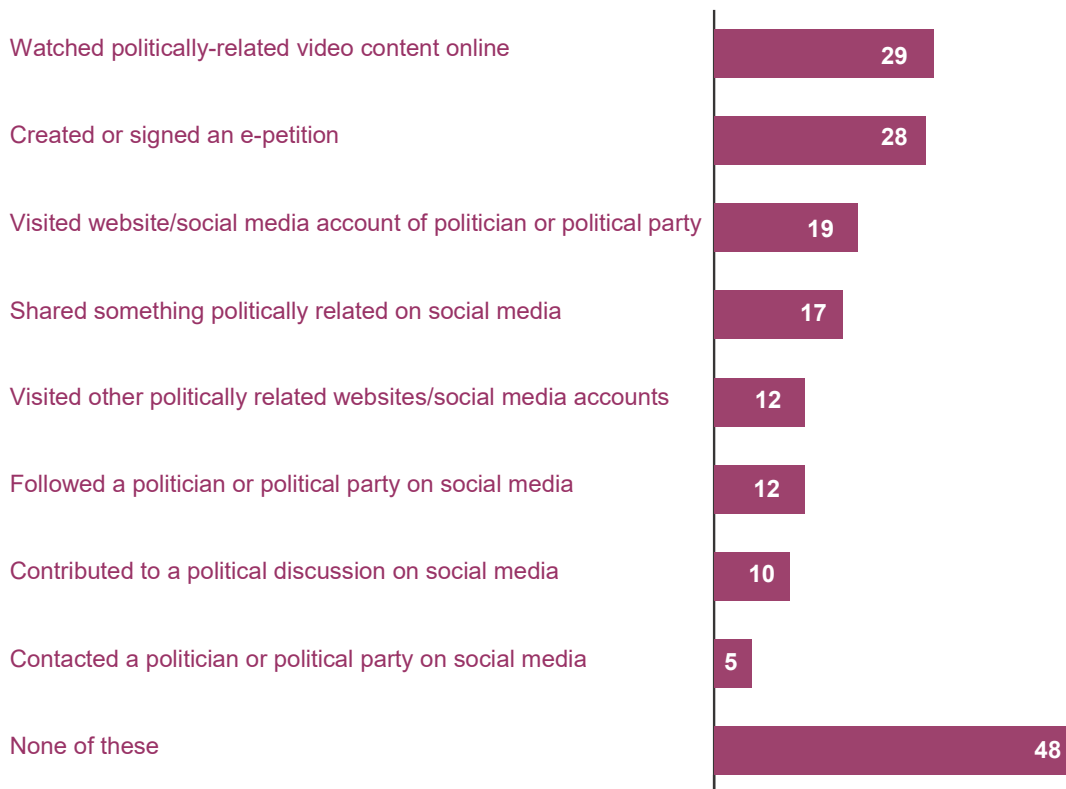
Figure 17: *% Online political engagement in the past 12 months*

online, although older people with degree-level education are more likely to have done so than older people with a non-graduate educational background.

Even when controlling for age, the likelihood that someone has engaged politically online is heavily influenced by their level of interest in politics. Just over half of politically-interested people aged 55+ have done none of the listed forms of online engagement, compared to just 11% of politically-interested 18-34-year-olds who say the same.

Sixty-three percent of 18-34s who say they are interested in politics report having watched politically-related video content, compared to just 20% of those aged 55+ who say the same.

Although just 17% of those aged 55+ who say they are politically interested have visited the website or social media account of a politician or political party, 46% of politically-interested 18-34-year-olds say they have done so. Three times as many politically-interested 18-34-year-olds have followed a politician or political party on social media as have those aged 55+.

The impact of social media on political discourse

There has been much comment about the extent to which social media may have influenced the outcome of recent elections and referendums, particularly in the UK and the United States.

Beyond concern about the ease with which 'fake news' can be disseminated online, debate here in the UK tends to focus around two polarised arguments. Proponents of social media argue that it is a political leveller, helping to open politics up to more people, and to bridge the gap between the public and their representatives. Critics of social media contend that the immediacy of the medium

lends itself to aggressive, often abusive, behaviour, by critical but unthinking participants. While social media-driven political debate may have broadened, it has not deepened. Social media, whatever the platform, provides an easy outlet for impulsive and reactive comment. An engagement culture governed, for example, by 280-character contributions does not lend itself to nuanced views or thoughtful deliberation.

As Figure 18 illustrates, the public has very mixed views about the effect that social media has on political discourse.

On the positive side, just over half the public (55%) agree that it helps broaden the debate by giving a voice to people who would not normally take part. Four in 10 people (40%) also think it breaks down
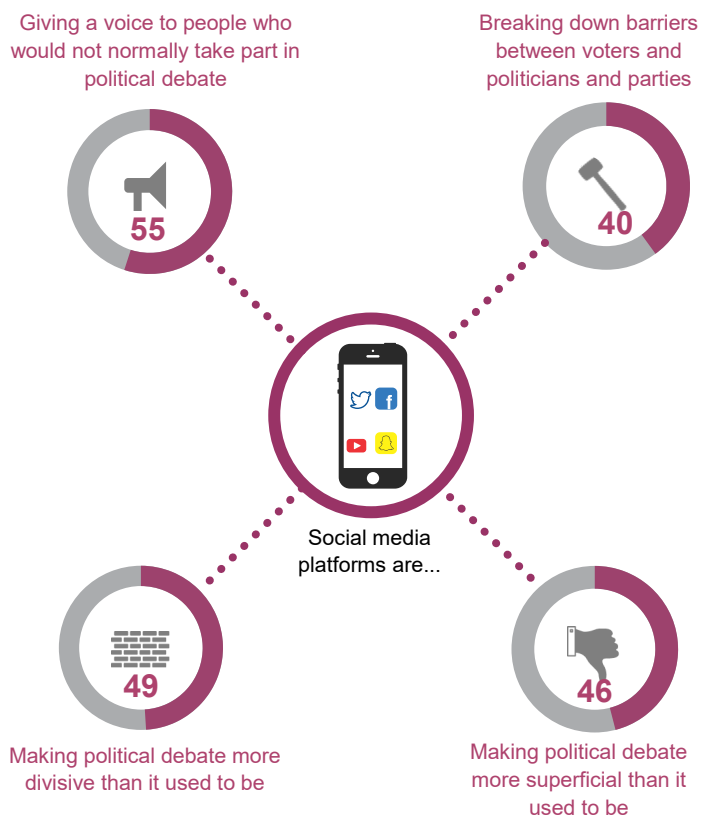
Figure 18: % Impact of social media on political discourse (agree)

the barriers between voters on the one hand and politicians and political parties on the other. However, half (49%) also think that social media is making political debate more divisive, and slightly fewer (46%) say that it is making political debate more superficial than it used to be.

It should be noted also that between 33% and 40% either have no view on the subject or give a 'don't know' answer to each of the statements.

Overwhelmingly, young people (18-34s) are more likely to agree that social media gives a voice to those who would not normally take part in political debate: 68% agree compared to 42% of those aged 55 or over.

However, young people are also more likely to agree that social media is making political debate more divisive: 59% of 18-34-year-olds hold this view, compared to just 40% of those aged 55 and above.

These results, are in part, a consequence of the fact that a higher proportion of young people use social media in a political context than do older people. However, the results also suggest that young people do bring some critical faculty to bear when considering the use of social media in a political context. They recognise both the benefits and the costs; they are neither uncritical users nor unthinking consumers.

CORE INDICATORS

Certainty to vote

Interest in politics

Knowledge of politics

Knowledge of Parliament

Efficacy

Satisfaction

KNOWLEDGE AND INTEREST

There has been a rise in both interest in, and claimed knowledge of, politics this year. This repeats the pattern seen in the previous two post-election-year Audits (Audit 8 in 2011 and Audit 13 in 2016). Longstanding differences persist in levels of political knowledge and interest between different demographic groups and parts of Britain, but the overall increases are driven by some notable rises in knowledge and/or interest among women, BME respondents and the DE social group. Last year's higher levels of knowledge and interest among 'remain' compared with 'leave' referendum voters also persist.

Knowledge of politics

Just over half the British public (52%) claim to know at least 'a fair amount' about politics. As Figure 19 shows, this is a small (three-point) rise since last year's Audit. Combined with a two-point fall in the share identifying as not knowledgeable, it takes the net knowledge score back into positive territory, with a five-point rise to +4%.

The improvement in the net knowledge score in 2018 follows the pattern of the previous two post-election years: the net knowledge score also rose in 2011, in Audit 8 (by four points, to +6%), and in 2016, in Audit 13 (by 16 points, to +11%). However, rises have also been recorded in non-post-election years.

The proportion of the population claiming to be 'knowledgeable' about politics is the third-highest in the Audit series, not quite returning to the levels of 2011 (53%) or 2016 (55%). The net 'knowledgeable' score in 2018 (+4%) sits well towards the top end of the 15-Audit range for this measure. The knowledge scores can jump significantly from one year to the next, but the trend over the whole Audit series is slightly but clearly upwards.

Legend:
- A great deal
- A fair amount
- Not very much
- Nothing at all
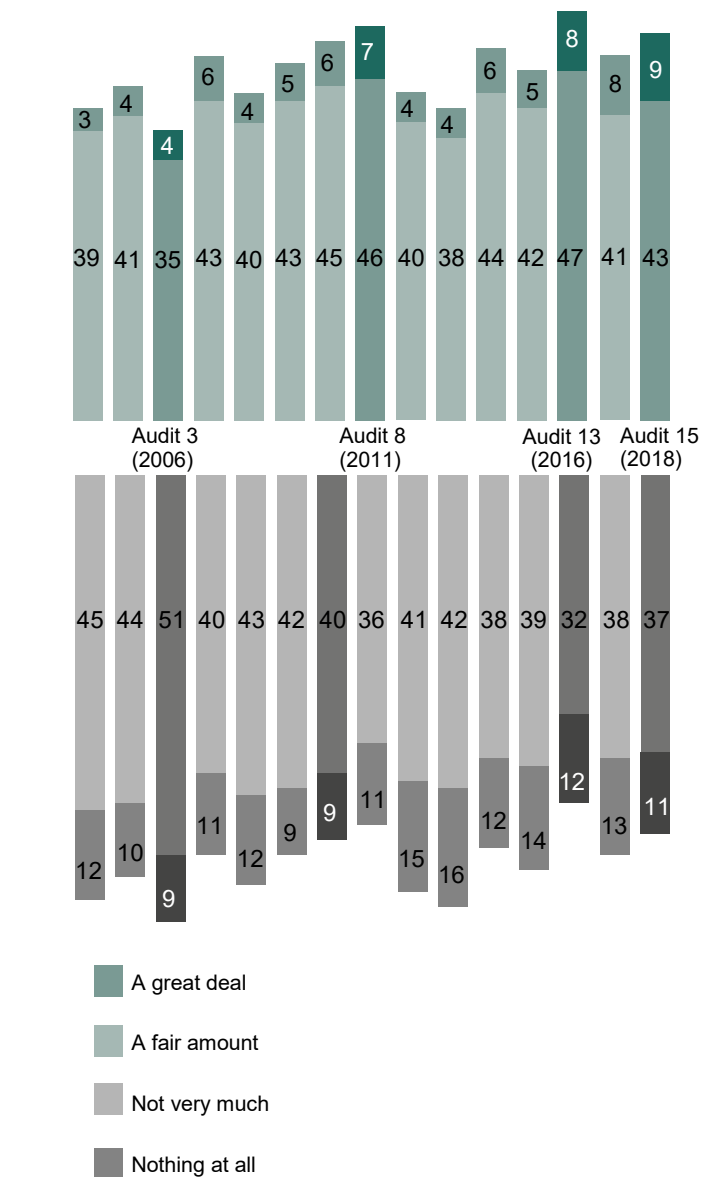
Figure 19: % Knowledge of politics

A large gap remains between the claimed knowledge levels of men and women, although it narrowed from a lead of 19 points for men in 2017 to 12 points in 2018. The narrowing resulted mainly from a six-point rise in the share of women saying they know at least 'a fair amount' about politics. However, as we have highlighted in previous Audits, when claimed knowledge has been put to an actual test, we have found that men tend to over-claim and women to underestimate what they know. The same is likely to be true this year.

