



Parliament and the Public

Knowledge, interest and perceptions

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New survey data provided by



About the author

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1.0 Introduction: what does the public think about Parliament?

The Westminster Parliament is the heart of representative democracy in the United Kingdom. Its own brand of parliamentary democracy, the 'Westminster system,' has been replicated around the world. The Palace of Westminster, with its iconic bell tower and dramatic position on the banks of the River Thames, is one of the most recognisable buildings on earth – an international symbol of the UK, as well as a physical embodiment of democracy.¹

But what do the British people think about the illustrious institution which represents them? There is evidence that public confidence in Parliament has been rapidly declining over the past several decades.² The Hansard Society's annual *Audit of Political Engagement* has recently found that only a third of the population is satisfied with how the institution works.³ In an effort to shed further light on the complex relationship between Parliament and the public, the Hansard Society commissioned a survey examining public attitudes towards the institution.⁴ This report presents our findings, which are grouped into three categories:

- **Knowledge and understanding** of how Parliament works and the distinction between Parliament and government;
- **Interest** in Parliament and the desire to know more about it;
- **Perceptions** of whether Parliament is important, relevant, accessible, representative and is generally working for people.

Key findings

The results of the survey reveal strikingly low levels of knowledge about Parliament as well as some surprising perceptions about its role as an institution. The key findings include:

- Just 32% of people agree that they 'have a good understanding of the way Parliament works';
- Only one in two members of the public are confident that Parliament is not the same thing as government;
- Over half of people (53%) have an interest in Parliament, although nearly as many (47%) have little or no interest;
- Around one in two (47%) are interested in learning more about Parliament;
- Younger people (aged 18-34) and women are more likely to want to know more about Parliament, while people from lower social grades are far more likely to say they would not like to know more;
- Nearly half of people agree that Parliament undertakes important functions that no other body can undertake and a majority feel it is relevant to their lives;
- An overwhelming majority of people feel that that Parliament is unrepresentative of British society;
- Only 19% of people agree that Parliament is 'working for them'.

Some of these findings – particularly vis-à-vis knowledge and understanding – are

¹ Winston Churchill dubbed the House of Commons the 'shrine of the world's liberties'. Winston Churchill quoted in P. Hennessy, 'An end to the poverty of aspiration? Parliament since 1979', unpublished paper, November 2004, p. 23.

² For example, MORI research found that trust in Parliament dropped from 54% in 1983 to 14% in 2000. See M. Woolf, 'Cameron launches taskforce to "restore trust in politics"', *The Independent*, 5 February 2006.

³ Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society and Electoral Commission), p. 7.

⁴ This publication is based upon a Hansard Society report for the Group for Information to the Public (GIP) of the Houses of Parliament, *Removing Barriers to Engagement*. The Hansard Society commissioned ComRes to poll 1023 UK adults by telephone between 4 and 5 June 2008. The data was weighted to represent the national distribution by age, region and gender.

unquestionably troubling. On a more positive note, others suggest that, contrary to popular belief, most people are not completely apathetic about Parliament. A majority of the public appear to have an interest in and a high regard for the institution even if it does not currently live up to their expectations and ideals.

