



Old Politics, New Media: Parliament, the Public and the Internet

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Introduction

Over the past decade considerable concerns have been raised about the health of parliamentary democracy in the UK. Apparently increasing levels of public distrust and cynicism about politicians and representative institutions, along with the dramatic fall in turnout at the 2001 election have prompted a debate about possible means of reconnecting the public with politics. One area which has attracted attention is whether the rise of new media technologies, such as the internet and email, could help facilitate such a re-engagement. So far, however, whilst there has been sustained criticism of MPs, parties and parliaments' online efforts, there is only limited evidence about the public's use of new media technologies for political engagement and communication. In order to address this gap, this paper reports the findings from a public opinion survey commissioned from NOP which examines citizen knowledge attitudes and behaviour regarding ICTs as means of connecting with parliament and MPs. The survey confirms that whilst the net has potential to deepen public engagement with our representatives and parliamentary institutions currently it attracts only a small minority of voters who are generally already politically active and privileged. Moreover, such potential will remain untapped without considerable effort from legislatures and legislators to change the culture of representation.

Parliament, the public and the representative nexus: decline and crisis?

It has become increasingly commonplace to talk of a crisis in parliamentary representation. A supposed decline of parliamentary representation is, arguably, signalled by the increasing gulf between the parliament and its members and the British public, in three interrelated respects: Firstly, the HoC has lost touch with electors, who are largely unaware of and uninterested in parliamentary work; secondly, citizens trust representative institutions, including the parliament, to a lesser degree than in the past; finally, decreasing trends of electoral engagement culminated at the 2001 election, which recorded the lowest turnout in the United Kingdom since 1918. Yet, long term general trends of support for the political system – interest in politics and views of the election outcome – have changed little from between the 1960s and 2001 in Britain (Clarke et al, 2004). As was recently noted, 'contrary to the conjectures offered by some observers, there is no evidence to suggest that engagement with the political system has declined significantly since the early 1960s' (Clarke et al., 2004: 284). The same largely goes for internal efficacy, the perceived capacity to influence the direction of government, and external efficacy, the responsiveness of institutions. Furthermore, these longer term trends are set against a backdrop of continuing support for democracy in general. Britons are fairly satisfied with how democracy works in general, regardless of party politics. EuroBarometer data clearly show that British subjects have been substantially happy with the state of democracy for the last 30 years. Also, they are at consistently more satisfied with their democracy than EU citizens in general.¹

Recent trends of disengagement

However, a number of observers have noted shorter-term decline over the past decade on a range of indicators, especially concerning external efficacy, voting turnout and trust in politician. Recent data in particular has highlighted increasing concerns in these areas. (Bromley et al, 2004; Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, 2004, 2005). Firstly,

¹ Source: Euro Barometer data. Country: UK. Period: From September 1973 (EB1) to April 2004 (EB61)
Q. On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in (your country)? Would you say you are ... ? Very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied , not at all satisfied, DK.

interest in politics has decreased since the 1997 election, from the 59 % of people who had at least some interest in politics in 1997 and 2001, to just above 50 % at different time points in 2004. Although, this average also hides further differences between citizens' continued interest in local and national 'issues' and increasing disengagement from 'politics' in general. In fact, the alleged recent crisis of British democracy largely rests on the lower 'levels of trust in government and confidence in the political system' than a decade ago (Bromley et al., 2004: 20). Also, self-reported political knowledge is not very high. More than half of voting age public claimed in 2004 and 2005 that they 'did not know very much' or 'nothing at all' about politics (Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, 2004, 2005).

Politicians and the government of the day bear the brunt of citizens' disengagement. Both MORI and British Social Attitudes data suggest that public trust and support of the government has been decreasing since 1994 (Bromley et al., 2004: 4-7; Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, 2005: 16). According to European Social Survey figures, about 60 % of Britons and other European citizens think that most or all politicians are interested in votes rather than citizens' opinions. Trust in politicians is consequently low, 3.8 on average on a 0-10 scale of trust. 47 % of Britons think that very few or hardly any politicians care what people think (slightly lower than EU average: 55 %).² Furthermore, politicians (along with journalists and government ministers) are the professional category trusted least by the British public to tell the truth (21 % yes, 73 % no), and the professional category with which the public is least satisfied, only 27 % of the British public, the lowest figure since 1999.³

On the measure of electoral turnout the past decade has apparently seen a significant fall from more than 75 % to 60 % in general elections. Although as many as 19 possible causes were recently identified for this fall (Power, 2005), people voted less in 2001 mainly due to the policy proximity of the two main parties and the one-sided nature of the electoral contest, rather than to ingrained political apathy (Clarke et al., 2004). Furthermore, there are no evident signs of reversal of such systemic trends, as intention to vote remains at the rock-bottom levels in 2005 lower than at the 2001 general election (Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, 2005). Whilst one might argue that declining electoral participation has been countered by engagement in other forms of political participation, (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003) low turnout is problematic for parliamentary legitimacy and government mandate and equally damaging for political equality, as it erodes the preferences of citizens from deprived backgrounds.

Finally, decline also directly concerns representative institutions, although to a more limited extent. Citizens know less about MPs and the Parliament that was the case in the past. Only 42 % of the public can correctly name their MP, a ten per cent decrease from the early 1990s (Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, 2004: 18). Similarly, relatively few people (33%) claim to know 'a fair amount' about the Westminster Parliament, though more claim knowledge about the role of MPs (45 %), thus suggesting the prevalence of politicians over institutions in the public imagination. Not many have contacted their MP

² Source: European Social Survey 2002/2003, edition 5. Q. Politicians interested in votes rather than peoples opinions. British N = 2041, EU N = 41,499. Q. Politicians in general care what people like respondent think. British N = 2043, EU N = 41,480.

³ For trust: MORI data for the British Medical Association, n = 2017, February 2005. See <http://www.mori.com/polls/2005/bma.shtml>. For satisfaction see the MORI tracker at <http://www.mori.com/polls/trends/satisfaction-jobs.shtml>.

either to present their opinions, only around one in ten, and mostly to express a grievance (Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, 2004: 31-32). However, unlike other trends discussed above, more people are contacting representatives today than in the 1970s, a trend that started in the 1980s. Finally, again in contrast with wider societal trends, electors are relatively satisfied with the work of their MPs and of the Parliament (36 % vs. 32 % unsatisfied), a balance which has remained stable over the last ten years. The Parliament also enjoys an average trust score, rated by Britons at 4.6 out of a maximum ten. It fares better than 'politicians' in general (3.8) but below other institutions such as the judiciary (5.0) the police (6.0), or even the United Nations (5.3).⁴ However, MPs score even higher in terms of citizen satisfaction (over 40% vs. 13 % dissatisfied), especially when respondents are asked to appraise their own MP rather than MPs in general (32 %, more akin to 'politicians' in general).

Re-connecting with the public

Overall then, the health of British democracy and parliamentary representation, whilst not in jeopardy, rests on thinner ground than in the past. There are evident trends of decreasing engagement, cognitive and behavioural, with institutions and increasing reliance on vague generalisation to relate to politics, and of 'political detachment' as classically defined by the *Political Action Study*: high interest, low engagement (Topf, 1995). As Inglehart (1999) has noted, the socio-political values associated with political modernisation, especially with a post-modern lessening of deference, might imply declining respect for authority, although they also engender growing support for democracy.

In this context, it has been argued that institutions need to do some catching up with citizens, increasingly engaged with 'issues' rather than with institutions, and wary of politicians. Whilst one might argue that this is partly an image problem for the politicians, who look cynical and untrustworthy, and parliament, which appears shabby, unprofessional and unrepresentative to the outside (Jenkins, 2004: 803), legitimacy and respect remain crucial, positive values for traditional representative institutions. Indeed, following concerns about parliamentary reputation, visibility and trust, legislators have taken steps to try to improve the public perception of the HoC, and the standards of conduct in the Parliament. Following the Nolan Report, new procedures were introduced in 1995 to regulate and oversee the conduct of MPs and public affairs in parliament. Principally, a Code of Conduct was drafted which regulated the public role and dealings of MPs. A Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards was appointed who was responsible to oversee (and sanction) MPs conduct and watch over Members declared private interest interests. Finally, a Committee on Standards and Privileges was established with the remit to investigate complaints concerning MPs behaviour and to oversee the work of the Commissioner. Alongside, the parliament has embarked in a process of modernisation which aims at the redefinition of the HoC working routines, including family-friendly working hours, more inclusive debate procedures, enhanced government scrutiny, and increased access to public records.