Claimed knowledge levels rose in all age groups except the 25-34s. There was a six-point rise in claimed knowledge levels among 18-24-year-olds, but this measure has moved erratically from year to year for much of the life of the Audit. As in previous years, claimed knowledge levels remain significantly lower in the two youngest age groups (39% of 18-24s and 35% of 25-34s claiming to know at least 'a fair amount') than among the over-35s (52%-68% across the age ranges claiming to know at least 'a fair amount').

Familiar differences in claimed knowledge levels also persist between different socio-economic groups. Although, in this year's Audit, larger shares in both the highest AB and lowest DE social groups claim to know at least 'a fair amount' about politics than at the start of the Audit series, the gap between the two figures remains at around 40 points, the same as in 2004.

Longstanding differences also persist between the claimed political knowledge levels of white and BME citizens, and citizens in different parts of Britain. Among white citizens, 53% claim to know at least 'a fair amount' about politics, compared with 41% of their BME counterparts - a two-point narrowing of the gap since last year's Audit, with levels of knowledge rising by two points among white citizens and four points among BMEs.

More citizens in Scotland claim to be politically knowledgeable than in Britain as a whole. This gap opened up in the wake of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, and its persistence suggests a mild ongoing referendum effect, although the four-point gap in 2018 is similar to the 2017 figure of three points, and much reduced from the nine- and 10-point gaps seen in 2015 and 2016.

In contrast to Scotland, citizens in Wales remain much less likely to claim to be politically knowledgeable than in Britain as a whole: at 34%, the share in Wales claiming to know at least 'a fair amount' about politics is down five points since Audit 14 last year, and is only one point above its Audit-series low in Audit 13. Among English regions, as in previous Audits more citizens claim to be politically knowledgeable in London and the South than in the North.

Group	Audit 14 (2017)	Audit 15 (2018)
Male	59	58
Female	40	46
18-24	33	39
25-34	37	35
35-44	47	52
45-54	56	56
55-64	58	63
65-74	66	68
75+	50	52
AB	71	75
C1	56	55
C2	35	36
DE	29	36
White	51	53
BME	37	41

Gender

Age

Social class

Ethnicity

Audit 14 (2017)
Audit 15 (2018)
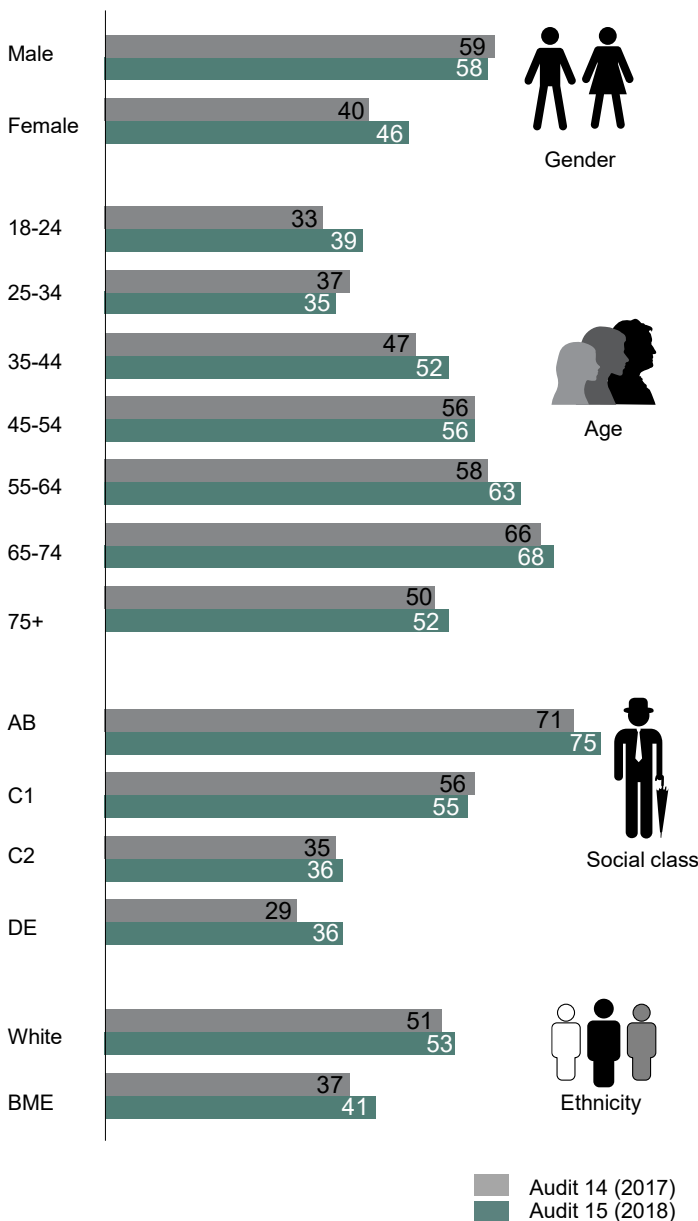
Figure 20: % Knowledge of politics by demographic group

The 13-point gap – in 'remainers'' favour – between the shares of 'remainers' and 'leavers' claiming to be politically knowledgeable is hardly changed from the last Audit. The share claiming to be politically knowledgeable rose slightly in both groups compared with the 2017 report.

Knowledge of Parliament

Just as for political knowledge in general, the number of people saying that they know at least 'a fair amount' about Parliament has risen by four points, to 49%. Again as with political knowledge in general, the rise repeated the pattern seen at the same stage after the 2010 and 2015 general elections. As Figure 21 shows, knowledge of Parliament has not quite returned to the level seen

Figure 21: % Knowledge of Parliament
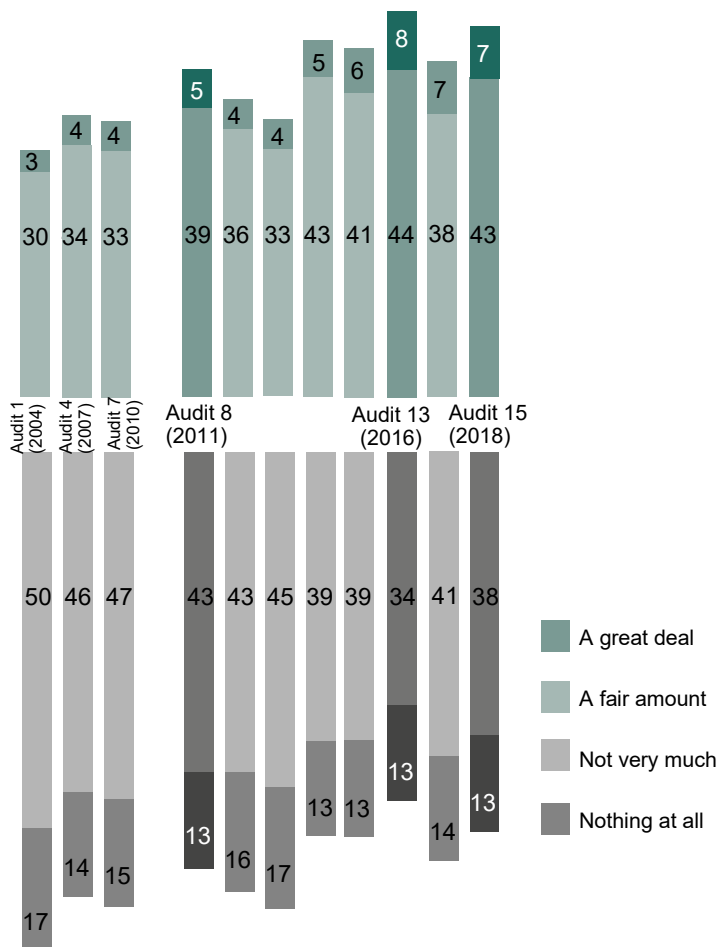
in Audit 13 (2016), but it is higher than in Audit 8 (2011).

The long-term trend over the life of the Audit is for rising knowledge of Parliament: when the question has been asked, the 'knowledgeable' share ranged between 33% and 37% up to Audit 7 (2010), between 37% and 44% in Audits 8-10, and between 45% and 52% since Audit 11 (2014).

Compared to last year, there has been a notable nine-point rise in the number of women saying they know at least 'a fair amount' about Parliament, whereas the figure for men is unchanged. The perceived knowledge gender gap has thus halved from 18 points to nine.

Eight-point rises in knowledge about Parliament among 18-24-year-olds and DEs see both groups outscore their immediately older and higher groups, respectively. This is rare in the life of the Audit: knowledge of Parliament typically rises steadily with age (until 75) and social class.

By leave/remain vote, and by ethnicity, knowledge of Parliament has also risen compared to last year, but the gaps in knowledge between 'leave' and 'remain' voters, and white and BME citizens, are essentially unchanged.

By region, knowledge of Parliament is up in Scotland (by four points), the North (nine points), the Midlands (five points) and London (seven points) but down in Wales (three points) and the South (two points).

Interest in politics

More people say that they are interested in politics than that they are knowledgeable about it. The share saying that they are at least 'fairly interested' in politics has reached 57%, up four points in a year. This figure has been between

Figure 22: % Interest in politics

The gap between the shares of men and women saying that they are interested in politics has narrowed significantly, to six points. The gap - with more men than women declaring themselves interested - has typically been at 10 points or more during the life of the Audit. As with knowledge levels, the narrowing of the gender gap in political interest is due largely to a rise in the number of women saying that they are interested.

Among different age groups, interest in politics has moved in varying ways since the last study. There has been a large nine-point jump in the share of 25-34s declaring themselves interested in politics. Interest also rose notably among 45-54s and the over-75s. But political interest has fallen slightly (by two points) among 18-24s, for the first time in a post-election year Audit. All age groups older than 45 are more interested in politics than the national average, and all younger age groups less so. Among 18-24s, 59% said that they are not interested in politics; among 25-34s, the figure is 51%.

As in all previous years, interest in politics remains significantly higher in the AB and C1 social groups than among C2s and DEs. But, for the first time in the life of the Audit, more DE citizens declare themselves interested in politics than their C2 counterparts (43% to 36%). DEs' 43% interest score is up by 12 points on last year and by five points on any previous Audit.

This Audit also sees a record high - 48% - in the share of BME respondents saying that they are interested in politics. This figure is still significantly below the national average (57%), but it is four points higher than in any previous Audit, and 14 points up on last year.

