
Non-Voters, Political Disconnection and Parliamentary Democracy

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Background and objectives

This article contains the findings from a series of group discussions conducted in September 2001 by MORI on behalf of the Hansard Society and the Electoral Commission to explore why people did not vote in the general election on 7 June 2001. At the same time, the Hansard Society and the Electoral Commission were interested in gauging non-voters' attitudes to parliamentary democracy, investigating attitudes towards political participation and identifying possible ways of re-engaging people with 'politics' and the political system.

The programme of focus groups which took place in September 2001 was designed to ensure that a cross-section of non-voters were included from a range of different seat types i.e. 'safe', 'marginal', urban, rural, and geographical spread (Nottingham, Watford, Plymouth and Stockport). All those taking part say they did not vote in the 2001 election. Some had voted in previous elections but many had seldom or never voted. It should also be noted that although all were non-voters in 2001, some of them were activists in their own communities or in interest or pressure groups.

This research develops many of the themes arising from previous quantitative research conducted during the 2001 election by MORI for the Electoral Commission and others. The focus groups provided the opportunity to explore some of these themes in greater depth and to get 'under the skin' of the factors demotivating people from voting. In considering the findings in this report, it is worth remembering the composition of the four focus groups, which were drawn predominantly from younger and 'serial' non-voters.

During the discussions of why they did not vote in 2001, a number of themes emerged. Firstly, people say they didn't vote because they didn't like what was on offer. Short-term factors seem to be stronger than long-term ones in explaining the fall in turnout. This, as previous research, has shown that on the whole the public have positive attitudes to voting—they believe it is important, it is a duty, and they think it can make a difference. On the evidence of these groups, non-voting in 2001 would seem to be less about 'apathy' and more about a positive abstention. People say they didn't vote because they didn't like the

parties, policies and leaders on offer at this election and didn't think that voting would make a difference to the way in which the country was governed.

Despite much speculation about the impact of the 'foregone conclusion', non-voters say they do not consider the likely ('foregone') result to be a factor. In seeking to explain the drop in turnout between 1997 and 2001, both elections Labour were expected to win, they draw the distinction between backing Labour 'for change' four years ago and feeling 'let down' this year.

Another much discussed factor, the election campaign itself, also does not appear to be a major factor. As MORI polling shows, non-voters say they decided not to vote in advance of the election campaign and do not mention the campaign itself as a reason for not voting. For many, this four week period either passed them by or turned them off, but the decision not to vote (as far as it was a conscious decision) had already been made.

Similarly, non-registration is an effect rather than the cause of a decision not to vote, which is made well before the election. Consequently, if the political system is to reconnect with non-voters it must do so in the 'peacetime' period between elections when it appears most damage is done. People say they want the political system, and its personnel, to be 'involved', 'out and about' and 'hands on', and not just 'about elections'. As a Plymouth woman explained, 'It is like we don't matter when we have voted.'

It appears that non-voting is motivated by outcomes more than process. Previous quantitative research by MORI has found that non-voting is often explained by people saying that voting was difficult or inconvenient. Our groups provided the opportunity to 'get under the skin' and test the strength of these views. Certainly, non-voters do mention access and inconvenience as reasons for not voting but when challenged they are, for the most part, secondary to other factors, which relate to outcomes. There is a sense that if they had really wanted to vote, they could have done so. That said, people do want voting to be 'made easy' and there is support for extending choice through additional methods and periods of voting.

An almost universal factor with these non-voters is that they see the political system as distant and irrelevant and are largely negative about it. Increased media coverage has made the political system familiar to people but at the same time more distant. Non-voters, especially the young, say they don't know how the system works. They find it hard to relate to what goes on at Prime Minister's Question Time and during elections they are unable to see how the outcomes will impact on them immediately and on their local area. They want to see evidence that the political system is in touch and working for them all the time, not just every four years. While they are more positive about their own MP than about MPs generally, there is a call for their

representatives to be more visible and to engage in greater dialogue with constituents.

There appears to be an important role for provision of information between elections at local level. People do not want to be disconnected. MORI surveys have shown that interest in politics has remained stable over the past three decades and that while there is decreasing involvement in activities connected with political parties, other activities have held up or increased. The young are just as interested, just as active in, for example fund-raising and making speeches and contacting elected representatives — but not in voting.