2.0 Knowledge and understanding

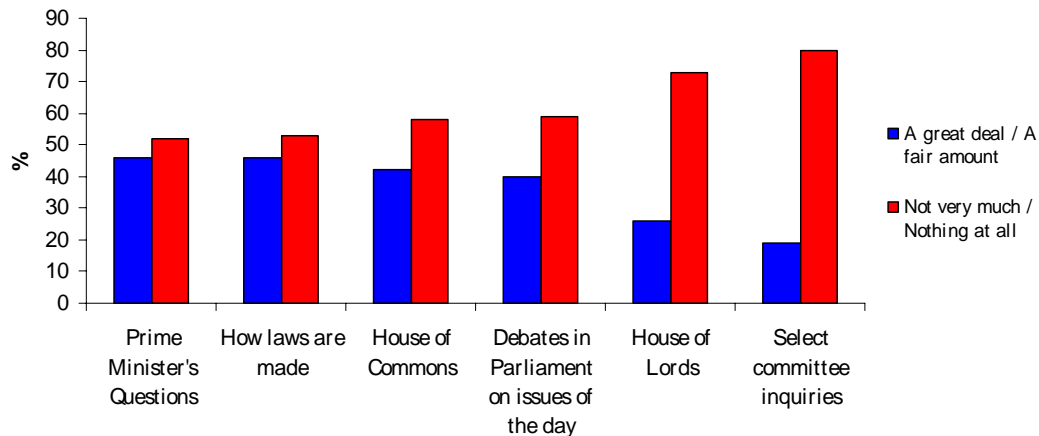
Just 32% of the public say that they feel they 'have a good understanding of the way Parliament works'. A much smaller proportion say that they know about the House of Lords (26%) than the House of Commons (42%). The two components of Parliament's work with which the public feel most familiar are Prime Minister's Questions and how laws are made, with 46% saying that they know either 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount'. Only half of the public appear to be able to distinguish between government and Parliament. Even among those who recognise that they are separate entities, there is confusion as to exactly what that difference is.

2.1 Knowledge of Parliament

Past Hansard Society studies have identified a lack of knowledge about politics as one of the most important barriers to engagement between the public and the political system, including Parliament.⁵ In this survey, we asked people whether they agree with the statement 'I feel I have a good understanding of the way Parliament works'. Only 32% of people tend to agree. This is significantly less than the number of people to who claim to know about politics as a whole (55%).

In view of the prevailing ignorance, it is not surprising that there is widespread confusion about Parliament's day-to-day work. People were asked to what extent they knew about six components of Parliament: the House of Commons, the House of Lords, Prime Minister's Questions, how laws are made, debates on issues of the day and select committee inquiries. The majority say that they know either 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about any of these components.

Figure 1: Knowledge of six components of Parliament



Base: all respondents

⁵ See Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *An audit of political engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission); Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society).

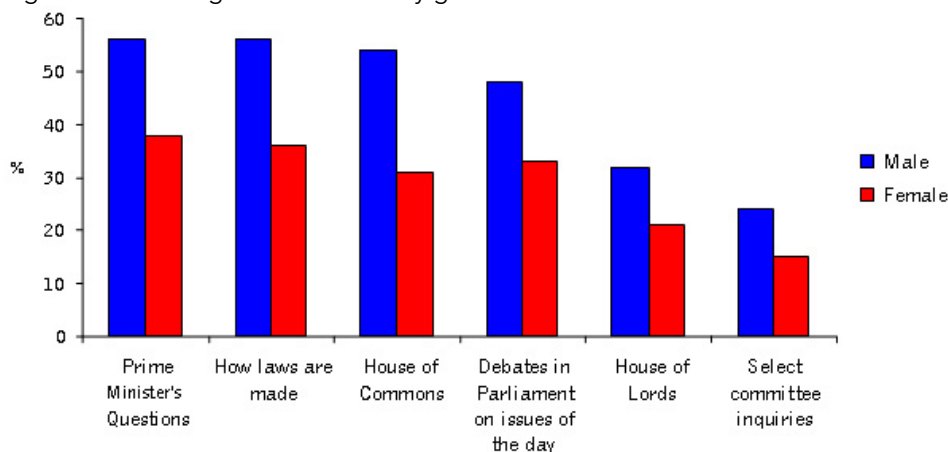
A much smaller proportion of the public feel that they have at least a fair amount of knowledge about the House of Lords (26%) than the House of Commons (42%). The two components of Parliament's work with which the public feel most familiar are 'Prime Minister's Questions' and 'how laws are made', with 46% saying that they know either 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' in both cases (14% more than the number of people who feel they understand how Parliament as a whole works).

The least well-known components are 'select committee inquiries', with 80% of the public saying that they know either 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about this aspect of Parliament's work.