By region, interest in politics has moved in divergent directions from Audit 14: it is up in Scotland (by four points), the North (by eight

50% and 59% throughout the Audit series, apart from a dip between 2012 and 2015 (see Figure 22).

The number saying that they are not interested in politics equals its Audit-series low, of 43%, previously seen in 2016. In line with this, the net 'interested' score returns to 14%, last seen in Audit 13 (2016) and exceeded only once in the Audit series, in Audit 8 (2011). This year's Audit thus repeats the pattern of a high net 'interested' score in a post-election year.

KNOWLEDGE AND INTEREST

points), the Midlands and London (by 15 points), but down in Wales and the South. Interest in politics in Scotland, the South and London remains above the level for Britain as a whole.

'Remainers' remain more interested in politics than 'leavers' (72%-60%). However, the share of politically interested 'leave' voters rose by five points on last year's Audit, against a rise of only one point among 'remainers'. This narrows the gap between the two groups from 16 to 12 points.

	Audit 14 (2017)	Audit 15 (2018)
Gender		
Male	58	60
Female	49	54
Age		
18-24	43	41
25-34	40	49
35-44	51	53
45-54	56	64
55-64	60	64
65-74	73	68
75+	52	62
Social class		
AB	77	81
C1	63	63
C2	35	36
DE	31	43
Ethnicity		
White	56	58
BME	34	48
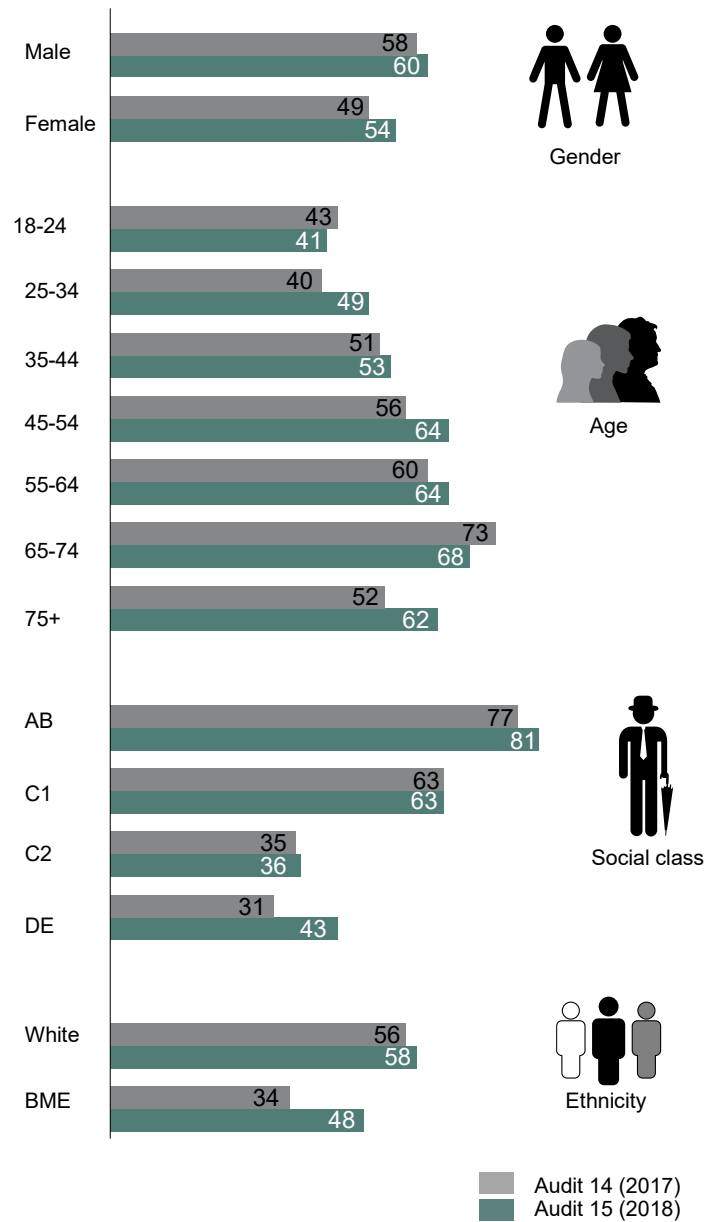
Figure 23: *% Interest in politics by demographic group*

ACTION AND PARTICIPATION

Levels of actual and potential political participation have risen, but this is driven heavily by higher levels of voting and willingness to vote. Participation in other political activities remains steady and low, including among young people.

There has been a further rise in the number of people claiming to have undertaken at least one of our 13 listed political activities in the last year: from 69% in Audit 14 to 75% in this latest Audit. This is the highest score since we began asking the question in this form in Audit 10 (2013).

The rise in political participation is driven largely by another increase in the number of people saying that they had voted in an election. With a UK-wide electoral event in three successive years, this score rose from 47% in Audit 13 to 57% last year to 65% in 2018.

The numbers of people reporting they had undertaken any of the other listed activities is barely changed from last year (see Figure 24). Even the rate of increase in the number of people claiming to have created or signed an e-petition has slowed to one point; in Audits 13 and 14, this figure rose by four and five points, respectively.

Creating or signing an e-petition and donating money or paying a membership fee to a charity or campaign remain by some distance the most frequently-undertaken activities, after voting. Despite the rise in interest in politics, the numbers of people saying that they had contacted an elected politician or the media, attended political meetings or taken an active part in a campaign or been on a demonstration, picket or march increased by at most one point compared to last year's Audit. The same applies to participation in a campaign or discussion online. None of these activities has over 12% of people saying that they undertook them in the previous year.

These observations hold even if we look only at the under-35s, whose political activism remains the subject of much discussion. Broadly, the middle age cohorts report more political participation than the two youngest groups, with activity holding up into the older age groups in some cases (contacting an elected politician; creating or signing a paper petition) and declining in others (contributing to a discussion or campaign online). Thirty-four percent of 18-24s and 37% of 25-34s report undertaking none of the listed political activities in the previous year.

Compared to age (or gender, where there are few differences), political participation is linked more closely to social group and geography. By socio-economic group, the numbers of people undertaking at least one of the listed political activities in the last year decline steadily from 88% among ABs to 81% among C1s, 69% among C2s and 61% among DEs. However, the 27-point range for this measure is smaller than the 35 points seen in Audit 14, with political activity among DEs increasing by 13 points, compared to five points for ABs.

By region, compared to the Britain-wide score of 75%, the numbers of people undertaking a political activity range from 64% in Wales to 73% in the North and Scotland, 74% in the Midlands, 76% in London and 83% in the South. Compared to Audit 14, political activity levels are unchanged in Scotland and down in Wales but up notably in the South (six points), North (seven), Midlands (eight) and London (15).

The gap between the political activity levels of 'remain' and 'leave' voters is barely changed, with the score for the two groups rising by six and five points respectively compared to Audit 14, and the lead for 'remainers' coming in at 11 points.

ACTION AND PARTICIPATION

Have done   **Would do**

	Have done (2017)	Have done (2018)	Would do (2017)	Would do (2018)	
Vote in an election	57	65	61	70	
None of these	31	25	18	12	
Donate money or pay a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation	19	23	22	26	
Create or sign an e-petition	23	24	36	38	
Contact a local councillor or MP / MSP / Welsh Assembly Member	11	12	42	43	
Boycott certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	10	10	25	27	
Contribute to a discussion or campaign online or on social media	9	10	19	21	
Create or sign a paper petition	11	10	34	37	
Take part in a public consultation	6	6	22	25	
Take an active part in a campaign	5	5	19	18	
Attend political meetings	3	3	17	17	
Donate money or pay membership fee to a political party	5	5	11	11	
Take part in a demonstration, picket or march	3	4	17	19	
Contact the media	3	4	17	19	

Audit 14 (2017)

Audit 15 (2018)

Figure 24: *% Political activities: have done in the past 12 months vs would do if felt strongly enough about an issue in the future*

When asked if they would undertake any of the 13 listed activities, if they felt sufficiently strongly about an issue, 88% of respondents said that they would. This is six points higher than in Audit 14 - so the 'potential participation' gap (between those who could become politically active and those that are) is unchanged at 13 points.

As in Audit 14, voting in an election is by some distance the most popular potential political activity, with 70% saying that they would be prepared to vote if they felt strongly enough about an issue. This is up by nine points on Audit 14, and again a record high for this measure. However, much of the increase from last year seems to comprise people who are very much *potential* voters. The number of those saying they are certain to vote has risen by only three points (to 62%), so the gap between certain (62%) and potential voters (70%) has widened from two points in Audit 14 to eight points this year.

Willingness to undertake potential political activities apart from voting is barely changed from Audit 14. And, at higher overall levels, patterns of potential willingness to undertake political activities are also broadly unchanged, with older, wealthier and white citizens more willing to countenance being active. However, DEs recorded a larger rise in their potential activity levels than other socio-economic groups, narrowing the gap between ABs and DEs on this measure from 23 points to 18.

The gap between the potential willingness to undertake political activities of 'remainers' and 'leavers' widened from two points in remainers' favour in Audit 14 to five in this Audit. This could suggest some mobilising effect from the Brexit process among some 'remainers'.

In Audit 14, there were notable regional variations in levels of potential political activity: compared to the Britain-wide figure, Scotland and the South recorded higher levels of potential activity and

London and the Midlands lower, with the range from highest to lowest at 21 points. In this Audit there is a convergence of potential political activity levels across Britain: all regions now fall within a six-point range. This is largely due to the rise in potential participation among respondents in the Midlands (from 75% in Audit 14 to 85% this year) and London (from 71% last year to 88% in this Audit). In London, mobilisation around Brexit may explain some of this increase.

EFFICACY, INFLUENCE AND INVOLVEMENT

People's belief that they can make a difference if they get involved in politics is marginally higher this year, but the public's sense of the efficacy of their involvement remains low. People's influence over decision-making at the local level is seen as stronger and more desirable than at the national level. The influence and involvement indicators show marked regional differences.

The efficacy of getting involved in politics

People's belief that they can effect political change has risen by a modest two points to 34%, repeating the rise seen in the last post-election year (Audit 13, 2016), and contrasting with the pattern seen earlier in the Audit series, when people's sense of political efficacy fell in post-election years (Audits 3 and 8, 2006 and 2011).

As Figure 25 shows, this year's political efficacy score sits roughly in the middle of the - relatively small - 30-37% range for the political efficacy measure over the life of the Audit.

Those with the strongest sense of political efficacy are, by age, the 18-24s; and, by socio-economic group, the ABs. DE citizens continue to feel more politically influential than their C2 counterparts, sustaining the lead that DEs have had on this measure since Audit 9 (2012) (with the exception of Audit 13 (2016)).

BME citizens continue to feel a stronger sense of political efficacy than their white counterparts, a lead that they have had since Audit 6 (2009).