The distinction non-voters make between being active and voting is that the former passes the ‘what’s in it for me/my community?’ test, whereas the latter does not. In other words, one is relevant, the other is not. If the political system is to reconnect with non-voters, it needs to build its relevance and its visibility to people in their own localities through MPs and councillors and it must deliver. People also think that there is a role for information in building awareness of ‘the basics’ — how the system works, what it does and how you can influence it — and ‘the specifics’ — which party is proposing what and how it affects you.

The general election 2001

What reasons do people give for not voting on 7 June 2001? The post-election poll conducted by MORI for the Electoral Commission showed that for significant proportions of non-voters, factors relating to the process and method of voting — especially access and convenience — were important disincentives on 7 June. A different picture emerges, however, from the four groups among non-voters with top-of-mind reasons for not voting largely focusing on outcome-related reasons. This implies that, for many non-voters, reasons relating to inconvenience are largely secondary to the perceived lack of choice and importance of the 2001 election.

In order to ensure that participants were giving their own individual reasons and not simply echoing those of the other people in the group, they were given post-it notes and asked to write down the reasons why they did not vote. They were then prompted with possible reasons why they did not vote and asked whether each applied. Non-voters say they did not vote for a number of overlapping reasons, which are explored below.

1. Non-voters say they did not think that voting would make a difference. Voting in 2001 is seen as having minimal or no effect. It is felt that it changes little about people’s own lives, nor will it lead to their concerns and those of the country as a whole being addressed. This reflects a longer-term cynicism about the political system and its inability to deliver visible changes or improvements ‘on the ground’, as well as shorter-term perceptions of the political parties at the 2001 election. It also echoes the MORI finding for the Electoral Commission

that a quarter of those who disagreed with the idea that generally 'voting makes little difference' did think this was the case in 2001 — certainly the lapsed voters in Plymouth felt that 2001 was a 'different' election. The sense of voting being 'not worth it', prevalent among non-voters, is also based on an impression that the parties were offering much the same things and that any vote for any party would lead to 'no change'.

For instance, a woman in the Nottingham group said, 'It was not like it was really important that it was going to have an effect.' 'In the old days you had Labour on the left and Conservatives on the right and they had certain ideas of what was what. Now they are in the middle and you don't necessarily know what's going on or how it affects you,' said a male 'activist' from the same group. A Watford group woman said, 'They all do the same things, they all promise to do the same things' while a Stockport group woman said, 'Everyone has similar policies, all the different parties say the same thing. But they don't mean it. They all have the same ideas.'

A Plymouth group woman explained in more detail. 'This is the first time I have not voted. I voted in 1997. There didn't seem to be such a blur between the two parties, this time I felt there was no distinction they were all muddled into one and it's not going to work. I don't see the point in having a government if you also haven't got a reasonable opposition, it just doesn't work. You need that, you need two separate parties and that's what we haven't got now. I didn't vote this time because the parties all seemed the same.'

2. Non-voters do not say they didn't vote because the election was a foregone conclusion. As in responses to unprompted questions asked by MORI in their post-election survey, there were few spontaneous mentions in the focus groups of the election being a 'foregone conclusion' — either at a constituency or at national level, and this was not given as a reason for not voting. However, when prompted, some felt that the inevitability of Labour's win may have been a reason for others not voting, while saying it was not a reason they themselves did not.

The expectation that Labour would win comfortably may have been overplayed as a reason for not-voting this time. Certainly, the distinction drawn by non-voters (including 'lapsed' and 'serial' non-voters) between the last two elections and their respective turnouts is that while the public expected Labour to win both, four years ago many voted for a change of government and the prospect of things improving, while in 2001 they say they had precious few reasons to vote. That said, there is some sense that politicians and political commentators knew the result and were 'resigned' to low turnout which had an effect on the campaign. As a Plymouth group woman pointed out, 'Maybe the politicians thought What's the point of knocking on doors?'