Gender

There is a marked contrast in the professed knowledge of men and women. While 42% of men agree with the statement 'I feel I have a good understanding of the way Parliament works', only 24% of women agree. And while nearly half of women (49%) disagree with the statement, only 29% of men do. Roughly equal numbers of men and women – a little over a quarter – neither agree nor disagree. In general, men are more likely to believe that they know about the six tested parliamentary components than women. The most striking disparity is with respect to the House of Commons. While 54% of men say that they know either 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal' about the House of Commons, just 31% of women say the same.

Figure 2: Knowledge of Parliament by gender



Base: all respondents

Age and social grade

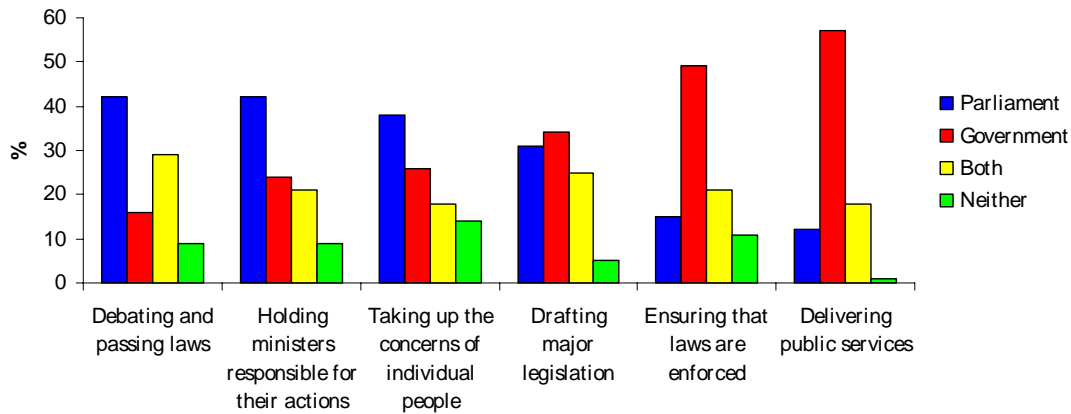
Age and social grade⁶ differences are also present, with older people (65+) and higher social grades more likely to have a good understanding of Parliament and its components.

2.2 Understanding the distinction between government and Parliament

In order to test the public's understanding of the distinction between government and Parliament, people were asked whether they agreed with the statement that 'government and Parliament are the same thing'. Only 49% disagree with this statement, suggesting that one in two members of the public are not confident that there is a difference. Those who correctly identified the distinction were then asked to categorise functions according to whether they considered them to be the responsibility of government, Parliament or both.

⁶ For an explanation of social grade definitions, see Appendix A.

Figure 3: Understanding of the different functions of government and Parliament



Base: all who say there is a difference between government and Parliament

Functions most popularly associated with Parliament are ‘debating and passing laws’ (42%); ‘holding ministers responsible for their actions’ (42%); and ‘taking up the concerns of individual people’ (38%).

The functions most widely associated with government are ‘delivering public services’ (57%) and ‘ensuring that laws are enforced’ (49%). The public are divided about who has responsibility for ‘drafting major legislation’, with 34% saying it is government’s role and 31% saying that it is Parliament’s role.

Gender

Men and women are roughly just as likely to say that there is a difference between government and Parliament. However, men are more likely than women to correctly identify the roles of government and Parliament: more men than women associate ‘debating and passing laws’ with Parliament (48% versus 37%); ‘holding ministers responsible for their actions’ with Parliament (48% versus 37%); ‘ensuring that laws are enforced’ with government (53% versus 47%); ‘taking up the concerns of individual people’ with Parliament (42% versus 34%); and ‘drafting major legislation’ with government (36% versus 32%). The one measure on which women appear to have a more accurate view than men is ‘delivering public services’, with more women than men (59% versus 55%) associating this function with government.

Age and social grade

People from higher social grades are more likely than people from lower grades to disagree strongly with the statement that ‘Government and Parliament are the same thing’ (33% of ABs and 28% of C1s disagree strongly compared to 23% of DEs and 21% of C2s). They are also more likely to correctly identify which functions correspond with Parliament and which correspond with government. For example, 55% of ABs associate ‘holding ministers responsible for their actions’ with Parliament, compared to 42% overall.