ICTs and the representative nexus

ICTs were one of the elements heralded as capable of assisting the parliament in reconnecting with the public. The desire of UK MPs and the HoC to reconnect with the public via electronic means is palpable. In the last few years a number of reports have been drafted and released by parliamentary committees concerning the adoption and use of ICTs

⁴ See note 2.

to strengthen representation. In July 2002, a report of the Information Select Committee, *Digital Technology*, stipulated five areas where ICTs might enhance efficiency and representation: increased accessibility to the HoC and MPs by the public by the means most convenient to the citizen; to enhance professionalism of members; to increase public participation especially among the excluded; to 'open up' the parliamentary proceedings and increase transparency; and to network with other institutions to keep ahead of ICT developments to pursue the above substantial aims (HoC Information Committee, 2002).

In the 2003 annual report of the House of Commons Commission the use of the internet looms large as a device to support the services provided by the House, to support individual members and their staff's working life, to support the work of committees, and, especially, to provide information and access for the public, though webcasting, the parliament.uk new site, and email access to the institution and its members (House of Commons Commission, 2003). The main point of the report concerns a 'corporate plan' for improving public understanding and access which focuses on implementing 'the high priority recommendations of the Information Committee on using IT to connect with the public' (House of Commons Commission, 2003: 265). Following this in May 2004 the report of the Modernisation Select Committee, *Connecting Parliament with the Public* 'sets out a series of practical recommendations designed a) to make the building more accessible and welcoming to constituents, b) to make greater efforts to engage young people, and c) to encourage better use of information and communication technology' (HoC Modernisation Select Committee, 2004: 11). In the case of the latter two points, the report has far-reaching implications: it recommends a radical upgrading of the website, including a more engaging youth section and a constant review of digital broadcasting of the HoC proceedings. It also strongly recommends to select committees and joint committees to make a greater use of online consultations, and, albeit cautiously, to allow for 'typescript' petitions to be tabled. As a measure of the widespread support for the use of ICTs to 'open up' the Parliament, only 14 MPs overall voted against the report 'Connecting Parliament with the Public', in January 2005.⁵ However, as noted by Derek Wyatt, MP, the Chairman of the All Party Internet Group (APIG), the reform of parliamentary proceedings towards the full-blown adoption and effective use of ICTs to foster citizen engagement would require permanent support at Cabinet level, which is currently unavailable.⁶

In line with the concerns of the parliamentary elite, some research has confirmed that new information technologies have the potential to incrementally improve the ways parliaments operate and their representative functions: they could increase administrative efficiency of the institution; improve information access and dissemination; and finally enhance MPs and assemblies' interaction with citizens (Kingham, 2003). In principle at least, politicians across a range of countries including the UK have expressed optimism concerning the capacity of new media to revive the representative nexus (Caldow, 1999; Åström, 2001; Hoff, 2004; Coleman, 1999; Campbell, Harrop, & Thompson, 1999). However, the actual uptake of the Internet by both British representative institutions and individual MPs has been fairly slow and patchy (Coleman, 1999; Jackson, 2003). Having been lambasted by

⁵ From the Public Whip website, <http://www.publicwhip.org.uk/division.php?date=2005-01-26&number=49>. Opponents were Conservatives, except for one Liberal Democrat.

⁶ Remarks at the Hansard Society / eSociety event 'Can the Internet reconnect Britain?', Portcullis House, London, 8 March 2005. See <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk> for a report of the event.

the media for their lack of awareness of the Internet,⁷ British MPs seem to have recently realised the importance of being available electronically via email and personal websites, albeit rather to 'inform' than 'engage' citizens (Ward & Lusoli, 2005). Increasingly, legislative assemblies across Europe have adapted ICTs to inform, interact and engage with citizens (Trechsel, Kies, Mendez, & Schmitter, 2003; also see Coleman & Blumler, forthcoming). Strikingly however, very few of these studies have examined directly public perceptions of new media technologies to connect with the Parliament and MPs. As Coleman and Spiller recently noted, academic literature has 'tended to neglect the effects of the new media upon the represented' (Coleman & Spiller, 2004: 8). Where studies in fact exist, they tend to focus on access to dissemination and accessibility rather than directly about citizen engagement, possibly due to the small numbers of citizens currently involved in e-politics in Britain (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2002).

According to the limited evidence available, a minority of users has engaged with representative institutions electronically and more would do so if they had a chance. A poll of Internet users conducted in 2002 by the Hansard Society reveals that one in four British users had visited the Westminster websites, more than had visited the Parliament building.⁸ Furthermore, young people were twice as likely to visit online as offline. Such visits might not have created more engagement though, as only 19 % thought that the site was 'good'. Email was also high on the list of preferred means of obtaining information about the House, being rated first by 44 % of users, vis-a-vis 36 % for the phone. Coleman and Spiller (2004) compare these results with the findings of HoC research on Britons who called in by phone, the web and in person, in February 2002. Despite significant differences in the proportions, email was however mentioned as the preferred method to obtain information by all three categories (respectively 41 %, 59 % and 57 %). Finally, a large proportion of users displayed 'significant enthusiasm' for a number of proposals to further connect the Parliament through ICTs: email response to emails, rather than letters back (63%); having speeches and releases online 56 %; and discussing policy issue in online fora. It thus seems that the Internet has an important role to play with respect to informing the public.

Marcella, Baxter and Moore (2002) examined citizen information needs and behaviours through 79 computer-assisted interviews in a road-show environment, in 2001, where respondents were asked to browse, retrieve and assess information from UK parliaments' websites.⁹ Although websites were found cumbersome to navigate, information difficult to search, and 'negative comments were made about website design features, the legibility of text, the poor structure of sites, broken and interrupted hypertext links' (p. 46), assessment of the range and quality of information provided was largely good. Most respondents (68/79) found the websites they examined a useful information source, which they thought served a useful purpose. Respondents mentioned the 'depth of information coverage (15 cases); reliability of information (13); ease of access (12); that this represented 'the way ahead' (8); supporting education (3); and encouraging political interaction (2). Eight

⁷ *MPs@not.in*, BBC online 19 November 1998, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/217641.stm; *MPs just want to be faxed*, Parity News, 15 August 2002, available at http://www.parity.net/news/15_08_02mp.htm.

⁸ Yougov.com online survey of 1098 users, May 2002. For a review of the methodology see <http://www.yougov.com>.

⁹ Although the sample was unrepresentative of the British public (as more politically engaged and more likely to use computers), the 'information needs' of the group did not correlate with either thus making it relatively unbiased.

participants were [however] concerned about the means and costs of access; 4 felt the approach more suited to younger people' (pp. 46-47). Also, most (61/79) thought that the information retrieved was very or quite interesting, very or quite easy to understand (69/79) – although hardly 'relevant' to respondents' life (43/79). Interestingly, most of those who thought they might search for further information mentioned the web as a way to proceed. Marcella and colleagues, however, conclude with a note of caution as concerns the capacity of institutions to 'engage' with citizens, warning that

In order to encourage participation, communications via ICTs must visibly enable meaningful and useful interaction that is relevant to citizens' everyday lives ... While the majority indicated that they would use electronic sources in the future, few felt that this was likely to be for reasons of democratic participation (2003: 41)

This importance of relevance was confirmed by public opinion research conducted by MORI for the Hansard Society (Coleman, 2001).¹⁰ Offered a range of services constituents might want to see on MPs websites (multiple-choice), respondents overwhelmingly opted for 'pragmatic' features they could relate to: 39 % rated as most useful an online surgery so that they could raise problems; 32% chose an e-mail address to contact them; and 22% mentioned a consultation forum where the MP could gather constituents' views. Other features such as the MP diary and email updates from the MP were much less popular. Consistent results were recorded when citizens were asked what online services they most wanted to see in the next five years (multiple-choice): access to government services in the main (30 %), voting via the Internet (25%) and MPs having website or email addresses (28 %) topped the table. Finally, in all studies reviewed the shadow of the digital divide looms large: citizens mention the lack of access to information technologies, more than anything else, as the major obstacle for democratisation via ICTs. As Coleman noted, 'It is clear that the public accepts that the digital divide is a barrier to any kind of democratic uses of the internet.' (Coleman, 2001: 5)

Exploring Public Attitudes to Parliament and the Net

In light of the concerns about political disengagement and some of the rhetoric from parliaments and politicians about the net (as well as criticism of their efforts), we wanted to explore public perceptions of ICT-assisted representative nexus. To what extent is are ICTs likely to fulfil some of the expectations outlined above in terms of supposedly reconnecting the public to parliament? As we noted above, whilst there has been growing amount of research looking at party and politicians websites and also studies of elites' attitudes and behaviour there is considerably less evidence coming from a bottom-up public perspective. Our survey, conducted by NOP between 9-14 December 2004, essentially explored four principal areas:¹¹

- Citizens' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours concerning their MP and representative institutions.
- Citizens' behaviours and attitudes concerning the use of the Internet – the web and email – to interact with British representative institutions and MPs.
- Citizens' knowledge of, and attitudes toward, a range of currently available online political transactions – e-government, e-voting and e-democracy – involving a range of British political institutions.