3. Non-voters say they did not like what was on offer. Many said that they were dissatisfied with Labour's record, and the sense that

people had been 'let down' by the government has perhaps been underestimated as a reason for non-voting at the last general election. Equally, non-voters say they did not like what was being offered by the other main parties: again, they feel they were presented with what, in effect, amounted to no choice. Many say that they saw the parties as being 'all as bad as each other', meaning that they had nothing positive to vote for, which consequently led them to abstain. Some also expressed dissatisfaction with the policy platforms of the two main parties and were critical of both Tony Blair and William Hague. As a woman in the Nottingham group said, 'None of the parties appealed to me . . . A lot of people don't want to vote for Labour but there's no alternative, therefore, they don't vote. Well they are not going to vote Tory, the Lib Dems just aren't really popular. The people who can't find an alternative, who are resigned to what's already there, will just not vote. If you felt really strongly that you didn't want them in then you'd go and vote just to stop them getting in.'

Another woman in this group agreed, 'I think an awful lot of people . . . basically get up in the morning and think, if I vote for these what are they going to do for me. I didn't particularly want Labour back in again but I couldn't see anybody else as a better alternative and I think that a lot of people stayed at home because they didn't see anything better. They see nothing in it for them and they see no alternative.' A woman in the Plymouth group referred to the leadership. 'And the relevant leaders of all the parties as well. Do I really want them to be in charge? I don't think you had a really forceful leader for any one particular party to make people think I am going to vote to make sure that that person gets in.'

4. Non-voters say they felt ill-informed and were unsure about how voting one way or another would affect them. Many non-voters, especially younger first-time non-voters, say they 'did not know enough' to make a decision about who to vote for. Most are self-conscious about knowing 'not much' or 'not enough' about 'politics' and what voting for different parties and candidates would mean in practice. For them, 'politics' is a largely serious, complicated and intimidating matter and, especially among the young, a subject and activity that is 'not for me'.

It is instructive, and encouraging, that younger non-voters do not rule out voting in 2004/5. Confirming the MORI/Electoral Commission survey results, they think highly of the principle of voting, and its importance, and say that they want to vote in an informed way and for positive reasons rather than simply voting for voting's sake. One young woman in Stockport said, 'If you don't know anything about it why vote? All the people who are really interested in it do vote. But if the people who don't have a clue vote for someone else and they win, then it is bad for the others.' Many were quite open about their lack of knowledge. A man in the Watford Group said, 'I would rather come up

and say I don't know enough, or no one sticks out for me so I am not going to vote this year.' And from the Stockport group a young woman said, 'I haven't got a clue who to vote for, I don't know what is going on in politics. So I have never voted because I don't know what is going on. I can't see the point in voting.'

5. Some non-voters say it was difficult or inconvenient to vote but, when challenged, these are seen as secondary to outcome-related explanations.

Process and practical barriers are mentioned by some who say they were 'too busy' on the day, 'at work' or 'away on holiday'. However, with a few exceptions, even when these are cited as reasons for not voting on 7 June, they are not seen as being the primary drivers of the decision to not vote but rather as 'clinchers'. For instance, a Nottingham group man said, 'I was on holiday during the election . . . You can vote by post or you can vote by proxy so that if people want to vote they can. I probably would have liked to have voted, I wish I had been more organised and then I would have voted but as it happened I didn't . . . My point is simply that if there is a blame as to why you didn't vote it doesn't fall on the authorities, all I am saying was if I had wanted I could have done.'

6. Non-voters do not mention the general election campaign—the previous four years were more important in demotivating them. Confirming MORI's election polling which found that three-quarters say they decided what they were going to do on 7 June before the campaign began, non-voters say they made up their mind not to vote well in advance of the campaign. For many of the younger non-voters, it largely passed them by. A Nottingham group man said, 'It's over the last four years when they have been in power you get an idea of what Labour are like, they are always on the news, you get an idea of what everyone's like so you don't make your mind up in the weeks running up, you decide over those previous four years.' The importance of the 'peacetime' period in framing perceptions of the efficacy of voting is also illustrated in the reasons given for non-registration. Some younger non-voters who suggest that they had no intention or anticipation of voting saw no reason to register, i.e. non-registration was not a cause of non-vote but rather an effect. For others, the campaign confirmed or crystallised a decision not to vote, although few say they remember the time they consciously decided whether or not they would vote. A Nottingham woman said, 'I think I probably decided [during the campaign] that I definitely wouldn't vote as opposed to probably wouldn't.'