A perhaps unexpected age difference emerges, with people aged 25-34 also disproportionately more likely to correctly ascribe parliamentary and governmental functions. For example, 67% of ABs and 63% of 25-34 year-olds relate ‘delivering public services’ to government compared to the overall average of 57%; 55% of ABs and 51% of 25-34 year-olds associate ‘debating and passing laws’ with Parliament compared to 42% overall. Sometimes 25-34 year-olds fare better than ABs, with 67% correlating ‘ensuring that laws are enforced’ with government, compared to 49% overall - and only 57% of ABs. While

44% of this age group associates 'drafting major legislation' with government, only 37% of ABs do the same and the overall average is 34%.

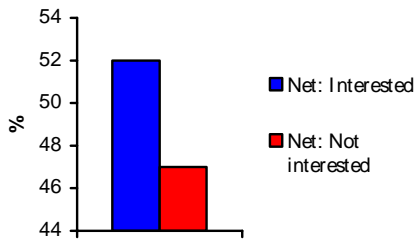
3.0 Interest

Over half (53%) of people have an interest in Parliament, although nearly as many (47%) have little or no interest. Around one in two people (47%) say either 'yes' or 'possibly' to the prospect of knowing more about Parliament. Younger people (aged 18-34) are more likely to say they want to know more than people over 35.

3.1 Overall interest in Parliament

Over the years, polls have consistently shown that only around half of the population professes to be interested in politics.⁷ This survey reveals that around the same amount of people are interested in Parliament – 53%. However, nearly as many – 47% – claim they have little or no interest in the institution.

Figure 4: Interest in Parliament

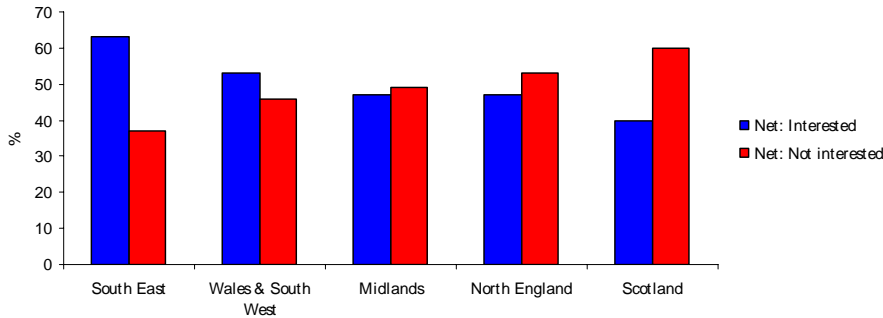


Base: all respondents
 Net interested: respondents saying either 'fairly interested' or 'very interested'
 Net not Interested: respondents saying either 'not very interested' or 'not at all interested'

Gender and region

More men than women claim they are interested in Parliament (55% versus 50%). Geographical location also plays a role.

Figure 5: Interest in Parliament by region



Base: all respondents
 Net interested: respondents saying either 'fairly interested' or 'very interested'
 Net not Interested: respondents saying either 'not very interested' or 'not at all interested'

⁷ Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society), p.13.

The above chart highlights that interest in Parliament correlates with people’s distance from Westminster. Six in 10 people based in the South East (63%) are interested in Parliament. In contrast, people based in Scotland have the lowest interest (40%) and highest lack of interest (60%) in the UK. This may be due to the possibility that those based in Scotland feel more affinity with the Scottish Parliament than the Westminster Parliament.⁸