¹⁰ Omnibus survey of UK adults (18 +) conducted 9-14 August 2001, n = 1921, in-home CAPI interviews.

¹¹ The complete questionnaire and topline frequencies are found in the Appendix.

- Socio-demographic controls including gender, age, education, working status, social grade, income, digital technologies in the home, location.

Whilst the survey can only provide a snapshot of UK public attitudes it should be seen in the light of other broader surveys and as a continuation of initial work by the Hansard Society from 2001. Moreover, it is important to track development of, and trends in, public attitudes towards political engagement at this early stage of internet development, as this may help to shape future policy.

Survey Results

The techno-political milieu: new media and old politics

The survey confirms once again the increasing prevalence of the Internet in British society; 63 % of survey respondents have access to a PC at home, 53 % of the sample has used the Internet in the previous three months, 27 % of respondents have broadband at home.¹² Figures for Internet adoption compare favourably with digital TV in its various forms – 32 % receive satellite, 14 % cable and 12 % Freeview. In addition, our data confirms the intensification of Internet use reported in previous surveys, as 22 % use the Internet up to one hour a week, 24 % between 1 and 3 hours, while the majority (53 %) connects for 4+ hours a week. We also see an ‘ageing’ of the Internet audience, as most users have now been online for three or more years. This compares favourably with British figures from 2002.¹³ Specifically, 16 % commenced one year ago or less, 13 % between 1-2 years ago, 40 % between 3-5 years ago and 31 % have started more than five years ago. Respondents who have adopted the Internet at an earlier time and earlier in their life spend more time online per week.

In stark contrast with the upsurge of the Internet, our results confirm that the interest in and knowledge of, political representation is somewhat flat in Britain. Only 69% claim to know the party in charge in their constituency, while less than half the electorate (43%) are actually able to name their MP, which confirms medium-term trends of political knowledge and satisfaction (Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, 2004). Respondents' indications are also sometimes inaccurate, as one in seven mistake the name of the MP (generally in favour of a Councillor or MSP in Scotland), though only one in ten wrongly guess the party in charge. The electoral connection is evident, as those who turnout at elections are far more likely to be able name their MP and party than non-voters (51% to 29 % for local MPs, and 78 % to 52 % for party label), while their prediction tend to be more accurate.

Whilst many surveys have documented the lack of trust in, and scepticism towards, politicians collectively, the majority of our respondents hold no extreme opinions about their own MP's efforts: 33 % are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the work of their MP while 21 % do not know or have no opinion. Those who do have an opinion hold largely positive views: 34 % are quite or very satisfied with their MP, while only 12 % are not very or not at all satisfied. Again, not surprisingly, one can see the electoral link at work, as less

¹² ONS data report a higher figure for Internet access, about 60 %. The difference between our data and ONS figures is partly due to the exclusion of 16-17 years old who are twice as likely to be online (approx. - 2 %). Partly, it is due to a different sampling strategy. According to MORI's technology tracker, 56 % of adults online in December 2004 (<http://www.mori.com>).

¹³ Gibson, Rachel, Lusoli, Wainer & Stephen Ward (2002). *UK Political Participation Online - The Public Response*. Salford: ESRC Report. Available online at <http://www.wipop.org.uk>.

non-voters have an opinion (- 16 %) while voters are on average more satisfied with their MP's work (+ 15 %). In short, there appears to be a widening engagement divide between those who know and trust, and those who don't know and seemingly don't care about representative institutions.

Getting in touch with representatives

A wide and growing range of channels are available to citizens for conveying their views and grievances to their elected representatives (table 1). Among the various contacting methods, the phone is reportedly the medium of choice (39 % first mention, 61 % all mentions). Letter writing comes a distant second (20 %), followed by email (12 %) and face-to-face contact (11 %). Email is becoming increasingly entrenched in the public imagination as a principal means to contact MPs especially for 18-34 years olds (20 %), notably students (37 %) and graduates (20 %), from B and C1 social grades (20 %). Of course email is also favoured by those who use the Internet (23 %) and particularly for more frequent and long term users (32 % for those who use the net more than 4 hours per week and approximately 30% for those who have used it for three years or more).

Furthermore, confirming previous studies, the survey indicates that would-be email contactors are also already more engaged in a range of political activities, such as discussing politics (19 %), contacting (19 %), participating in demonstrations (18 %) and boycotts (20 %). Also, there is a strong correlation of email contact with website contact, moderate with phone contact and slightly less with letter writing. Although the small sub-sample precludes firm conclusions, it appears as if the rise of email also coincides with the end of business life for the fax machine. Functionally, email seems to 'speed up' the communications between the constituents and the MP. Finally, only a small minority of respondents (8 %) declared they would not contact their MP. This suggests that the opportunity of getting in touch is still very much valued by the majority of the British public despite their general scepticism about politicians.

[Table 1. Preferred ways to get in touch with Member of Parliament]

Traditionally, however, actively contacting one's MP is only taken up by a small minority. Indeed, only some one in ten of our respondents contacted their local MP in the last 2-3 years, while an additional 4% had contacted some other government official. This is substantially similar to MORI data for 2001-2003, and in line with trends which originate in the 70s (Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, 2003). Interestingly, most citizens have last contacted their MP by post (41 %) rather than by phone (20 %), reversing the figures for contacting intentions. Face-to-face meetings are also relatively common (24 %).¹⁴ Yet, approximately only one in ten have last contacted their MP by email, which is in line with the intention figure. As email has been around now for at least a decade, one might have expected considerably more than 1 % of the public would have vented their opinions electronically to their representatives. Whilst MPs routinely lament an increase in their workload due to email, electronic correspondence with constituents seems a rather

¹⁴ In general, phone and email intentions thus seem over-reported, while post and personal meetings are under-estimated. A number of possible explanations are available as to why people turn to paper when they finally contact representatives. Communications may commence by phone and email and then move to print or face-to-face, when a document exchange is required. Additionally, surgeries and postal exchange are felt to be 'more official' on both sides. With email, there might be a generational effect at play, as actual contactors are generally older than the wider pool of potential contactors.

unlikely culprit; although this figure will undoubtedly increase over the coming decade, MPs fears of being overwhelmed by email appear unfounded. However, the problem may not be so much with the volume of electronic correspondence as the expectation of speedier response times for email.

Those who have contacted their MP, but eschewed the internet as a means of contact, mention as major reason the lack of Internet access (37 %), the preference for traditional means (32 %) and/or a combination of lack of skills and knowledge (27 %). For a significant number of respondents new media technologies still present technical/skills challenges. Overall, however, people value the ability to be able to get in touch with MPs and support a variety of means of contact but rarely personally make use of them.

The Internet and virtual representation

Despite the prevalence of the Internet, online politics is still very much a minority sport (table 2). Internet users visit news and current affairs websites (40 %) far more often than the websites of any overtly political organisations or institutions. In the latter category, users visit the websites of local council (28 %) and government departments / agencies (21 %) much more frequently than any other political website – parties, NGOs, other political institutions. Outside news and government services the numbers are considerably more modest with representative institutions lagging far behind. Only 5 % of internet users have visited the House of Commons website within the last 12 months, while a combined 3 % visited the websites of the devolved legislative assemblies/parliaments (in Scotland and Wales). Finally, less than 2 % visited the personal websites of their MPs. Parliaments and their Members thus seem farther away than other institutions from citizen's everyday needs. However, our survey data indicates the potential of the Internet to assist British representative institutions to engage with a wider proportion of the public than currently in two respects. Positive results for the visibility of online institutions and citizens' attitudes to online representation are in stark contrast to low actual engagement, reported above.

[Table 2. Websites visited in last 12 months]

First, the survey asked about the visibility of MPs websites. 22 % of respondents claim to know whether their local MP has an Internet website. Although in absolute terms there are still four in five Britons who do not know about MPs websites, the result is surprisingly high when one considers the overall low recognition rating of MPs (43 %, see above), internet access levels and the lack of effort most MPs put into pursuing and publicising an online presence (Ward & Lusoli, 2005). Citizens' predictions tend to be relatively accurate, as 69 % of respondents give a correct answer compared to the actual existence of a site for their MP. If anything, citizens largely underestimate the extent to which MPs are online: 14 % generously credit their MPs with a site when they don't have one, but 78 % of those who think that their MP is not online are in fact wrong, suggesting that MPs still need to do considerable work on the marketing of their websites.