7. Many-voters reject the 'apathy' argument. For them, non-voting is more about positive abstention. Overall, participants felt that non-voting and non-registration were decisions born out of a rejection of what was on offer. When challenged, they do not buy in to the view that apathy is the main reason for low turnout this year, if by apathy it

is meant that people are not interested in voting or politics or could not be 'bothered'. They think low turnout reflects a positive abstention and a justifiable decision to reject what was on offer. From their perspective, it is not that they did not want to vote but that they were not presented with enough sound reasons to be either interested in the election or to vote: 'I think what they are doing is voting by not going.' Was the clear view of one woman in the Plymouth group and 'Not voting is like a vote in itself,' was a neat way of summing this up from a man in the Stockport group.

On the whole, non-voters are not defensive personally about their not having voted on 7 June and neither do they say they are embarrassed about it. At the same time, there is a sense that low turnout is disappointing and that the 59% figure gives a clear message about people's lack of confidence in the party programmes and the politicians on offer in 2001: 'It just says it all doesn't it, really' being a typical response.

What do people say can be done to boost turnout?

It is important to remember that voting and voting reform is a fairly low-salience issue for most people and is not something they have clear, or particularly strong, views about. There is only sketchy awareness of the actual extent of non-voting at the 2001 general election—participants knew it was low but were not sure just how low—and this was, for most, the first time that they had ever thought about what could be done to make more people vote. 'It is funny, because you are talking about it like I might actually lose sleep over it, I don't.' was the bemused response from a man in the Watford group.

Spontaneous, top-of-mind suggestions for boosting turnout, given by respondents in various groups, focus on the following: more relevant policies from politicians and parties; clearer policies from politicians and parties; policies that have a constituency/local focus; better communication of these to the electorate; greater differentiation between the parties so there is a 'real choice'; better leaders of the parties; delivery of promises; greater honesty on the part of politicians; improving access by making it easier to vote.

As would be expected given that most of the reasons for non-voting focus on outcomes not methods, the suggestions given for boosting future turnout do likewise. A Nottingham group male activist said, 'I think a lot of people feel voting is very important but I think unless in 2004/5 there are policies going on that we believe in, we won't.' Other comments were, 'If it made a difference, then yes I would vote. If I knew that by me doing that I would make a difference, then yes. But right now I don't think if I did vote, or didn't vote, it would make a difference. Because irrespective of what I say, or what I think, whoever goes into power is just going to do the same old thing' from a Watford group man, and 'I think a polarisation of the parties so that they are a

bit more different is what would need to happen' from a woman in the Nottingham group. A Plymouth Group woman suggested, 'If someone would actually stand up and say I can't promise you the world but realistically we'll try and do this.'

While these are thought to be key factors in determining whether or not people vote, non-voters do suggest there is scope for reform in two key non-outcome related respects. Two important factors were improving the information available to the electorate; and 'making it easy' to vote by extending the choice people have in deciding how to vote. There is support for more information but more important than the amount is the content. Non-voters say they want more relevant, local and issue-based information about what is being done between elections and what the parties are offering at elections. They want to know what their MP is doing and what he/she intends to do for them.

There is also support, particularly among younger non-voters, for information about the basic mechanics of politics. However, information provision is thought to be the responsibility of parties and politicians and of the media, none seen as particularly trustworthy messengers. Some query the current system of voting and ask why it is exclusively on a Thursday, why it is done in polling stations, why these tend to be in schools, and why people are allocated to one polling station at which to vote. These factors make it hard for some groups of people such as parents with young children whose schools are off for the day because the school is used as a polling station, or workers who either commute to work and for most of the day are not close to their polling station or whose jobs require them to travel large distances away from their polling station. A Watford group woman said, 'Why do they always use schools, that means it is always on a weekday, I have to find childminders to look after my two, because they have closed the schools. Could they not do it on a weekend?' A Nottingham man explained, 'Where I was working I was an hour, hour-and-a-half, away from the polling station so when I thought I was going to go and do it something cropped up. I wish I had voted. It was because I was away from where I was registered to vote all day. You can by post but if you are working away and you have to go to a certain polling station and you are working away, it's impossible.' In the same group a man said, 'I suppose if you are at work it is not always an open system because your polling card is for your local polling station but if you are at work you might be miles away. If you want to cast your vote you should be able to do it anywhere in the country.'