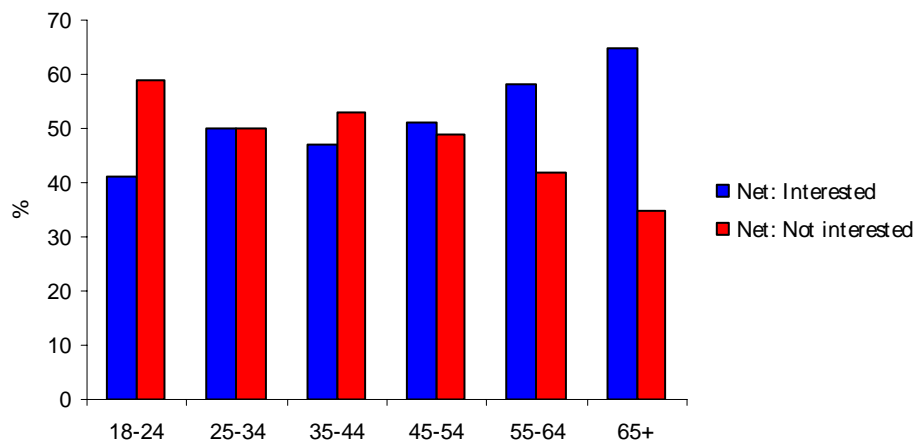
Social grade

When broken down by social grade, the results show that those in the highest social grades (AB) have the greatest level of interest in Parliament (65% compared to 53% overall). Interest gradually diminishes through grades C1 (55%) down to C2 (39%). Interestingly, DEs have a greater interest (47%) than C2s. As a disproportionate number of ABs live in the South East, it is possible that the regional disparity in interest is primarily reflecting regional economic discrepancies.

Age

Older age groups have a greater interest in Parliament. Indeed, interest appears to increase proportionally with age. Those aged 65+ are most likely to express interest in Parliament, at 65%. The lowest level of interest occurs within the 18-24 age group, at 41%. Those aged 25-34 appear to be equally as likely as those aged 35-44 to express an interest in Parliament, around one in two (50% and 47% respectively).

Figure 6: Interest in Parliament by age



Base: all respondents

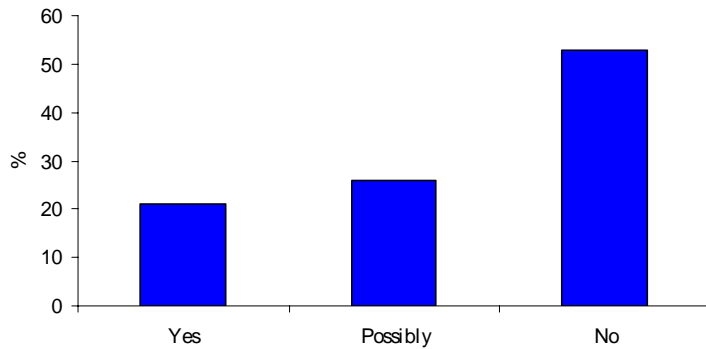
It is difficult to say from these figures alone whether this trend is indicative of a broad cultural change whereby today’s younger generation is destined to be less interested in politics than their predecessors (regardless of age), or whether it demonstrates that as people age, they are more likely to be interested in politics.

3.2 Desire to know more about Parliament

People were asked whether they would like to know more about what happens in the Westminster Parliament.

⁸ As the results for Wales are grouped with the South West, it is impossible to know if the same holds true for the Welsh Assembly; 53% of people in Wales and the South West are interested in Parliament.

Figure 7: Desire to know more about Parliament



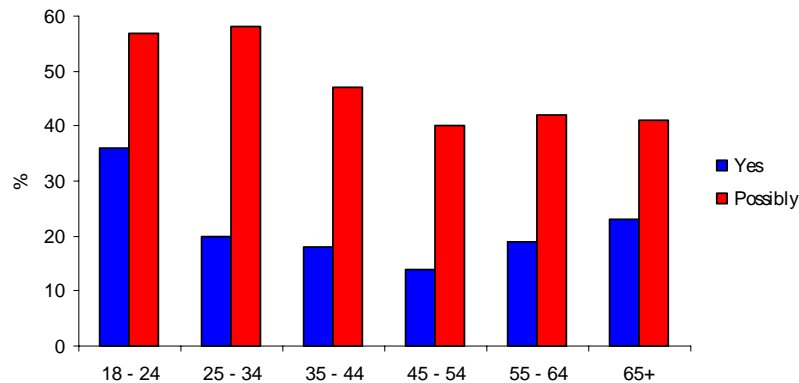
Base: all respondents

Around one in two of the population (47%) say 'yes' or 'possibly' to the prospect of learning more. This roughly corresponds with the aforementioned finding that 53% of respondents say that they are either very or fairly interested in Parliament. However 53% say that they would *not* like to know more about what happens in Parliament. It is possible that this group includes some people who are interested in the Westminster Parliament and feel that they already know enough.