MPs websites are visible to voters from varied social, technical and political backgrounds. There are, however, some interesting exceptions. While sites are slightly less known to young people (- 5 %), topical variables play an important role. Those who can name their MPs also know about their sites (+ 6 %) also being relatively certain that they have one (+ 7 %). Conversely, those who are unsure of the party affiliation of their MP are correspondingly less likely to know about their MP's online whereabouts (- 8 %). Then,

those who are very satisfied with the work of their MP know much more (+ 18 %), and repute their MP to have a website well above average (+ 21 %). Finally, those who participate in politics are more likely to know about the MPs' site (+8 %): those who donate (17 %), campaign (12 %), and rally (+ 10 %) A 'virtuous circle' grounded in behaviours and attitudes predating the Internet may well be at play here and deserves further investigation (Norris, 2000).

Great expectations?

Finally, the survey asked about the levels of public support for a range of online activities, most of which are currently available in a form or another in Britain. Given the relatively low levels of electronic transactions recorded for the House of Commons (HoC) and individual MPs, it is therefore surprising that most people are favourable to a wide range of online interactions especially with their MP and the Parliament. The survey asked specifically about levels of public backing for a range of electronic transactions (table 3). The Parliament and MPs come top of the table of public support: only 19 % of the population would not like to see MPs using email or having sites, while above 40 % would like them to be more active on the electronic front. As for the HoC, most would like to be being able to comment via e-mail to the Parliament on major laws being discussed (43 %), while only one in four rejects the idea.

[Table 3. Support for various e-government and e-democracy features]

Online government services are also quite popular (36 % would like to see, 37 % don't mind), which reflects the relatively high levels of public access to government websites. Slightly more opposition mounts to government online polling on policy issues (26 % would not like to see it), though support remains positive. As to other government-initiated, more interactive engagement, public support slips backwards. Again, slightly more of the public oppose than support government-sponsored discussion fora about the issues of the day (- 1 %) and e-mail bulletins on policy issues of their choosing (- 7 %). The better results obtained for MPs survey items can be explained by the baseline nature of these services – having a site and using email; the same response may have been obtained had the same question been asked for government departments. However, the fact remains that citizens wish to engage electronically with the House of Commons as much as if not more than with government departments.

Finally, online voting remains a controversial issue. The majority of citizens are not in favour (41 %), while only a minority (18 %) have no views on the issue. For all transactions scrutinised, the survey recorded very low levels of 'Don't know responses, 8 % maximum, significantly low even among Internet non-users. This indicates that the efforts of British institutions to engage online with citizens are beginning to filter into the public imagination, including some of those who currently do not use the Internet. It is however difficult to assess the nature of 'don't mind' responses, that is whether people think that online issues are uncontroversial or, they don't care much or, that they are relatively ignorant about them.

The study also sheds additional light on the background of those who support and oppose electronic transactions of different types. For all questions asked, the respondents' Internet proximity / proficiency – e.g. PC in the home, broadband access, Internet use at all, and also length and intensity of Internet use – provide the most important predictors of positive

attitudes. In addition, the positive effect of Internet use, different socio-demographic combination shape the support/opposition for discrete implementations. Specifically:

- Support for access to government services
Males, 35-44 years old, AB grade, University graduates + students, higher income.
- Support for online voting
Females, below 35 years old, urban, students, higher income. Polarized for AB grade (no 'don't mind')
- Support for commenting on HoC laws by email
No gender difference, young, C1 grade but homogeneous ('not like to see' evenly distributed), medium-high income, not-so-expert user.
- Support for all MPs having web sites
Slightly more male, 18-54, C1 grade ('not like to see' and 'don't mind' evenly distributed), medium-high income, at least GCSE.

In general, similar combinations of factors - income, internet access and social grade – underpin public attitudes to different online transactions. However, higher expectations involving the HoC or individual MPs are held by respondents from relatively broader backgrounds on a range of indicators, including gender, age and education. Representative institutions thus have the potential to attract and engage a wider section of the British public, including some of the currently disengaged, than similar e-government experiments. Similarly, we found that more non-users support the use of the Internet for a range of political functions than current users resist them. If socio-demographic trends underpinning our results persist, we might see 3-5 years ahead that most voters will be ready to transact online with political institutions; in 5-10 years nearly all voters might well expect to do so.

Finally, the survey interrogated the nature of this electronic linkage, with specific reference to voters' relation with their MP (table 4). Respondents were asked to indicate the most important features on MPs websites, if and when they had one. Most respondents rate highly an online surgery mechanism to raise and discuss their problems (45 %) and would appreciate online surveys to express their views (31%). Slightly less popular are information about the MPs' policy positions (31 %) and their voting record in the HoC (24%). However, perhaps not surprisingly, activities which involve an ongoing relationship as in the case of online discussion fora (17 %) and email updates from the MP (20 %) are relatively less popular. Respondents therefore seem to value most a direct, one-to-one representative linkage rather than more interactive online transactions.

[Table 4. Features of importance on MPs websites]

When we compare these figures with Hansard Society data collected in August 2001 we notice a consistent growth of citizens' expectations.¹⁵ Specifically, online surgeries score higher preference than in the past (+ 6 %), as do email updates from the MP (+5 %). However, more interactive features such as the forum score lower than previously (- 5 %). Compared to Coleman's conclusion in 2001 that Britons want more interaction with than

¹⁵ Coleman, Stephen (2001). *Democracy Online: What do we want from MPs' web sites?* London: Hansard Society.

information from their MPs online, we found that the expectations about the online exchange with one's MP has moved in 2005 toward increasingly pragmatic, direct communications. This is also confirmed by the dramatic increase in public expectations regarding what are now baseline services, which were only beginning to emerge in 2001: all MPs having email addresses (+ 30 % increase) and all MPs having websites (+28 % increase). Figures for online transactions with a range of institutions instead record a modest increase: + 6 % for government services online and + 9 % for e-voting at national elections.

A note of caution is however still required, as even in 2005 some 27 % are at least indifferent to what MPs might have to offer online. The number of respondents who also reported that none of the above features were desirable is similar to the figure for those who declared at a previous question that they were against MPs having a website or using email. Although the two sub-groups largely overlap, they do not perfectly coincide, thus complicating analysis.

'Want nots', 'Sceptics' and 'Enthusiasts'

Within our respondents we identified three distinct groups (table 5).¹⁶ First, the 'want nots' are those who ignore whether their MP has a website, would prefer them not to have one, and basically think websites contribute little to public life. This category comprises approximately 11 % of British adults. The 'sceptics' are the second group, who largely express mildly negative or neutral views about 'virtual representation'. They often don't know whether their MP has a site, they don't mind if (s)he does, but are generally sceptical of the benefits of MPs' websites (10 % of entire sample). Finally, there are the 'enthusiasts', those who know whether their MP has a website, think they should have one and would like to see two or more of the features listed above on their sites (8.5 % of the sample).

[Table 5. Profile of virtual representation 'want nots', sceptics' and 'enthusiasts]

These three groups are different from each other and from the general British public in many significant respects. 'Want nots' are definitely disengaged from the political circuit, including representation, coming from backgrounds traditionally conducive to neither political engagement nor Internet access. 'Sceptics' come from a pool of citizens potentially engaging, though with generally lower levels of actual engagement. Their political profile is almost average and they use the internet to a limited extent, though they are largely indifferent to both. It is doubtful that either of these categories (want nots, sceptics) will ever enjoy the benefits, if any, of virtual representation. 'Enthusiasts', however, represent the stereotypical 'ideal' citizen, in that they are willing and capable, in terms of personal resources, to participate in politics. If anything, virtual representation will add to their already consistent share of 'representation'.

The rest of the British public, some 70 %, are located between the sceptics and the enthusiasts. They hold mixed views but might be categorised as being mildly positive towards online engagement although currently most are not active participants. It is this large pool of potential online participants that British institutions need to take aim at, if they want to revive the representative link by electronic means. Different dynamics unfolding in different regions, most importantly with regard to the devolved assemblies of Scotland and Wales, suggest that relying solely on the seemingly unstoppable uptake of new Media alone

¹⁶ Groups are mutually exclusive.

is unlikely to be a successful strategy: greater attention is required to the constitutional configuration of representation, and its effective communication to the public.