On prompting, there is some support for telephone, postal and e-voting as all are seen as making it easier to vote by extending the range of mechanisms available. They are not mentioned spontaneously and there is low awareness of such suggestions or how they might work. Indeed, there is low awareness among these non-voters of the current proxy and postal methods, suggesting that more will need to be done

to communicate the recent introduction of postal voting 'on demand'. For instance, a Stockport group man said, 'I thought you had to go to the polling station.' And a woman from Watford group said, 'I thought there was only one way of voting, and that was to go and place a vote in the ballot box in the polling station.'

As mentioned previously, there is a general feeling that access and convenience are not 'big issues' and that these suggestions alone would not be enough to motivate people to vote. For most non-voters, outcomes (the what and why of voting) are more important than the methods (the how of voting). 'If they want to vote then they'll vote' was the comment of a Plymouth group woman which summed up this view.

When prompted with suggestions of possible ways to encourage voting, the idea of compulsory voting receives a largely negative reaction as participants feel it would impinge on their freedom of choice. There is also a perception that compulsory voting would, to some extent, let politicians 'off the hook' because they would have little incentive to re-engage with non-voters. A Watford Group man said 'We are a democratic country, so it is our choice to vote.' And a Nottingham group woman said equally strongly, 'It is your right to not have to vote.' A Plymouth women explained it this way, 'I mean in any walk of life you have a debate and you either vote for, against or abstain. [With compulsory voting] you are removing choice.'

There is stronger support for including a 'none of the above' option on ballot papers. This suggestion is unfamiliar to most people. It is harder to grasp (unlike, say, compulsory voting) and has to be explained. What people like about the idea is that it is seen as giving greater choice to non-voters who do not like what is on offer and who can either not vote at all or register a rejection of all candidates. Some are more sceptical, questioning why you would want to tick 'none of the above' when you could just as easily not turn out at all. A Nottingham woman said, 'I think it shows a different side of voting. I do think it would be a good idea to have a none of the above in case someone did want the choice of going and not voting for somebody, not make it compulsory to vote but that to be there if you wanted to put your point across in that way.' And another woman from the Stockport group said, 'At least if you don't want to vote for anybody you have gone there. You have not voted but at least you have put what you thought, at least you have done something. Then if you don't know who to vote for which I didn't, if there was a box saying none of the above I could have just ticked that. At least I have gone there and done something.'

What do people think of the political system?

The research sought to go beyond attitudes to elections and voting putting these in the broader context of attitudes to the political system. Clearly, there is a strong relationship between the two, not least because

elections are the main 'contact' people have with the political system (and this is something they are critical of). The largely negative impressions of the political system are likely to impact on attitudes to voting just as impressions of individual elections may frame broader attitudes to 'politics' and the political system.

When asked which two or three words come to mind when thinking about the political system (defined as being elections, parties, politicians and Parliament), the following are typical of the non-voters in the focus groups: confusing, disorganised, a mess, rubbish, broken promises, argumentative, unreachable, big words to impress, dictatorial, traditional, and, especially among younger non-voters, don't know, haven't a clue.

There is a sense that 'politics' is familiar (not least because of national media coverage) but at the same time it is seen as being distant and having little direct relevance to, or impact on, people's day-to-day lives. Younger non-voters tend to associate 'politics' with Westminster and Prime Minister's Question Time, which is viewed negatively. From a Watford group man, 'Order, order, you know, it is just a game to them. And it would be nice for once if someone . . . say, like the Conservatives have a good idea and then Blair will get up and say, well I think that is a good idea. They can't agree on anything you know, it is just stupid.' A woman in the Stockport group said, 'I think they are argumentative, when I flicked on the telly and see them in Parliament, they stand up and sit down and address each other. You see people arguing and laughing, you think I don't want to listen to this.' And a Watford group man 'I only know what I see on the news, but it is like a load of people on this side, load of people on the other, all talking over each other. Why not change the way it is done, do it in a more civilised manner?'

The system is seen as being confrontational, with 'fighting', 'squabbling' and 'arguing' frequently used to describe the conduct of political debate and decision-making. 'They are always fighting against each other, because they haven't got their facts right. If they don't know who has got the facts right how should we know?' said a Plymouth group woman. Another said, 'You get the Conservative person saying something and then you have the Labour Party opinion and they just slag them off. They don't say one thing about what they plan to do.'