Men have a marginally stronger sense of political efficacy than women, but they are also slightly more likely to disagree that people like them can effect change. Women's slightly more diffident

| Strongly agree | Tend to agree | Neither agree / nor disagree | Tend to disagree | Strongly disagree |

6	31	20	30	10	Audit 1 (2004)
7	30	20	31	10	
6	27	20	31	13	Audit 3 (2006)
5	28	24	31	8	
4	27	23	29	13	
3	28	22	32	13	
5	32	19	30	11	
4	26	23	31	13	Audit 8 (2011)
7	25	28	22	14	
7	25	29	24	13	
5	26	27	27	15	
4	27	29	23	12	
6	29	24	27	12	Audit 13 (2016)
5	27	28	27	11	
6	28	29	24	12	Audit 15 (2018)
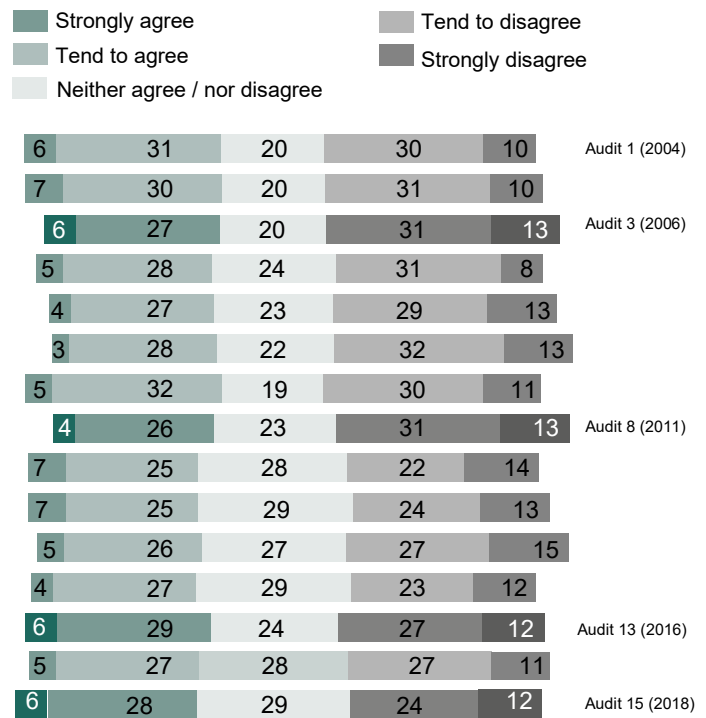
Figure 25: % When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run

stance leaves them with a higher net efficacy score than men.

As in Audit 14, 'remain' voters feel that they can have more political influence than 'leave' voters. However, the gap has narrowed, with the share of 'remainers' feeling politically efficacious declining by two points from 40% to 38%, and the share of 'leavers' feeling so rising by four points from 30% to 34%.

Desire for influence and involvement in decision-making

The number of people feeling that they have influence over local decision-making has risen compared to last year, from 23% to 27%. This is the highest score for this indicator in the 15-year life of the Audit (see Figure 26).

Perceived influence   **Desire for involvement**

	Perceived influence	Desire for involvement
Audit 9 (2012)	24	38
Audit 10 (2013)	25	48
Audit 11 (2014)	26	42
Audit 12 (2015)	20	38
Audit 13 (2016)	25	46
Audit 14 (2017)	23	46
Audit 15 (2018)	27	48

50%   50%
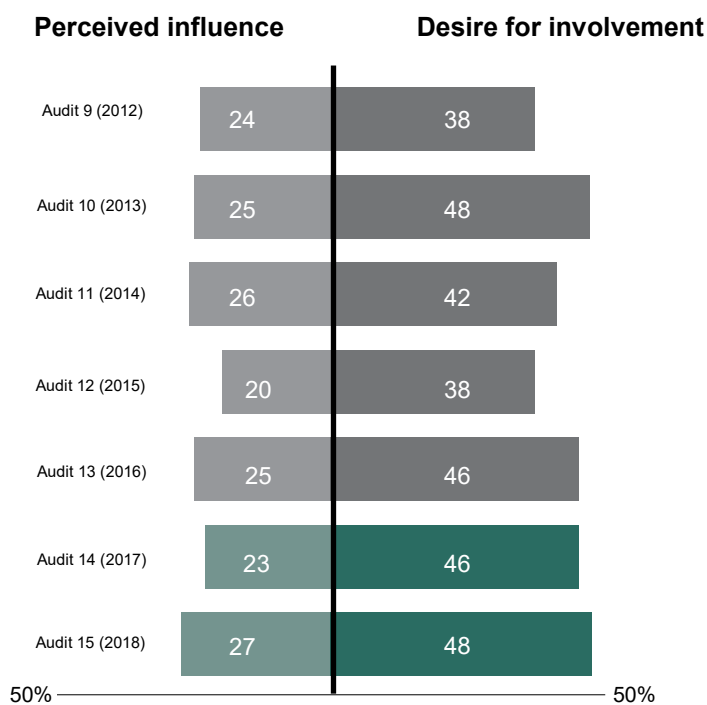
Figure 26: % Perceived influence vs desire for involvement in decision-making locally

The number of people who would like to be involved in decision-making at the local level also rose, from 46% to 48%, equalling the record score measured in Audit 6 (2009) and Audit 10 (2013).

These rises in engagement at the local level contrast with the picture for the national level. The number of people feeling that they have influence over national-level decision-making is unchanged from last year, at 16%. And the share who would like to be involved nationally fell by one point, to 40%.

To some extent, these patterns repeat those of the previous post-election Audit (Audit 13 in 2016). (That was the only previous occasion on which we asked both these sets of questions in a post-election year.) In Audit 13, both people's feeling of local influence and their desire to be locally involved rose, as in Audit 15. And, as in Audit 15,

people's sense of national influence did not rise – rather than the stagnation seen in Audit 15, it fell in Audit 13, by four points. However, people's desire to be involved in national decision-making rose in Audit 13, after the 2015 election. Although it is marginal, and although we only have two cases to examine, the drop in people's desire to be involved in national decision-making in Audit 15 is new for a post-election year.

In other respects, the influence and involvement indicators display longstanding features. The numbers of people who would like to be involved in decision-making, at both local and national level, are significantly higher than those who have recently undertaken some form of political activity, and those who feel that they currently wield some influence. People's influence over local decision-making continues to be seen as stronger and more desirable than over its national-level counterpart. And, as in previous Audits, those in higher socio-

Perceived influence   **Desire for involvement**

	Perceived influence	Desire for involvement
Audit 9 (2012)	13	33
Audit 10 (2013)	16	42
Audit 11 (2014)	14	37
Audit 12 (2015)	17	37
Audit 13 (2016)	13	42
Audit 14 (2017)	16	41
Audit 15 (2018)	16	40

30%   50%
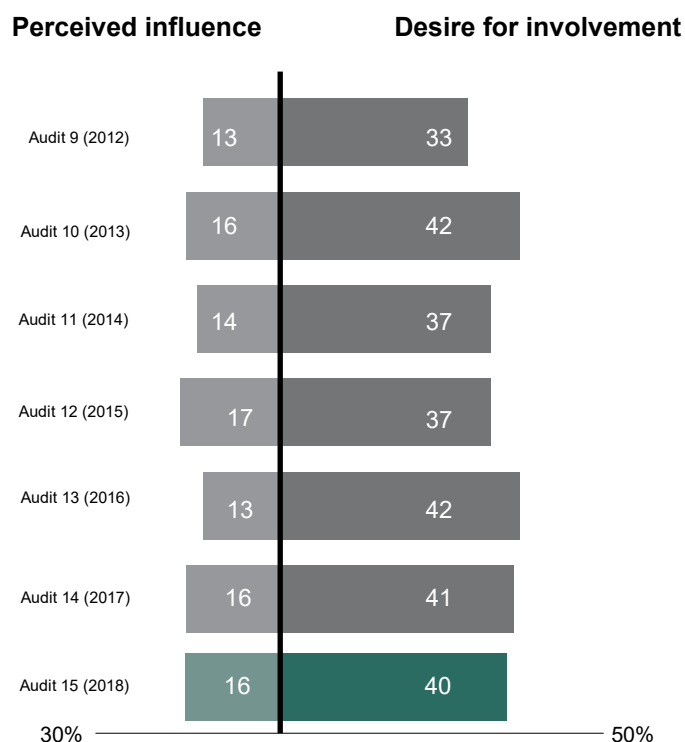
Figure 27: % Perceived influence vs desire for involvement in decision-making nationally

economic groups are more likely both to feel that they have decision-making influence and to want to be involved. White respondents are more positive than their BME counterparts about influence and potential involvement at the local level, while the positions are reversed for decision-making nationally.

By region, those in the South and London feel that they have significantly more influence over local decision-making than those in other parts of Britain, with only 11% of those in Wales feeling locally influential. There is far less difference across different parts of Britain in the shares of those who would like to be involved in local decision-making.

For national decision-making, London stands out as having a much higher share of people feeling influential and wishing to be involved than any other part of Britain.

As in Audit 14, 'leave' voters feel that they have less influence over national decision-making than their 'remain' counterparts, although both groups feel marginally less influential than they did last year.

DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF RESULTS

Gender

Age

Social class
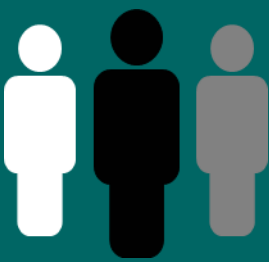
Ethnicity
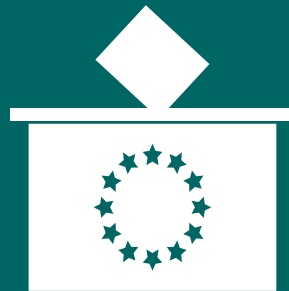
'Remainers' and 'Leavers'

Nations and regions

DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER

	Male	**Female**

Certainty to vote (absolutely certain - score 10 out of 10)

Male: 59%
Female: 64%
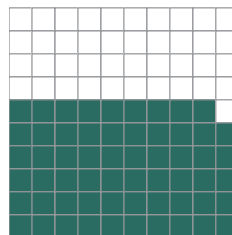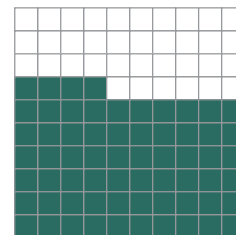
Interest in politics (very / fairly interested)

Male: 60%
Female: 54%
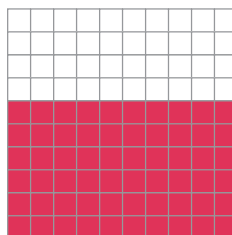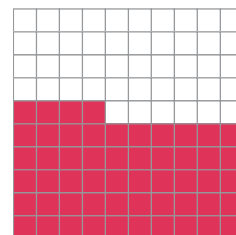
Knowledge of politics (knows at least a fair amount)

Male: 58%
Female: 46%
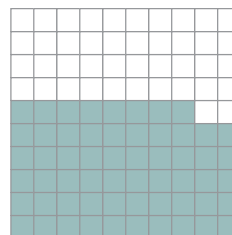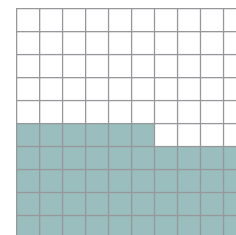
Knowledge of Parliament (knows at least a fair amount)
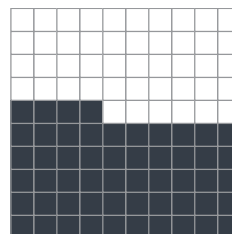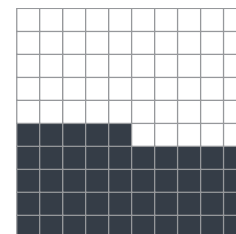
Male: 54%
Female: 45%