The way forward? broadband users¹⁷ and virtual representation in Scotland and Wales¹⁸

A growing minority of British households are now linked to the Internet via a broadband connection. About 28 % of respondents report now having broadband at home, 47 % of all Internet users. The socio-political profile of broadband users is largely similar to the profile of Internet user in general: male, younger, higher social grade, working full-time, higher levels of formal education (and students). Broadband users are not otherwise different from general internet users than in their online habits: they surf the Internet for longer and have been using the Internet for more years. Additionally, they are as politically engaged as other users, though they are slightly less knowledgeable about MPs and their party, they are equally satisfied with the work of their representative. In stark contrast to these similarities, broadband users are more connected than dial-up users with online politics and have even higher expectations as regards the fruition of online political transactions. In the first respect, broadband users much prefer sending an email to get in touch with their MPs (27 % first choice, 53 % total) as well as using the web, rather than sending a letter. However, although 17 % of broadband users reported having contacted their MP by email, more than reported using the phone, letter remains far higher up the table (48 %). Broadband users also visit a range of political websites more frequently than other users; probably function of the greater time they spend online. The largest difference however was recorded concerning broadband users' expectation. They are consistently more favourable to one-to-one e-government transactions – services, online polling and e-voting – and slightly more favourable to 'representative' transaction, such as MPs using email and to legislative scrutiny by email. In light of their background, this propensity thus seems technology-driven rather than related to broadband users' socio-political status.

Scottish and Welsh devolutions triggered speculation on the greater willingness and capacity of the new assemblies to engage with the public, especially by electronic means. As a result, the Scottish Parliament and to a lesser extent the National Assembly for Wales built a good reputation for the use of ICTs, compared to the House of Commons. On the other hand however, the socio-technical background of local resident might be less than conducive to 'virtual representation. Both regions are somewhat less 'wired' than England, in terms of PCs in the home (Scotland), Internet use and broadband penetration (Wales). In terms of contacting behaviours, Scottish respondents report a preference for face-to-face communications with their MP, while Welsh respondents use most phone and letter above average. Finally, less in Scotland and Wales are aware of the existence or otherwise of their MPs websites. Results clearly reflect this dichotomy. On the one hand, virtual representation seems livelier in the devolved regions than in England. Greater numbers of respondents in devolved regions contacted their MP by email, although numbers are too small to generalise. In addition, they have visited the HoC website twice as often as the English in the sample, and even more they paid a visit to their respective parliament website, respectively 15 % Scotland, 19 % Wales. Slightly more respondents than average

¹⁷ This does not imply that broadband is used. There is a minority of respondents (n = 56) who have broadband at home and do not use the Internet. Similarly, some people may have broadband at home and use the internet at work, which our survey does not ascertain.

¹⁸ Results should be taken as tentative given the small n of the Scottish and Welsh sub-sample, respectively 127 and 99.

have visited local council sites, thus making electronic institutions as a whole rather more successful in Scotland and Wales than in England. On the other hand, however, the survey recorded lower (though marginally positive) expectations in Scotland with regard to e-government services online, and in Wales as regards other online transactions, especially e-voting. In Scotland, this is reflected in a higher rejection of online MPs services, about 33 % versus the 27 % average, while 10 % don't know. Finally, there are in both regions a few additional don't wants and sceptics than average, and a few less enthusiasts. While devolved representative institutions are reaping a digital dividend, at least in terms of visibility, electronic transactions in general do not marshal a comparable level of support.

Conclusions

The results of this survey certainly provide a sobering antidote to the hype that often surrounds the role of the Internet in the political world. Not only are those engaging via e-channels fewer in numbers, but they largely resemble traditional political participants and activists. The danger remains that e-politics will simply exacerbate existing participation and engagement gaps by amplifying those voices that are already prominent in the parliamentary system. Simply adding new electronic channels of communication to pre-existing structures or putting information online will not automatically produce a democratic nirvana. Nevertheless, we should not write off new technologies as being of no consequence for representative institutions. Firstly, the survey indicates a potential to attract new citizens and deepen people's engagement especially amongst younger people. As we noted above, a significant number of voters want and expect MPs and parliamentary institutions to do more but not necessarily more of the same. Secondly, as new media technologies become more prevalent in day to day life, then such demands and usage will also increase. Yet, the gap between hypothetical support for, and actual use of, new technologies will remain unless institutions rethink their new (& old) media engagement strategies. Clearly, publicising and marketing online initiatives might be a start but not enough on its own. If parliaments and MPs are serious about engaging with the public, then it requires a change in culture of representation both in terms of who they engage with and the style and the frequency of communications. Representative institutions need to actively recruit participants outside the normal suspects. Most people will not participate without being asked to do so, though nearly all have expertise and everyday experiences which ought to be valuable to policymakers. Moreover, it will require a demonstration that their participation and communication is valued and listened to, and a willingness to open up the policy agenda on a more regular basis. Thus the dialogue needs to be ongoing, considerably less top-down and less formalised. In short, it needs to be on the citizens' terms not that of the institutions and politicians. Technology can facilitate some of these changes but political will and institutional flexibility will be even more crucial if the representative political system is to be renewed.

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Table 1. Preferred ways to get in touch with Member of Parliament			
	<i>Total mentions (%) a</i>	<i>First mention (%) a</i>	<i>Last actual contact (%) b</i>
Telephone inquiry	61	39	20
Letter to the constituency / HoC office	43	20	41
Send them an e-mail	25	12	9
Personal meeting	23	11	24
Contact them via their website	12	4	1
Send them a fax	2	0	0
None of these / would not contact	11	11	5
Don't know	2	2	0
Total %	(multiple)	99 %	99 %
N	1932	1932	191
<p>a. Q.3 If you wanted to or needed to contact your local MP, which of the ways on this card best describes how would you contact them?</p> <p>b. Q.5b And how did you contact your MP? If you have contacted on more than one Occasion in the last 2-3 years, please think about the last time you contacted them.</p>			

Table 2. Websites visited in last 12 months		
	<i>% of Internet users</i>	<i>% of public</i>
None	42	69
News for current affairs	40	21
Local councils	28	15
Government / departments	21	11
NGO / political groups	8	4
House of Commons	5	3
Scotland / Wales Assemblies	3	1
Parties	3	2
MPs	2	1
Number 10	2	1
Total N	1018	1932
<p>Q.7 Which, if any, of the following websites have you visited in the last 12 months?</p>		

Table 3. Support for various e-government and e-democracy features				
	<i>Would like to see (%)</i>	<i>Don't mind (%)</i>	<i>Would not like to see (%)</i>	<i>Don't know (%)</i>
All MPs using e-mail addresses	44	28	19	8
All MPs having web sites	42	31	19	8
Being able to comment via e-mail to the Parliament on major laws being discussed	43	25	25	7
Access to all Government services via the Internet	36	37	19	8
Government online polling on policy issues	34	32	26	8
Voting in national elections via the Internet	34	18	41	7
Special discussion forums for the public to engage in debate about important Government issues	29	33	30	8
Regular government e-mail bulletins on policy issues of interest to you	27	31	34	8
<p>Q.8 I am going to read out various services and for each one I read out, I would like you to tell me if you would like to see it, you wouldn't like to see it or if you have no preference either way? Entire sample, N = 1932</p>				

Table 4. Features of importance on MPs websites	
	<i>% of public</i>
An online advice surgery so that you can raise any problems you may have	45
Information on your MP's policy positions	36
An online survey to express your views in general	31
Information on the voting record of your MP in the House of Commons	24
E-mail updates sent to constituents on matters of importance	20
A consultation forum where you can discuss issues with others and MPs can read constituents' views	17
Information on your MPs daily diary/schedule	11
None of the above	27
Don't know	6
<p>Q.9 Supposing all MPs were online and had websites, which of the features on this card would be important to you? Entire sample, N = 1932</p>	

Table 5. Profile of virtual representation 'want nots', sceptics' and 'enthusiasts'