Criticisms tend to focus on the personnel rather than the system as such although for most participants these were one and the same thing. Politicians are seen as being self-serving, having gone 'native', and the political system is thought to comprise 'elite' groups of people. Many feel that the way in which it operates is neither widely understood nor particularly transparent. These sentiments are by no means unique to national government. In MORI's experience, similar themes emerge when people are asked about their local councillors. A Watford group woman said, 'They make the decisions at the end of the day, and we can't see how it has been done.' A Plymouth group woman said, 'The

politicians are interested in money and power. I think they start with a cause and they believe in that cause, but I think they get lost on the way into just securing their own existence in politics really.’ And a Stockport group woman said, ‘They say one thing and do another, I agree with that. Every political person says the same thing every year, to make you vote for them.’

There is also a sense that politics and the way it is communicated to the electorate are too stage-managed. The word ‘spin’ is often mentioned in a negative way while the media come in for some criticism for simplifying politics to the level of ‘soundbites’. Politicians are thought to be equally culpable in going along with this and being more interested in getting across what they want to say rather than engaging in genuine dialogue with the public. This reinforces the perception that politics is distant and ‘out of touch’. For instance, a Nottingham group woman said, ‘When you watch the elections in America it is all like for show, kind of a showman thing and I think Tony Blair has a lot of that. It is like one big circus.’ A man in the same group said, ‘They are presenting it in a way that has been spun, so I mean like when the financial news is presented it is not just these are the facts, this is what happens there is always something behind it, some angle.’

A further criticism relates to the remoteness of politicians and their lack of empathy with the ‘man in the street’. Many people say that they only hear from, or see, their MP at election time when they are out to secure votes. MPs are generally thought to be largely invisible between elections, helping to foster a sense of cynicism towards politicians and their motives (again, in MORI’s experience similar themes emerge when people are asked about their local councillors). Some instances of this perceptions came from a man in the Watford group who said, ‘You see them before the elections, and that is it, that is the last you hear of them until the following elections.’ And a Stockport group man said, ‘The majority [of MPs] are toffs. They haven’t got a clue what is going on in an inner city.’ A Plymouth group woman said, ‘I don’t think they have any idea how an old age pensioner copes day to day. They have never had to think on that level.’ And a Watford group man said, ‘They just got a pay rise didn’t they. They don’t suffer you know, they hear of people, but they don’t suffer, they never suffer themselves. Until you suffer yourself you don’t know, you don’t really understand it really. I don’t think they do. It is like they are always sympathising, but I don’t think they really understand what the NHS is like, all the waiting . . .’

The proximity of an election can heighten cynicism to an extent that people are likely to be less receptive to the information, or indeed dialogue, during the four weeks leading up to it. This further underlines the importance for the political system to be visible and seen to be working for the public during the ‘peacetime’ period in between elections. ‘They say anything in the campaign just to get your vote’ said a Nottingham group man, whilst a man from the Watford group said,

‘You get the information but you only get it at one time during the year. Like I said, you don’t have any idea what they have been doing for the last three years, the last four years.’

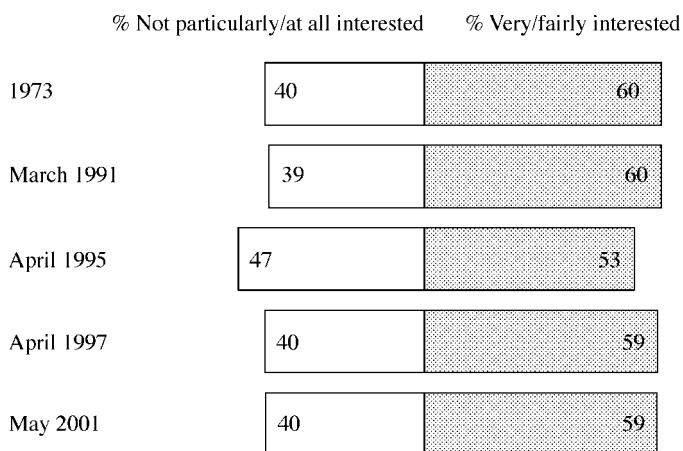
When thinking about politics and the political system, people tend to think at a national level—the parties, their leaders, Parliament and PM’s Question Time. However, when asked about their immediate concerns their ‘world view’ is about their local area, about local issues and local institutions such as councils. A Watford group man said, ‘What about from a local point of view? Because at the end of the day, sad as it sounds, at the end of the day you only worry about where you live, it is your backyard, it is not like four towns, five towns down the road.’ An activist man from the Nottingham group said, ‘What I am getting is that people out there haven’t got contact with local government.’ And a Plymouth group woman said, ‘I think if everybody’s honest their own town is their priority. I mean I don’t care what other people’s areas are like quite frankly, my worry is Plymouth and I think you need to feel confident in your local council before you can start to feel confident perhaps in your general part of it and the country.’