Satisfaction with present system of governing (satisfied it works well)
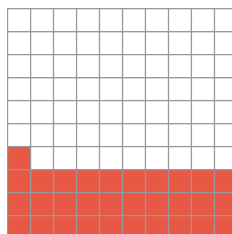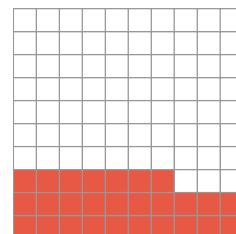
Male: 31%
Female: 27%

Feel getting involved is effective (agree)

Male: 36%
Female: 33%
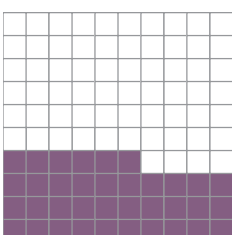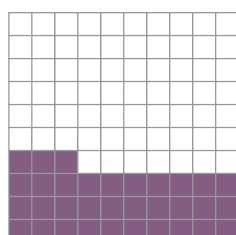
| 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65-74 | 75+ |

Certainty to vote
(absolutely certain - score 10 out of 10)

| 44% | 49% | 55% | 69% | 68% | 75% | 76% |

Interest in politics (very / fairly interested)

| 41% | 49% | 53% | 64% | 64% | 68% | 62% |

Knowledge of politics (knows at least a fair amount)

| 39% | 35% | 52% | 56% | 63% | 68% | 52% |

Knowledge of Parliament (knows at least a fair amount)

| 38% | 36% | 44% | 56% | 60% | 62% | 51% |

Satisfaction with present system of governing (satisfied it works well)

| 28% | 31% | 22% | 26% | 31% | 33% | 35% |

Feel getting involved is effective (agree)

| 41% | 34% | 36% | 37% | 30% | 33% | 29% |

DEMOGRAPHICS

	AB	C1	C2	DE
Certainty to vote (absolutely certain - score 10 out of 10)	79%	69%	44%	49%
Interest in politics (very / fairly interested)	81%	63%	36%	43%
Knowledge of politics (knows at least a fair amount)	75%	55%	36%	36%
Knowledge of Parliament (knows at least a fair amount)	73%	54%	31%	33%
Satisfaction with present system of governing (satisfied it works well)	36%	31%	22%	25%
Feel getting involved is effective (agree)	39%	34%	25%	37%

	White	BME
Certainty to vote (absolutely certain - score 10 out of 10)	63%	53%
Interest in politics (very / fairly interested)	58%	48%
Knowledge of politics (knows at least a fair amount)	53%	41%
Knowledge of Parliament (knows at least a fair amount)	51%	39%
Satisfaction with present system of governing (satisfied it works well)	29%	32%
Feel getting involved is effective (agree)	34%	40%

DEMOGRAPHICS — 'REMAINERS' AND 'LEAVERS'

	Remain	Leave
Certainty to vote (absolutely certain - score 10 out of 10)	75%	71%
Interest in politics (very / fairly interested)	72%	60%
Knowledge of politics (knows at least a fair amount)	67%	54%
Knowledge of Parliament (knows at least a fair amount)	64%	52%
Satisfaction with present system of governing (satisfied it works well)	28%	32%
Feel getting involved is effective (agree)	38%	34%
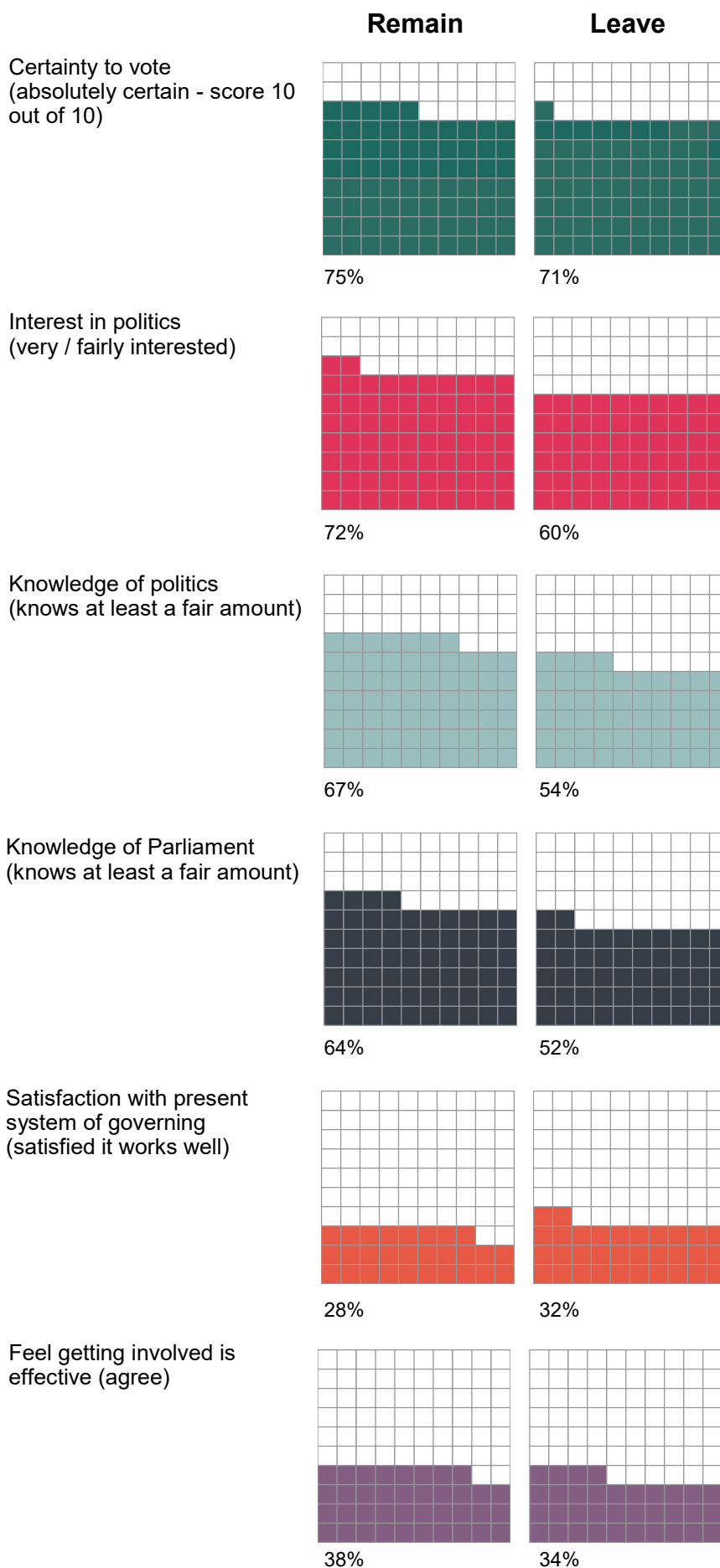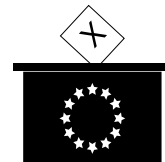
NATIONS AND REGIONS

	Scotland	Wales	North	Midlands	South	London

Certainty to vote
(absolutely certain - score 10 out of 10)
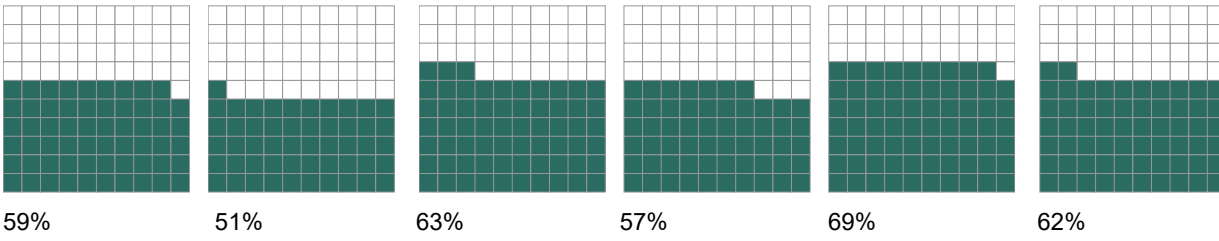
Scotland	Wales	North	Midlands	South	London
59%	51%	63%	57%	69%	62%

Interest in politics (very / fairly interested)

Scotland	Wales	North	Midlands	South	London
62%	45%	54%	52%	64%	63%

Knowledge of politics (knows at least a fair amount)

Scotland	Wales	North	Midlands	South	London
56%	34%	48%	52%	56%	55%

Knowledge of Parliament (knows at least a fair amount)

Scotland	Wales	North	Midlands	South	London
50%	31%	44%	50%	54%	56%

Satisfaction with present system of governing (satisfied it works well)

Scotland	Wales	North	Midlands	South	London
14%	23%	23%	28%	37%	41%

Feel getting involved is effective (agree)

Scotland	Wales	North	Midlands	South	London
36%	24%	38%	30%	28%	51%
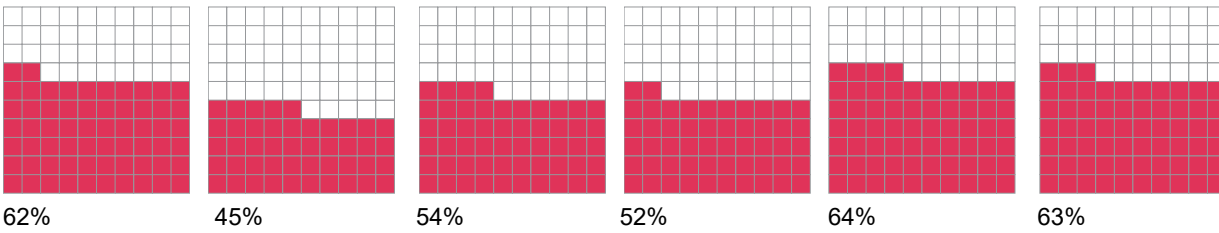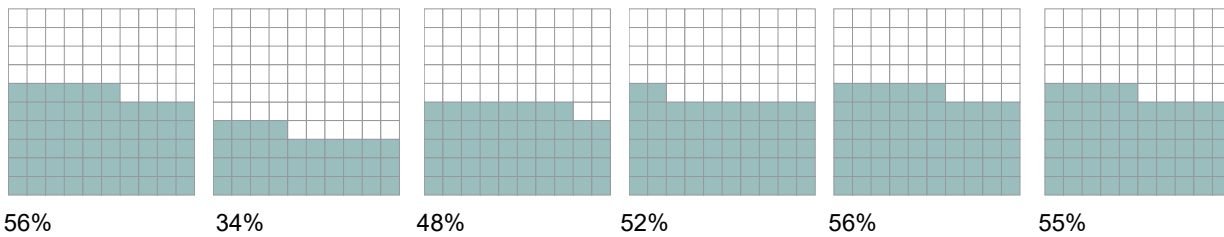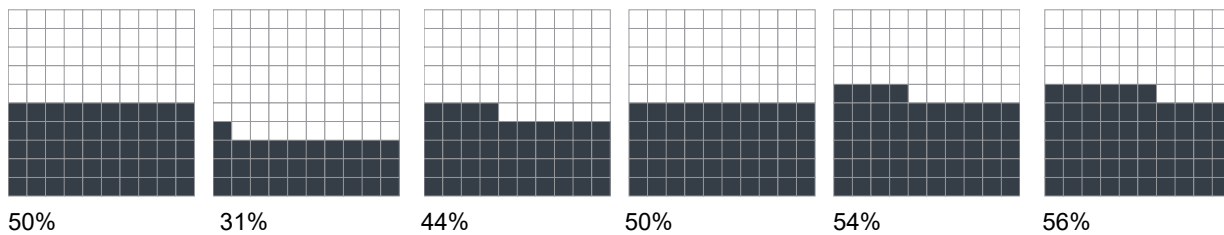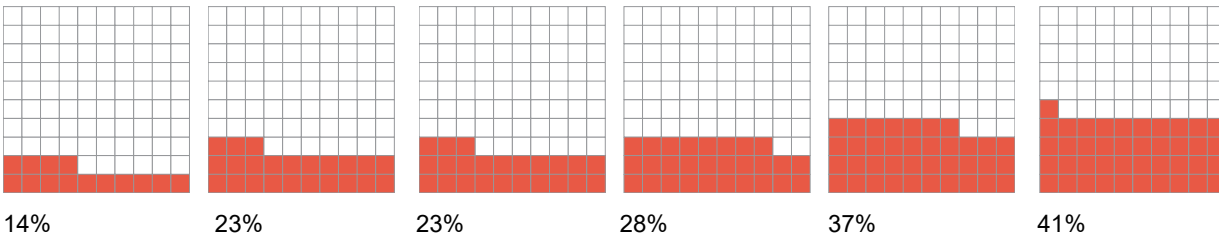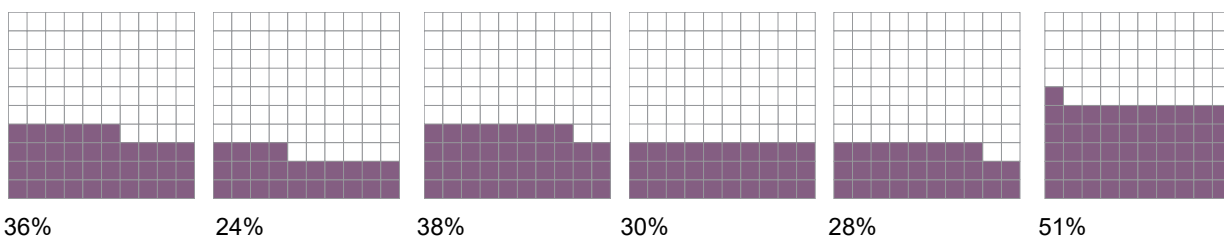
POLL TOPLINE FINDINGS