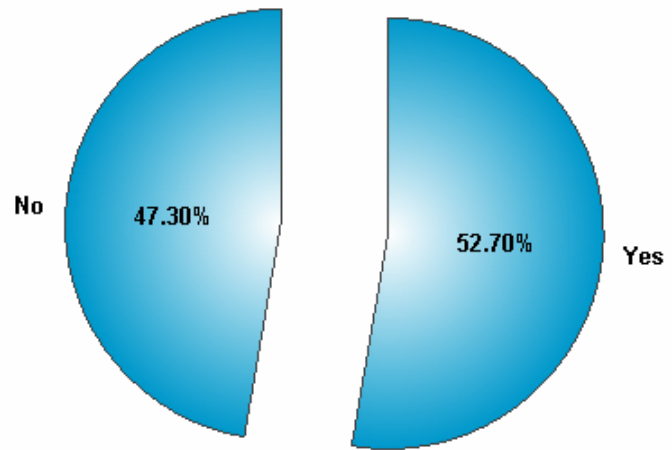
<i>Want nots</i>	<i>Sceptics</i>	<i>Enthusiasts</i>
Rural	(Female)	(SE England)
Older (55+)	Young (18-24) or elderly (65+)	Middle aged (44-55)
Lower formal education	Lower formal education	Higher formal education
DE	C2-DE	AB
Lower income	Lower income	Medium income
Virtually no Internet access	Lower internet access (newcomers)	Higher internet access (including broadband)
Oppose e-government	'Don't mind' about e-government	Strongly favour e-government
Lower levels of political activity, including voting	Lower political activity, except voting and party id	Higher levels of political activity, across the board
Lack of experience and satisfaction with representation	Almost average experience and satisfaction with representation	High knowledge and satisfaction with representation

Appendix: Representation in the Internet Age – Questionnaire and Topline findings

QA Firstly, do you yourself use the Internet at all nowadays?

Yes
No

Q.A Use the Internet at all nowadays

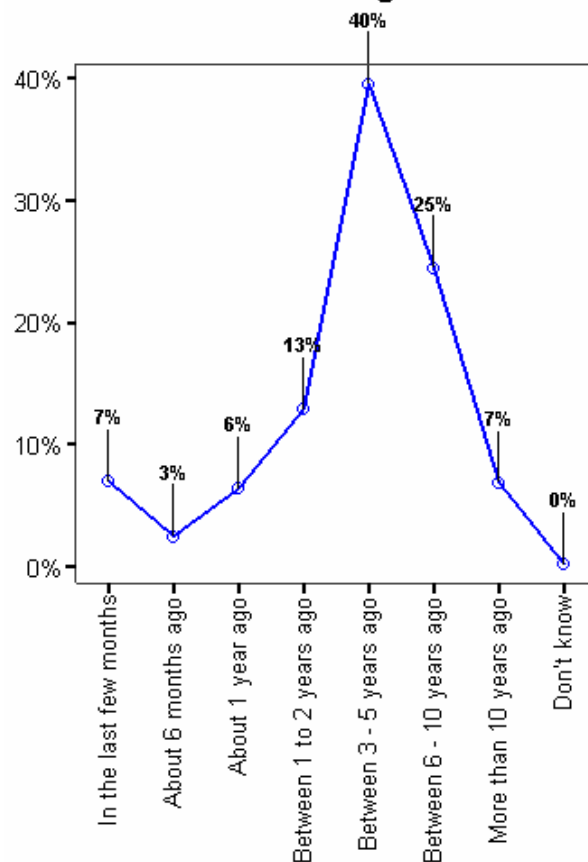


[INTERNET USERS ONLY]

Q.1 Can you tell me when you started using the Internet? CODE ONE

- In the last few months
- About 6 months ago
- About 1 year ago
- Between 1 to 2 years ago
- Between 3 – 5 years ago
- Between 6 – 10 years ago
- More than 10 years ago
- Don't know

Q.1 When started using the Internet



[ASK ALL]

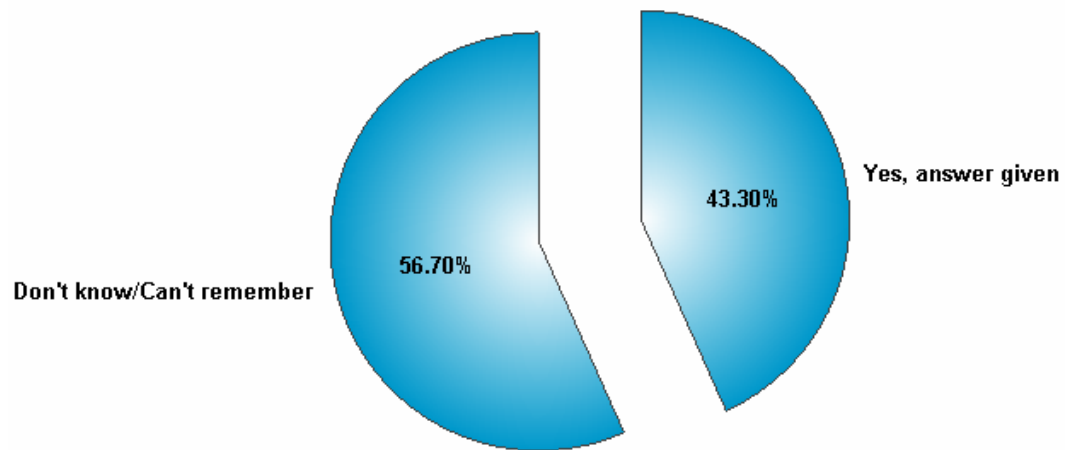
The next few questions are about your MPs and ways people can contact them...

Q.2a What is the name of your local MP? CODE ONE

Yes, answer given (please type in)

Don't know/Can't remember

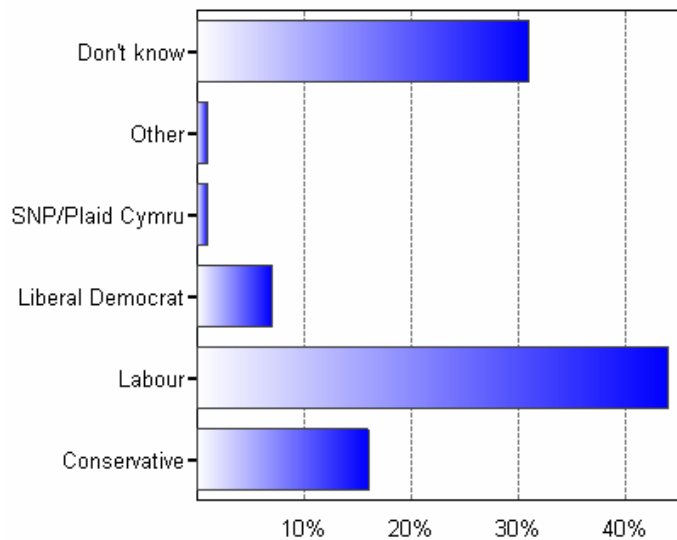
Q.2a Name of local MP



Q.2b Which party does your local MP belong to?

- Conservative
- Labour
- Liberal Democrat
- SNP/Plaid Cymru
- Other
- Don't know
- Refused

Q.2b Which party does local MP belong to



Q.3 If you wanted to or needed to contact your local MP, which of the ways on this card best describes how would you contact them?

- Telephone inquiry
- Letter to the constituency / HoC
- Personal visit to constituency / HoC
- Send them a fax
- Send them an e-mail
- Contact them via their website
- Would not contact them
- None of these
- Don't know

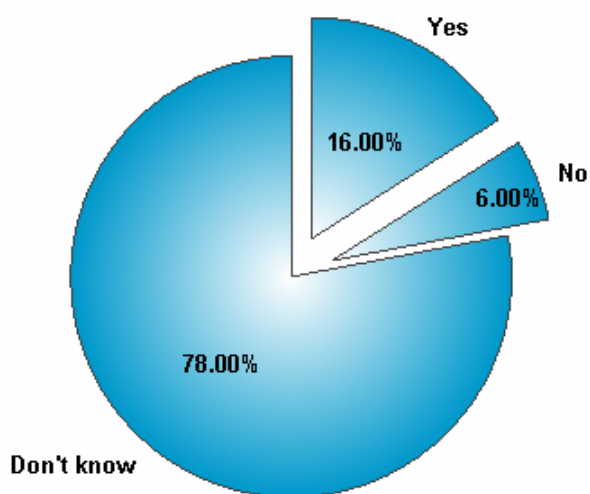
Q.3a Prefer to contact local MP - 1st Mention



Q.4 Does your local MP have an Internet website?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