What could be done to build engagement?

MORI surveys have shown that interest in politics has remained very stable in the period since the 1970s (see Figure 1) and the youngest 18–24 age cohort are no less interested in politics than they were a decade ago.

1. Interest in Politics over Time

Q: How interested would you say you are in politics?



Base: c.1000 British/UK adults 18+ interviewed by telephone, 9–15 May 2001

Source: MORI/JRRT

While some of the younger non-voters in the focus groups said they were not interested in politics, they had an expectation that their interest would grow as they got older. The problem seems to be the presentation of politics to this group and the way it connects with them (or not), although some of these sentiments apply equally to older people. A young woman from the Stockport group said, 'It is interesting but we are not exactly interested. As you get older you pay more attention to it. And you notice what is going on around you. When you are young you just want to go out and have fun. You don't think about it.' Another man in this group said, 'If it is on it is on nearly every channel, I can't sit and watch it. It is doing my head in.' Similarly a woman from Watford said, 'I try and watch a bit more on the news about politics, but a lot of it doesn't interest me, or winds me up so much . . . because this childish squabbling that they seem to do, each party. When you get down to the nitty gritty about health and education, yes that is important, but all they do is talk . . .' And a Nottingham group man said, 'I just feel it is rammed down your throat on the telly.'

Building engagement and involvement in decision-making is widely supported; people agree that this is something which should be done and indeed, needs to be done. However, many acknowledge that they would only be interested in getting involved in decision-making if it was relevant, directly affected them, and provided they had confidence in the system—these are seen being the major failings of the current political system. This was explained by a Watford group man who said, 'Once you get belief, you get people talking, that is when you get word of mouth, that is when you get involvement, after that, whenever you come up with a new scheme, or a new idea, people will be more interested, and more attentive you know, to get involved and to help out. Because they know at the end of the day it is helping themselves, and their borough, and where they live, and they are going to make it a better place.'

Relevance is also the basis of the contrast between voting and taking part in other political activities—the MORI/Electoral Commission surveys found that 24% of 18–24-year-olds who were active citizens (attending a political or interest group/charity meeting, taking part in a demonstration or march, presenting their views to a local or national politician, urging someone else to) did not vote. Other MORI surveys have shown decreasing involvement in party politics while other activities, which are political in a broader sense, have held up or actually increased. In these groups, the more activist among the non-voters say that they did not vote because there was nothing in it for them or their communities whereas other activities offer opportunities to affect real change. A Plymouth woman said, 'You go along with the issues that affect you.' A Nottingham woman said, 'If you feel impassioned . . . and it's a community thing, you rally round when it is the community. When it is affecting your school or your neighbourhood.'

When asked how politics could be made more interesting and relevant, participants say they want MPs to be more proactive in the community and more visible in between elections. They also feel that MPs need to have greater, as well as on-going, dialogue with their constituents. People want greater contact and interaction between the public and the political system, with the proviso that it is on their terms i.e. the public should be generating the agenda and priorities, not being informed about what has already been decided. They want the political system to be working for people all the time (and they say they see little evidence that it is), not once every four years or so. 'Bring [the politicians] closer. We're at Land's End and they're at John O'Groats' said a man in the Stockport group. A Nottingham group woman said, 'Basically if people felt once they had been elected they had more input on their behaviour in politics during their term in office they might feel a lot better about it. You feel that once you have voted them in you are stuck with them for four years and if you don't like them you are no better off if you don't vote again.'