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?														

|	APE 1 (2004) %	APE 2 (2005) %	APE 3 (2006) %	APE 4 (2007) %	APE 5 (2008) %	APE 6 (2009) %	APE 7 (2010) %	APE 8 (2011) %	APE 9 (2012) %	APE 10 (2013) %	APE 11 (2014) %	APE 12 (2015) %	APE 13 (2016) %	APE 14 (2017) %	**APE 15 (2018) %**
10	51	52	55	55	53	53	54	58	48	41	49	49	59	59	**62**
9	6	6	7	6	4	5	6	4	4	4	6	4	4	4	**5**
8	8	8	7	7	7	8	7	7	5	7	7	6	7	6	**6**
7	5	5	7	6	5	6	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	4	**3**
6	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	5	4	5	4	2	**3**
5	7	7	6	5	8	7	7	6	8	9	8	8	5	7	**8**
4	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	**1**
3	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	5	2	3	2	2	**2**
2	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	1	3	3	3	2	1	1	**1**
1	11	11	10	11	10	11	12	10	16	20	11	12	10	11	**8**
Don't know	2	1	1	0	3	2	2	2	3	*	2	3	2	1	**2**
Refused	0	0	0	1	*	*	*	*	2	1	-	1	0	0	**0**

Q2	In the last 12 months have you done any of the following to influence decisions, laws or policies?					

	APE10 %	APE11 %	APE12 %	APE13 %	APE14 %	**APE15 %**
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation	20	20	13	24	19	**23**
Voted in an election	27	18	27	47	57	**65**
Created or signed a paper petition	8	16	9	8	11	**10**
Created or signed an e-petition	9	14	14	18	23	**24**
Contacted a local councillor or MP / MSP / Welsh Assembly Member	8	12	12	12	11	**12**
Boycotted certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	6	10	9	11	10	**10**
Taken an active part in a campaign	2	7	4	6	5	**5**
Contributed to a discussion or campaign online or on social media	3	6	7	10	9	**10**
Taken part in a public consultation	4	6	5	7	6	**6**
Contacted the media	2	3	3	4	3	**4**
Attended political meetings	2	3	3	5	3	**3**
Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party	1	2	3	5	5	**5**
Taken part in a demonstration, picket, or march	1	2	3	4	3	**4**
None of these	50	52	55	39	31	**25**
Don't know	0	*	1	1	*	*

Q3	Which of the following would you be prepared to do if you felt strongly enough about an issue?					
	APE10 %	APE11 %	APE12 %	APE13 %	APE14 %	**APE15 %**
Donate money or pay a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation	17	21	14	22	22	**26**
Vote in an election	42	46	35	55	61	**70**
Create or sign a paper petition	34	43	29	35	34	**37**
Create or sign an e-petition	25	31	23	34	36	**38**
Contact a local councillor or MP / MSP / Welsh Assembly Member	41	51	33	52	42	**43**
Boycott certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons	14	25	15	24	25	**27**
Take an active part in a campaign	14	22	15	21	19	**18**
Contribute to a discussion or campaign online or on social media	8	14	14	19	19	**21**
Take part in a public consultation	14	21	16	22	22	**25**
Contact the media	16	22	17	20	17	**19**
Attend political meetings	10	15	15	15	17	**17**
Donate money or pay a membership fee to a political party	5	7	8	10	11	**11**
Take part in a demonstration, picket, or march	10	16	14	16	17	**19**
None of these	22	20	29	19	18	**12**
Don't know	-	1	3	1	1	**1**

Q4	How interested would you say you are in politics?					
	Very interested %	Fairly interested %	Not very interested %	Not at all interested %	Don't know %	*Very / fairly interested %*
APE 1	11	39	32	18	*	*50*
APE 2	13	40	28	19	*	*53*
APE 3	13	43	30	14	*	*56*
APE 4	13	41	27	19	*	*54*
APE 5	13	38	28	19	1	*51*
APE 6	12	40	30	17	*	*52*
APE 7	14	39	29	18	1	*53*
APE 8	16	42	26	17	*	*58*
APE 9	8	34	33	24	1	*42*
APE 10	10	32	32	26	*	*42*
APE 11	11	39	31	20	*	*50*
APE 12	12	36	33	18	1	*49*
APE 13	18	39	25	18	*	*57*
APE 14	17	36	27	19	0	*53*
APE 15	**16**	**41**	**25**	**18**	**0**	*57*

Q5a	How much, if anything, do you feel you know about...politics?					
	A great deal %	A fair amount %	Not very much %	Nothing at all %	Don't know %	A great deal / a fair amount %
APE 1	3	39	45	12	1	42
APE 2	4	41	44	10	*	45
APE 3	4	35	51	9	*	39
APE 4	6	43	40	11	*	49
APE 5	4	40	43	12	*	44
APE 6	5	43	42	9	1	48
APE 7	6	45	40	9	*	51
APE 8	7	46	36	11	*	53
APE 9	4	40	41	15	1	44
APE 10	4	38	42	16	*	42
APE 11	6	44	38	12	*	50
APE 12	5	42	39	14	1	47
APE 13	8	47	32	12	*	55
APE 14	8	41	38	13	*	49
APE 15	**9**	**43**	**37**	**11**	*	**52**

Q5b	How much, if anything, do you feel you know about...the UK Parliament?					
	A great deal %	A fair amount %	Not very much %	Nothing at all %	Don't know %	A great deal / a fair amount %
APE 1*	3	30	50	17	1	33
APE 4*	4	34	46	14	1	38
APE 7*	4	33	47	15	1	37
APE 8	5	39	43	13	*	44
APE 9	4	36	43	16	1	40
APE 10	4	33	45	17	*	37
APE 11	5	43	39	13	*	48
APE 12	6	41	39	13	1	47
APE 13	8	44	34	13	*	52
APE 14	7	38	41	14	*	45
APE 15	**7**	**43**	**38**	**13**	*	**49**

Asked as 'The Westminster Parliament', comparisons with later waves should therefore be seen as indicative.

Q6	Which of these statements best describes your opinion on the present system of governing Britain?					
	Works extremely well and could not be improved %	Could be improved in small ways but mainly works well %	Could be improved quite a lot %	Needs a great deal of improvement %	Don't know %	*Works well* %
APE 1	2	34	42	18	4	*36*
APE 2	2	32	45	18	3	*34*
APE 3	1	33	41	21	4	*34*
APE 4	2	31	40	21	6	*33*
APE 5	2	30	38	24	6	*32*
APE 6	2	31	40	24	3	*33*
APE 7	1	27	42	27	4	*28*
APE 8	1	30	39	25	5	*31*
APE 9	2	22	41	26	10	*24*
APE 10	2	25	41	27	6	*27*
APE 11	3	30	41	23	3	*33*
APE 12	1	25	41	27	6	*26*
APE 13	2	31	40	23	4	*33*
APE 14	3	29	41	24	3	*31*
APE 15	**2**	**27**	**38**	**29**	**4**	*29*

Q7	Would you call yourself a very strong, fairly strong, not very strong, or not a supporter at all of any political party?					
	Very strong %	Fairly strong %	Not very strong %	Not a supporter %	Don't know %	Refused %	*Strong supporter* %
APE 4	6	30	38	24	1	*	*36*
APE 11	7	23	36	33	*	*	*30*
APE 12	8	22	35	32	2	1	*30*
APE 13	8	33	33	25	1	-	*41*
APE 14	7	24	37	31	*	0	*31*
APE 15	**8**	**30**	**34**	**28**	**1**	**0**	*37*

Q8	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? When people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run.						
	Strongly agree %	Tend to agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Tend to disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't know %	*Agree* *%*
APE 1	6	31	20	30	10	4	*37*
APE 2	7	30	20	31	10	2	*37*
APE 3	6	27	20	31	13	3	*33*
APE 4	5	28	24	31	8	4	*33*
APE 5	4	27	23	29	13	3	*31*
APE 6	3	28	22	32	13	2	*31*
APE 7	5	32	19	30	11	4	*37*
APE 8	4	26	23	31	13	3	*30*
APE 9	7	25	28	22	14	5	*32*
APE 10	7	25	29	24	13	2	*32*
APE 11	5	26	27	27	15	2	*31*
APE 12	4	27	29	23	12	5	*32*
APE 13	6	29	24	27	12	2	*35*
APE 14	5	27	28	27	11	1	*32*
APE 15	**6**	**28**	**29**	**24**	**12**	**1**	***34***

Q9	To what extent do you agree or disagree that: Important questions should be determined by referendums more often than today?			
	APE9 %	APE13 %	APE 14 %	**APE 15** **%**
Strongly agree	33	33	25	**20**
Partly agree	39	42	36	**38**
Partly disagree	7	11	20	**20**
Strongly disagree	3	6	14	**16**
Not sure what a referendum is (spontaneous response)	7	2	1	**1**
Don't know	10	6	4	**5**
Strongly / partly agree	*72*	*76*	*61*	*58*

Q10a How much influence, if any, do you feel you have over decision-making in…
...your local area?