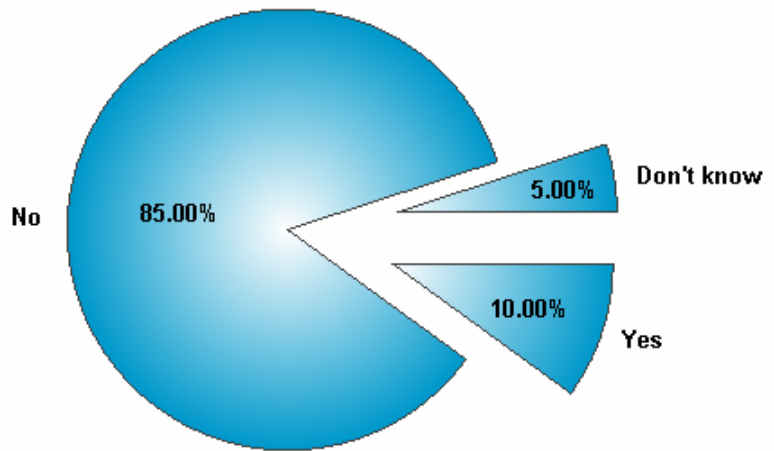
Q.4 Does local MP have an Internet website



Q.5a Have you contacted your local MP in the last 2-3 years?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q.5a Contacted local MP in the last 2-3 years

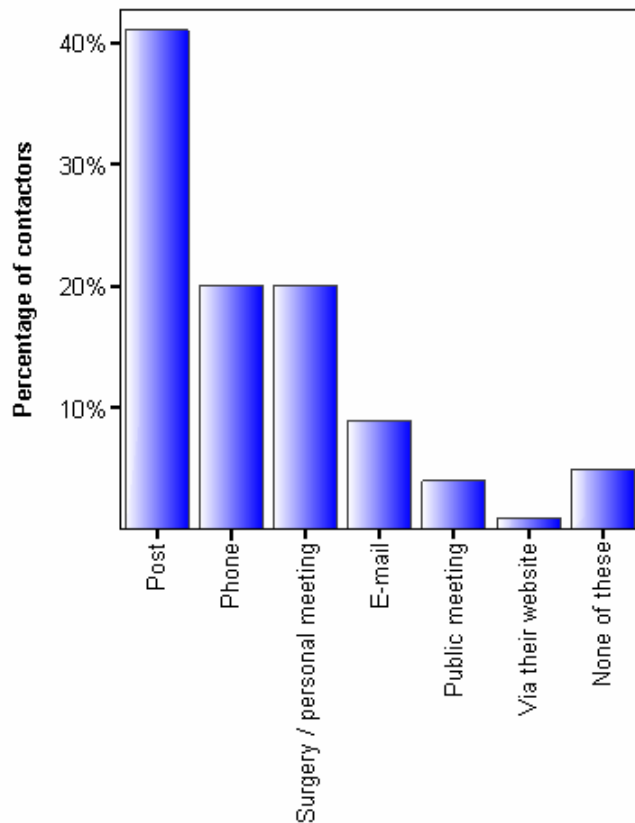


[ASK ALL WHO HAVE CONTACTED THEIR MP IN THE LAST 2-3 YEARS]

Q.5b And how did you contact your MP? If you have contacted on more than one Occasion in the last 2-3 years, please think about the last time you contacted them. CODE ONE

- Post
- Phone
- Surgery / personal meeting
- Fax
- E-mail
- Public meeting
- Via their website
- None of these
- Don't know/Can't remember

Q.5b How contacted MP

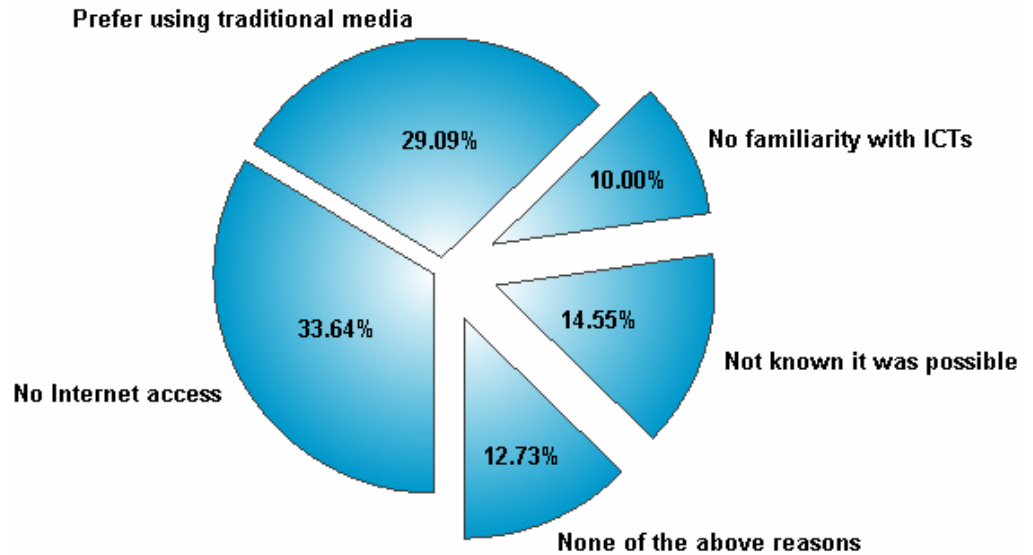


[ASK ALL WHO DID NOT CONTACT THEIR MP BY EMAIL OR VIA THE WEBSITE]

Q.6 Which of the answers on this card best explains why you didn't contact your MP using the Internet (by email or via their website)? CODE ALL

- No access to the Internet
- Not familiar enough yet with the Internet to know how do this
- Did not know MPs could be contacted online
- Prefer using telephone / post / fax
- None of these
- Don't know

Q.6 Reasons for not using Internet to contact MP

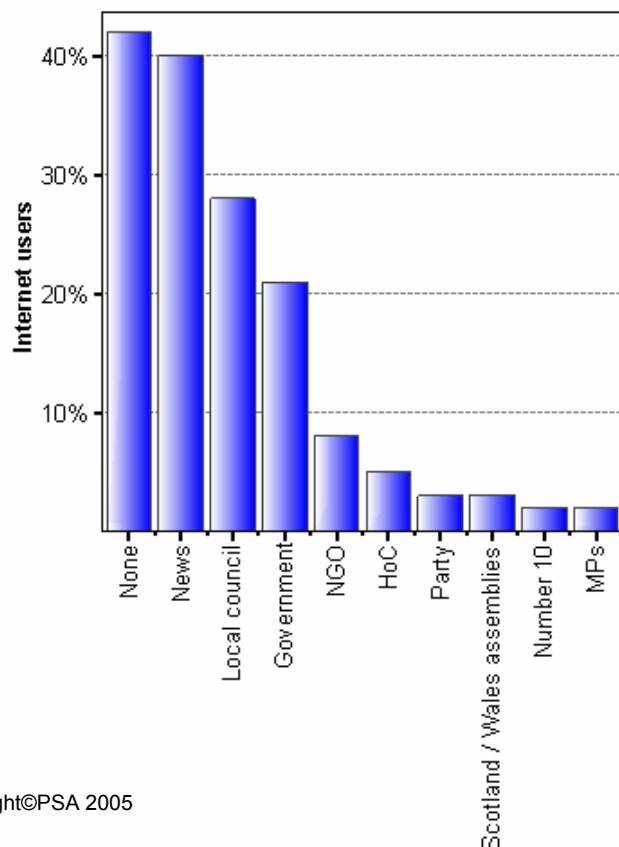


[ASK ALL WHO USE THE INTERNET AT ALL NOWADAYS]

Q.7 Which, if any, of the following websites have you visited in the last 12 months? CODE ALL

- The Parliament
- MP
- The Scottish Parliament / Welsh Assembly
- PM / Number10.gov.uk
- National government / departments
- Local council
- NGO or group with a political agenda
- A political party
- News . current affairs
- None of these
- Don't know
- Refused