Respondents were shown a list of suggestions for improving 'engagement' and asked which they preferred. They were as follows: innovative media strategies such as local newspaper campaigns; opportunities to learn more about Parliament, the work of MPs, how to influence government policymaking; Citizens' Juries; online consultations and discussions; online voting; more candidates who reflect the composition of society; and more accessible candidates/representatives e.g. town/village hall style meetings or home-based meetings.

Perhaps inevitably given the negative impressions of the political system, there is support for each of the items on the list and a sense that anything and everything should be tried. Support is, however, strongest for opportunities for learning more about parliament and the political system and how they work. Most participants felt this should be done in secondary schools with a 'curriculum' focusing on the 'basics'—how the system works, who does what and how, how this relates to 'us' and how we can change things. The parallel is drawn with religious education. 'When people say, what do you know about politics, I think a lot of people would say they can't tell you the first thing . . .' said a Watford group woman. A Stockport group woman thought, 'If it were taught in schools and stuff you would probably understand more about it. But if you understand it fully then you would probably know who to vote for, and then you get used to that way and just carry on voting. As soon as you get to high school you get that, like religious education.' A man in the Watford group said, 'I think that is something that should be brought in. Like you get a brief outline in school, because that is where your first understanding, because if you show someone how it works to start off with, then you will get them interested, but if there is no like actual teaching in it, they will abuse it or it will go straight out the window. If I had some foundation on how

it works, then I might get involved and try and take an interest in politics.'

There is also strong support for more candidates who reflect the composition of society, in the sense of being demographically similar (more women, more younger people, more from ethnic minorities). More important, however, they want candidates to be 'in tune' with society and accessible. As mentioned earlier, there is an impression that elected representatives have little in common and little empathy with the 'person in the street'. In the Nottingham group a woman said, 'I think more candidates that reflect the composition of society because if there were more people like us then they'd know what we want and then they would then change it. That would be quite good I think. Because at the end of the day if they don't reflect our needs we shouldn't be out there voting for them.'

Online voting is also supported, although some express concern about the potential for 'fraud' and doubt whether any e-system could be truly secure. Support for these suggestions is based mainly on outcomes, i.e. people support consultation and discussion (the output) however this is achieved (the method, e.g. the internet). So for instance a Stockport group woman said, 'I think they are all good apart from the online voting, if you haven't got a computer that is a bit difficult. If you are lazy then it won't work because you have to go and find somewhere. If you have got a computer then it is easier. I think they are all quite good.' A Nottingham group woman said, 'It is just going back to the point I made earlier which is about communication, about contact whether that be online or face to face.'

Citizen's Juries are not widely understood, but once explained they receive widespread support. They are seen as a genuine way in which ordinary people can influence the decision-making processes. That said, participants say that the decisions made by juries would have to be binding in order to be effective. There is also some uncertainty as to whether people with busy lives would be able to give up their time to take part in them. A Stockport group man said, 'I think that citizens' jury is letting normal people have their say.' Overall, it is clear from this research that much could be done to build engagement and reconnect with non-voters.

Looking ahead

In summary, people are more 'disconnected' from the personnel of the political system than the system itself, although of course they do tend to see these as one and the same. Crucially, non-voters are not necessarily disconnected from voting and, encouragingly, most do not rule out voting at the next election. They rejected what was on offer at the recent general election rather than disconnecting from the on-going process. In the future, above all, they want to see evidence that their elected representatives are working for them between elections, are

listening to them and are making good on promises that have been made. This was summed up by a Nottingham group woman, 'I think people should vote but they should have a party that they believe in to be able to go and put their trust in.'

* Footnote on the interpretation of the data. Two of the key strengths of qualitative research are that it allows issues to be explored in detail and enables researchers to test the strength of people's opinion. However, it needs to be remembered that qualitative research does not allow conclusions to be drawn about either the extent to which something is happening or percentages of the population who have certain attitudes and opinions. Qualitative research is designed to be illustrative rather than providing statistically representative data. It should also be remembered that throughout this report we record perceptions, not facts. Throughout the report, use is made of verbatim comments from respondents. Where this is the case, it is important to remember that the views expressed do not always represent the views of the groups as a whole, although normally the statements are representative of at least a significant minority.