	A great deal %	A fair amount %	Not very much %	Nothing at all %	Don't know %	A great deal / a fair amount %
APE 6	1	24	41	32	2	25
APE 9	2	22	39	32	5	24
APE 10	2	24	40	33	2	26
APE 11	2	24	44	29	1	26
APE 12	1	19	44	33	4	20
APE 13	2	23	39	34	2	25
APE 14	1	22	40	37	1	23
APE 15	**1**	**26**	**39**	**33**	**1**	**27**

Q10b How much influence, if any, do you feel you have over decision-making in…
...the country as a whole?

	A great deal %	A fair amount %	Not very much %	Nothing at all %	Don't know %	A great deal / a fair amount %
APE 6	*	14	44	41	1	14
APE 9	*	12	40	43	5	12
APE 10	1	15	43	40	2	16
APE 11	1	13	46	40	1	14
APE 12	1	16	38	41	4	17
APE 13	1	12	42	43	1	13
APE 14	1	15	41	42	*	16
APE 15	**1**	**16**	**42**	**40**	**1**	**16**

Q11a

To what extent, if at all, would you like to be involved in decision-making in …
...your local area?

	Very involved %	Fairly involved %	Not very involved %	Not at all involved %	Don't know %	*Very / fairly involved* %
APE 6	5	43	32	18	2	*48*
APE 8	5	38	38	17	2	*43*
APE 9	5	33	33	25	4	*38*
APE 10	8	39	29	22	1	*47*
APE 11	6	37	35	21	1	*43*
APE 12	7	31	36	22	4	*38*
APE 13	11	35	29	23	1	*46*
APE 14	9	37	30	24	*	*46*
APE 15	**7**	**41**	**30**	**22**	**1**	*48*

Q11b

To what extent, if at all, would you like to be involved in decision-making in …
...the country as a whole?

	Very involved %	Fairly involved %	Not very involved %	Not at all involved %	Don't know %	*Very / fairly involved* %
APE 6	5	38	33	22	2	*43*
APE 8	8	34	38	19	2	*42*
APE 9	6	27	34	30	3	*33*
APE 10	7	35	32	25	2	*42*
APE 11	6	32	37	25	1	*38*
APE 12	8	28	34	26	4	*37*
APE 13	9	32	30	27	1	*41*
APE 14	8	33	33	25	*	*41*
APE 15	**7**	**33**	**33**	**26**	**1**	*40*

Q12	Thinking generally, which two or three of these, if any, are usually most important to you in deciding which political party to vote for? Whether the party...	
	APE4 %	APE15 %
Represents the interests of people like me	40	28
Takes on board the views of the public	31	24
Draws party candidates from a cross-section of society	6	8
Leads campaigns around local issues	10	8
Has policies I fully support	34	30
Promotes the single issue that is most important	5	7
Is the least worst option	8	9
Is the most competent	19	20
Campaigns on the doorstep to meet local voters	6	5
Believes in the same thing as me	21	23
Has a leader I prefer	9	14
Can be trusted to keep its promises	30	32
Has a local candidate I prefer	7	12
Other (specify)	0	1
None of these	3	4
I never vote for a political party	5	4
Don't know	6	2

Q13a	I'd now like you to think back at the last general election held in June this year. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? ...I was happy with the choice of political parties available to me.					
	Strongly agree %	Tend to agree %	Neither %	Tend to disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't know %	Agree %
APE 15	15	35	23	17	9	1	50

Q13b	I'd now like you to think back at the last general election held in June this year. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? ...There was more than one party that appealed to me.					
	Strongly agree %	Tend to agree %	Neither %	Tend to disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't know %	Agree %
APE 15	7	23	21	22	27	1	29

Q14a	I'd now like you to think about the role of political parties in general. On balance, how good or bad do you think that political parties are at each of the following? ...Providing a way for ordinary people to get involved in politics.						
	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it* %
APE 15	2	14	41	27	15	1	*16*

Q14b	I'd now like you to think about the role of political parties in general. On balance, how good or bad do you think that political parties are at each of the following? ...Providing capable politicians to run the country.						
	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it* %
APE 15	3	16	37	29	15	*	*19*

Q14c	I'd now like you to think about the role of political parties in general. On balance, how good or bad do you think that political parties are at each of the following? ...Telling voters about the issues they feel are most important in Britain and how they will work to solve them.						
	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it* %
APE 15	4	19	38	26	12	1	*24*

Q14d	I'd now like you to think about the role of political parties in general. On balance, how good or bad do you think that political parties are at each of the following? ...Ensuring that their candidates for elections represent a cross-section of British society.						
	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it* %
APE 15	2	18	40	29	11	1	*20*

Q14e	I'd now like you to think about the role of political parties in general. On balance, how good or bad do you think that political parties are at each of the following? ...Creating policy ideas that are in the long-term interests of Britain as a whole.						
	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it* %
APE 15	2	19	38	27	13	1	*22*

Q15a

I'd now like you to think about how the system of governing Britain is working today. On balance, how good or bad do you think that the system of governing Britain is at each of the following?
...Ensuring the views of most Britons are represented.

	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it %*
APE 15	3	19	35	30	13	*	*22*

Q15b

I'd now like you to think about how the system of governing Britain is working today. On balance, how good or bad do you think that the system of governing Britain is at each of the following?
...Providing Britain with a stable government.

	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it %*
APE 15	4	19	34	28	15	*	*22*

Q15c

I'd now like you to think about how the system of governing Britain is working today. On balance, how good or bad do you think that the system of governing Britain is at each of the following?
...Ensuring the rights of minority groups are protected.

	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it %*
APE 15	4	27	36	21	10	1	*31*

Q15d

I'd now like you to think about how the system of governing Britain is working today. On balance, how good or bad do you think that the system of governing Britain is at each of the following?
...Encouraging governments to take long-term decisions.

	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it %*
APE 15	2	15	40	27	15	1	*17*

Q15e

I'd now like you to think about how the system of governing Britain is working today. On balance, how good or bad do you think that the system of governing Britain is at each of the following?
...Allowing ordinary people to get involved with politics.

	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it %*
APE 15	3	18	36	31	12	*	*21*

Q15f	I'd now like you to think about how the system of governing Britain is working today. On balance, how good or bad do you think that the system of governing Britain is at each of the following? ...Providing political parties who offer clear alternatives to one another.						
	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it %*
APE 15	2	24	38	25	10	1	*26*

Q15g	I'd now like you to think about how the system of governing Britain is working today. On balance, how good or bad do you think that the system of governing Britain is at each of the following? ...Allowing for voters to have the final say about Britain's future direction.						
	Very good at it %	Fairly good at it %	Neither good nor bad %	Fairly bad at it %	Very bad at it %	Don't know %	*Good at it %*
APE 15	3	19	37	26	15	*	*22*

Q16	In the last 12 months have you done any of the following?
	APE 15 %
Visited the website or social media account of a politician or political party	19
Visited other politically related websites or social media accounts	12
Watched politically related video content online (e.g. Facebook Live, YouTube)	29
Contacted a politician or political party on social media	5
Followed a politician or political party on social media	12
Contributed to a political discussion on social media	10
Shared something politically related on social media, such as a news story, article or your own political statement	17
Created or signed an e-petition	28
None of these	48
Don't know	*

Q17	Thinking back to the general election held in June this year, can you tell me which, if any, of the following ways you received election related news or information?
	APE15 %
Printed newspapers or magazines	39
Debates or interviews with party leaders or other politicians	25
Printed campaign publicity from the political parties, for example leaflets or posters on billboards	49
Online campaign publicity from political parties, for example emails or posts on social media	17
Discussions or conversations you had with people face to face	36
Discussions on social media, for example Facebook, Twitter or a blog	21
News or news programmes on TV or radio	69
Opening a news article online after clicking a link from a post on social media	19
Going directly to online news sites such as the BBC or newspaper sites, not via link from a post on social media	32
Other politically related sites, such as blogs	6
Non-politically related sites, such as charity	5
Other	*
Don't know	1
None of these	8

Q18a	And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote? ...Printed newspapers or magazines. *Base = 518*					
	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important %*
APE 15	15	39	30	16	*	*54*

Q18b

And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote?
...Debates or interviews with party leaders or other politicians.

Base = 345

	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important %*
APE 15	25	50	18	8	0	*74*

Q18c

And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote?
...Printed campaign publicity from the political parties, for example leaflets or posters on billboards.

Base = 621

	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important %*
APE 15	7	27	33	33	0	*34*

Q18d

And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote?
...Online campaign publicity from political parties, for example emails or posts on social media.

Base = 213

	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important %*
APE 15	10	36	26	26	1	*46*

Q18e

And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote?
...Discussions or conversations you had with people face to face.

Base = 448

	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important %*
APE 15	18	54	16	12	0	*72*

Q18f	And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote? ...Discussions on social media, for example Facebook, Twitter or a blog. Base = 261					
	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important* %
APE 15	10	39	32	19	*	*50*

Q18g	And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote? ...News or news programmes on TV or radio. Base = 875					
	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important* %
APE 15	21	48	20	11	*	*69*

Q18h	And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote? ...Opening a news article online after clicking a link from a post on social media. Base = 242					
	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important* %
APE 15	6	41	37	15	0	*47*

Q18i	And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote? ...Going directly to online news sites such as the BBC or newspaper sites, not via link from a post on social media. Base = 391					
	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important* %
APE 15	20	51	21	8	1	*70*

Q18j	And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote? ...Other politically related sites, such as blogs. *Base = 86*					
	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important %*
APE 15	5	33	39	23	0	*38*

Q18k	And how important were each of the following in helping you decide which way to vote or not to vote? ...Non-politically related sites, such as charity. *Base = 72*					
	Very important %	Fairly important %	Not very important %	Not at all important %	Don't know %	*Important %*
APE 15	12	31	39	18	0	*43*

Q19a	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? ...Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are giving a voice to people who would not normally take part in political debate.					
	Strongly agree %	Tend to agree %	Neither %	Tend to disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't know %	*Agree %*
APE 15	18	36	30	7	5	3	*55*

Q19b	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? ...Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are breaking down barriers between voters and political parties.					
	Strongly agree %	Tend to agree %	Neither %	Tend to disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't know %	*Agree %*
APE 15	9	31	36	14	8	3	*40*

Q19c	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? ...Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are making political debate more divisive than it used to be.						
	Strongly agree %	Tend to agree %	Neither %	Tend to disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't know %	*Agree %*
APE 15	17	32	35	7	5	4	*49*

Q19d	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? ...Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are making political debate more superficial than it used to be.						
	Strongly agree %	Tend to agree %	Neither %	Tend to disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Don't know %	*Agree %*
APE 15	16	29	37	9	5	3	*46*

- An asterisk (*) indicates a finding of less than 0.5% but greater than zero.
- A dash (-) indicates that nobody chose a response.

ABOUT THE AUDIT

The Audit of Political Engagement is a time-series study providing an annual benchmark to measure political engagement in Great Britain, gauging public opinion about politics and the political system, and more broadly the general health of our democracy.

Each Audit report presents the findings from a public opinion survey, providing detailed commentary on a range of measures that have been chosen as key measures of political engagement. Repeating questions in successive years enables us to chronicle the public's responses year on year and track the direction and magnitude of change since the Audit was first published in 2004, building trend data on public attitudes to key aspects of our democracy.