Q.7 Websites visited in the last 12 months



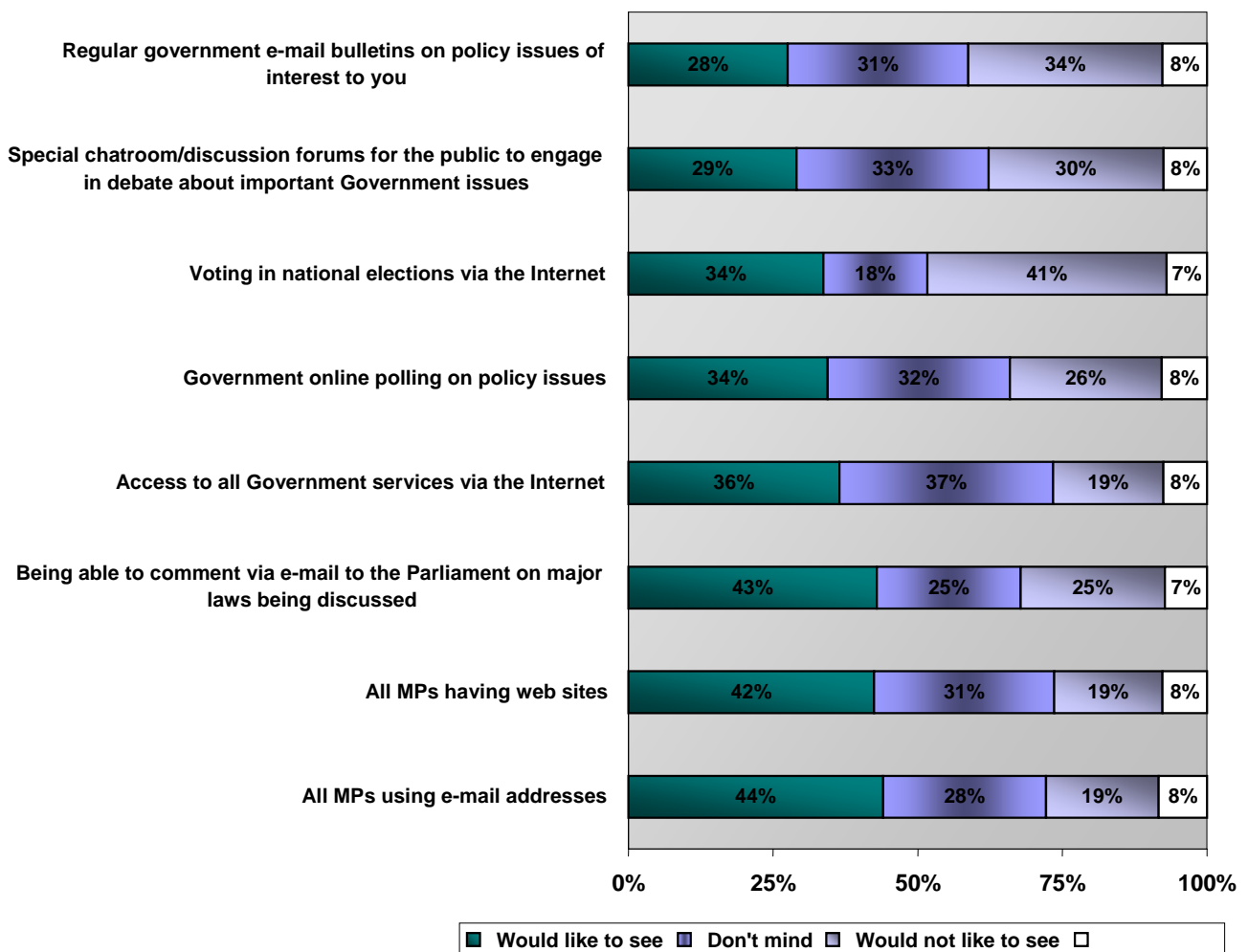
[ASK ALL]

Q.8 I am going to read out various services and for each one I read out, I would like you to tell me if would like to see it, you wouldn't like to see it or if you have no preference either way? CODE ONE

FOR EACH: WOULD LIKE TO SEE, DON'T MIND, WOULD NOT LIKE TO SEE, DON'T KNOW

- Access to all Government services via the Internet
- Government online polling on policy issues
- Regular government e-mail bulletins on policy issues of interest to you
- Voting in national elections via the Internet
- Being able to comment via email to the Parliament on major laws being discussed
- Special chatroom / discussion forums for the public to engage in debate about important government issues
- All MPs using e-mail addresses
- All MPs having web sites

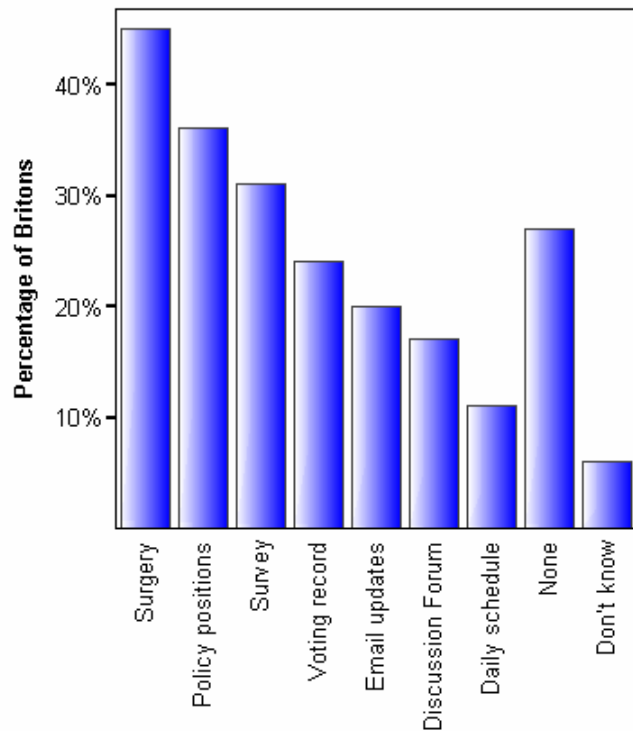
Q.8 Attitudes toward various online transactions



Q.9 Supposing all MPs were online and had websites, which of the features on this card would be important to you? CODE ALL

- An online advice surgery so that you can raise any problems you may have
- An online survey to express your views in general
- A consultation forum where you can discuss issues with others and MPs can read constituents' views
- E-mail updates sent to constituents on matters of importance
- Information on the voting record of your MP in the House of Commons
- Information on your MP's policy positions
- Information on your MPs daily diary/schedule
- None of these
- Don't know

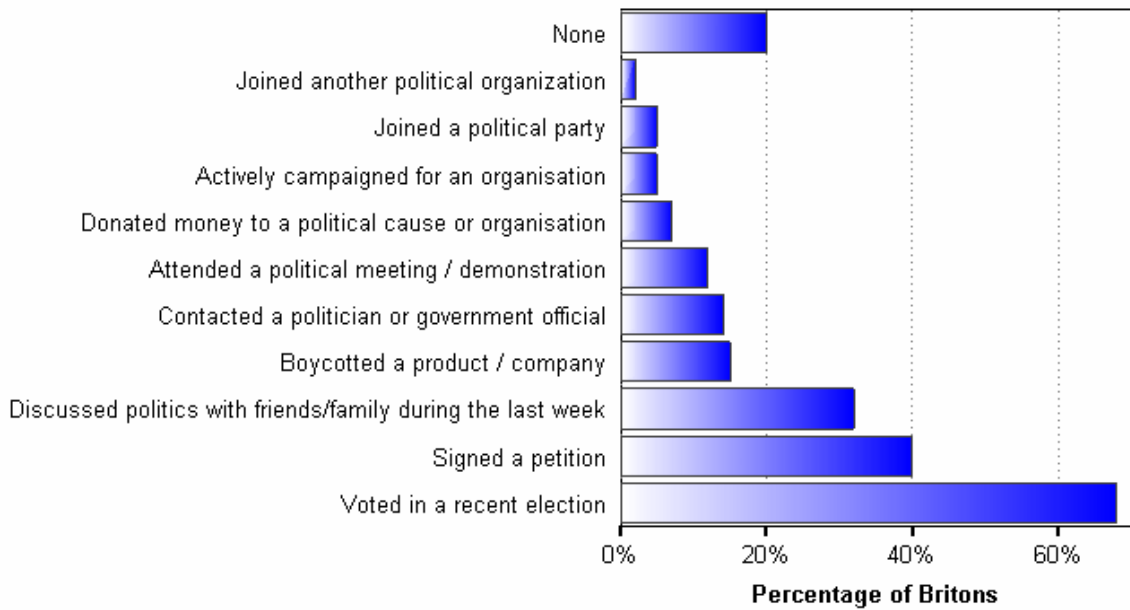
Q.9 Preferred features on MPs websites



Q.10 Which, if any, of the following forms of political activity have you participated in? CODE ALL

- Voted in a local council election, the general election or European election
- Discussed politics with friends/family during the last week
- Contacted a politician or government official
- Donated money to a political cause or organisation
- Joined a political party
- Joined another political organisation
- Actively campaigned for a political organisation (distributed leaflets, worked for a candidate)
- Attended a political meeting / demonstration
- Signed a petition
- Boycotted a product / company
- None of these
- Don't know

Q.10 Traditional political engagement



Q.11 Generally speaking how satisfied are you with the work of your MP?

- Very satisfied
- Quite satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied
- Not very satisfied
- Not at all satisfied
- Don't know/No opinion

Q.11 How satisfied with the work of MP