This fifteenth Audit report is based on a survey of the public undertaken by Ipsos MORI between 1 December and 18 December 2017 with a representative quota sample of adults aged 18+ across Great Britain. Booster samples were included to make comparisons between England, Scotland and Wales and between the white and black and minority ethnic (BME) populations more statistically reliable. The data was then weighted to match the national population profile.

The study provides not a prediction but a snapshot of public perceptions of, and engagement with, politics at a given moment in time. Its findings go beyond the normal vicissitudes of the political and electoral cycle, offering greater depth and insight into public attitudes to politics than can be found in one-off polls and instant responses to events and news headlines.

Building blocks of engagement

In the Audit we look at core inter-locking areas that we know are vital facets, or 'building blocks', of political engagement. Given the multi-dimensional nature of political engagement, the indicators we

have chosen are not exhaustive. But in capturing aspects of public behaviour, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and values towards politics they help us understand the drivers of political engagement and the relationships between them. Across the Audit series several 'core' indicator questions have been asked each year, supplemented by a range of thematic and topical questions, some of which are re-visited on two- or three-year cycles

Levels of public knowledge and interest are explored because they are known to be important factors in engagement, given the strong correlation between familiarity and favourability. The more people know about an institution, service or process, the more positive they tend to be towards it and the more willing they may be to participate and get involved.

Political engagement can be measured in terms of what people think, but also in terms of what they do. We therefore look at levels of public action and participation in the political process, capturing both formal and informal forms of engagement that require varying levels of time and commitment. The Audit study was initiated in response to the drop in turnout at the 2001 general election, so tracking the public's propensity to vote has always been a key aspect of the study. But while public participation is

the lifeblood of representative democracy, politics is about more than casting a vote every so often, so the study also looks at a repertoire of other activities through which people can express their views between elections and without relying on political parties or MPs. And we look not just at what people claim to have done in the last year but what activities they say they would be willing to do in the future if they felt strongly enough about an issue, enabling us to chart the gap between actual and potential engagement.

Building on the familiarity indicators, we look at the public's favourability towards aspects of the political system through a series of questions in relation to their sense of efficacy and satisfaction. We explore public satisfaction with the way our system of governing Britain works and the extent to which people believe their involvement in politics would be worthwhile in bringing about change in the way the country is run.

Engagement operates at a number of levels. We therefore track the public's appetite for both local and national involvement in decision-making, and, as a further facet of their sense of political efficacy and satisfaction, the extent to which they feel they have any influence over decision-making at each level.

We also focus on public perceptions of Parliament as the core institution of our democracy. We look at the public's knowledge of Parliament, and their perception of its importance and relevance and its effectiveness in performing its accountability function, and in engaging with and addressing the issues that matter to them.

The relationship between elected representatives and the public is at the heart of our system of representative democracy. Power is vested in the public who turn out on election day to choose who will represent them in Parliament as their MPs, and they retain the right, next time round, to 'kick the rascals out' if they are dissatisfied with them. Periodically in the Audit series we therefore revisit

questions about public attitudes to MPs, exploring how well the public think they fulfil their representative function.

In our democratic system, political parties are the link in the chain between the public and their representatives. There has long been concern that parties are no longer representative of the wider public and therefore cannot mobilise mass participation in the political process, leading to a widening of the gap between the people and the political elite. We therefore look regularly at the extent to which political parties command public support and among which groups of the public.

The Audit results generally dispel the notion that the public are apathetic about politics. However, citizens are generally disenchanted with the workings of the political system and have a low sense of satisfaction with it. But low levels of satisfaction with the culture and practice of politics do not seem to undermine the public's faith in democracy overall. Nonetheless, politics remains a minority interest and most people are onlookers rather than active participants in formal political processes. And yet there is a latent desire among a significant proportion of the public to be involved in decision-making that remains untapped, particularly at the local level.

One of the clearest findings across the Audit series is the extent to which political engagement is unequal. There are important, often substantial, differences between the engagement levels of those in the highest and lowest socio-economic groups, between the youngest and oldest, and white and BME citizens across many indicators, including knowledge and interest, action and participation, and desire for involvement in politics. But in two areas – satisfaction with the system of governing, and the perceived efficacy of their own involvement – the public tend to possess a common – largely negative – view, regardless of social, economic, educational or ethnic background.

METHODOLOGY

This 15th Audit report is based on a public opinion survey conducted by Ipsos MORI with a representative quota sample of 1,230 adults aged 18+ across Great Britain. The research was carried out face-to-face in people's homes as part of Ipsos MORI's omnibus survey between 1 December and 18 December 2017.

Booster samples were included to make comparisons between England, Scotland and Wales, and between the white and BME populations, more statistically reliable. A total of 200 BME, 182 Scottish and 108 Welsh interviews were held.

As in previous Audit waves the data was then weighted to match the population profile by Ipsos MORI. These weights are regularly updated to incorporate the most recent national data.

Weighting

As the Audit is a tracking study, targets are updated to reflect population change where necessary but the changes in the weighting scheme are kept to a minimum to allow for longitudinal comparability. However, elements of the sample design (the inclusion of boosters) and other factors sometimes necessitate adding extra controls to prevent biases arising in the figures.

Last year (Audit 14) Ipsos MORI retained all the weighting factors used in previous Audit waves but refined two of them (tenure by region and social grade applied by age) to prevent sub-national distortions within the national totals, and added a new weight (education by age) to maximise the accuracy of the sample.

In this Audit, while retaining all the weighting factors used in Audit 14, the interactions between them have been simplified without losing the representativeness, thus maximising the effective base size: controls for tenure, social grade and education were applied separately to the whole sample.

Sampling tolerances

All results are subject to sampling tolerances. This means that not all differences are statistically significant. The people in the survey are only samples of the 'total' population of Great Britain, so we cannot be certain that the figures obtained are exactly those we would have if everybody in Britain had been interviewed (the 'true' values). However, the variation between the sample results and the true values can be predicted from the knowledge of the size of the samples on which the results are based and the number of times that a particular answer is
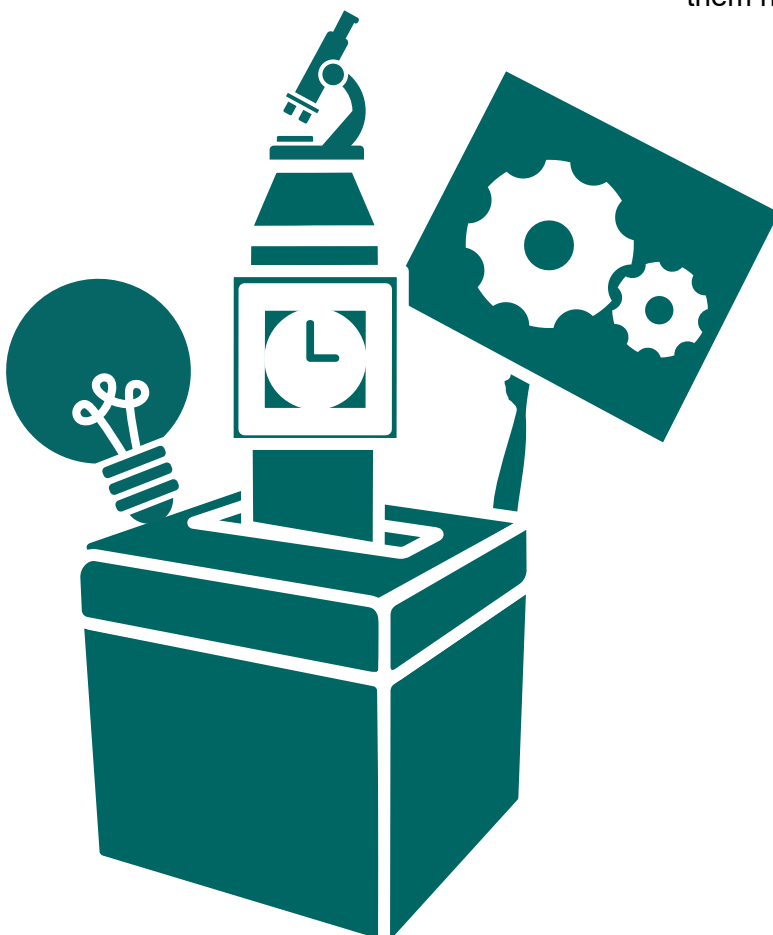
Weight	Source
1. Age by sex	Office of National Statistics Mid-Year Estimates 2015
2. Work status by sex	Labour Force Survey Quarterly Supplement December 2016- February 2017
3. Social grade by age	National Readership Survey January 2016- December 2016
4. Car in household	Office for National Statistics Census 2011
5. Ethnic group	Office for National Statistics Census 2011
6. Tenure by region	National Readership Survey January 2016- December 2016
7. Education attainments by age	Office for National Statistics Census 2011

Some graphs and tables may also not add up to 100% if 'don't knows' or refused responses have not been included.

Data has been analysed by rounding weighted counts of responses to the nearest whole number before calculating percentages. As a result there may in some cases be a difference of one percentage point between findings reported here and those in previous Audit studies.

given. The confidence with which this prediction can be made is usually 95% - that is, the chances are 95 in 100 that the 'true' value will fall within a specified range. The Audit sample size has a margin of up to +/-3.6% at the 95% confidence level. (This allows for the 'design effect': because the data is weighted, the effective sample size is smaller than the real sample size.) So if 50% of people give a particular response we can be sure (19 times out of 20) that the actual figure would be between 46.4% and 53.6%.

Percentages

Where percentages do not add up to exactly 100% this may be due to computer rounding or because multiple answers were permitted for a question.

IMAGES AND ICONS

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The **Hansard Society** believes that the health of representative democracy rests on the foundation of a strong Parliament and an informed and engaged citizenry. Founded in 1944, we are a charity working in the UK and around the world to promote democracy and strengthen parliaments. An independent, non-partisan political research and education Society, our work is devoted to:

Exploring the evolution of representative democracy: offering evidence-based ideas for reform of political and parliamentary institutions, processes and culture to help foster democratic renewal.

Educating citizens, particularly young people: so that they have the knowledge and confidence to play an active role in our democracy and be future leaders in civic and political life.

Connecting citizens with parliamentarians and policy-makers: through innovative on and offline initiatives to address the democratic deficit.

Convening debate on topical political issues: providing a non-partisan forum for the exchange of ideas about our democratic future.

Enquiries about membership or the work of the Hansard Society should be addressed to Dr Ruth Fox, Director and Head of Research, Hansard Society, 5th Floor, 9 King Street, London EC2V 8EA, by email to contact@hansardsociety.org.uk, or visit the website at **www.hansardsociety.org.uk.**

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The 2018 Report

The Audit of Political Engagement is the only annual health check on the state of our democracy. Now in its 15th year, each Audit measures the 'political pulse' of the nation, providing a unique benchmark to gauge public opinion across Great Britain about politics and the political process.

This year's report explores 15 years of political engagement, comparing the situation today with that in the first Audit published in 2004. The impact of recent events as a form of 'electric shock therapy' for political engagement is explored, as is the trajectory of engagement among key groups such as the Scots and young people.

Looking in detail at this year's wave of results, the report focuses on the question of whether current political engagement levels are entirely due to the usual post-election movements or whether there is a delayed EU referendum effect in play.

Following the June 2017 general election which resulted in a hung Parliament, this study also takes a closer look at what the public think about the system of governing Britain, how they view political parties, and the role that different forms of traditional and social media play in informing and influencing the electorate.

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