Age

People aged 18-34 – who tend to say they know less about Parliament – are more likely to want to know more about what happens in Parliament than people over 35.

Figure 8: Desire to know more about Parliament by age



Base: all respondents

This finding is particularly interesting when contrasted with interest in Parliament by age (see 3.1). Whereas 65% of people aged 65+ say that they are interested in Parliament, only 41% say that they would like to know more. By contrast, whereas only 41% of 18-24 year-olds claim that they are interested in Parliament, 57% would like to know more. More of this group answer 'yes' to the question than any other age group (36% versus 21% overall). These findings suggest that there is a real desire among 18-24 year-olds to know more about Parliament, even among some who would consider themselves uninterested.

Gender

More women than men (49% versus 44%) say they would like to know more about

Parliament, despite the fact that more men than women (55% versus 50%) say they are interested in Parliament.

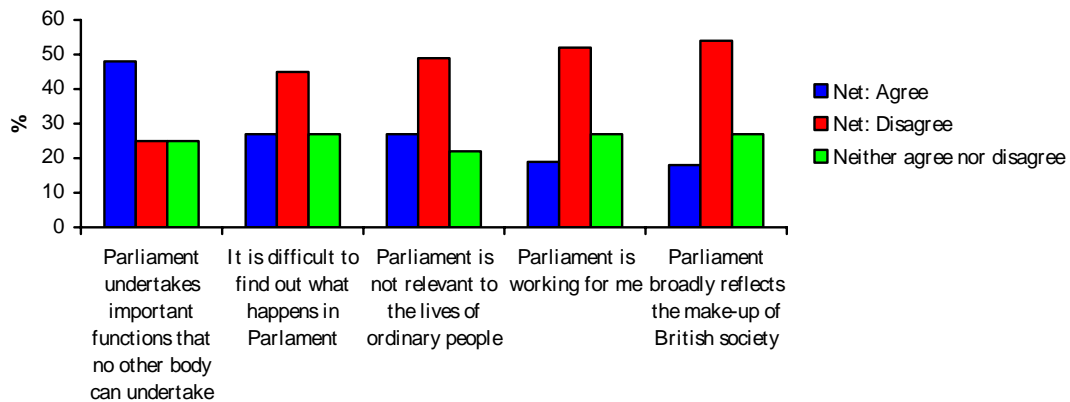
Social grade and region

People from lower social grades are markedly less interested in the prospect of learning more about what happens in Parliament: 63% of DEs said they would not like to know more compared to 53% overall and 48% of ABs. Residents of Wales and the South West are also more likely to say they do not wish to learn more (61% versus 53% overall), possibly reflecting the fact that the lower social grades are disproportionately represented in these regions.

4.0 Perceptions

Nearly half of people agree that Parliament undertakes important functions that no other body can undertake and most people feel it is relevant to their lives. However there is a widespread perception that Parliament is not representative of the public and just 19% agree that Parliament is ‘working for them’.

Figure 9: Perceptions of Parliament



Base: all respondents
 Net agree: agree strongly or disagree
 Net disagree: disagree strongly or disagree

4.1 Importance

People were asked to what extent they agree with the statement that ‘Parliament undertakes important functions that no other body can undertake’. Nearly half of the public (48%) agree. A quarter of people disagree and another quarter is neutral.

There is striking gender divide, with men far more likely to agree with the statement than women (56% versus 40%). The oldest respondents (65+) are also more likely to agree (50%) than 18-24 year-olds (38%). An average of 55% of the top grades (ABs and C1s) agree compared to 39% of the lower grades (C2s and DEs). People in Scotland are 10 percentage points less likely to agree than people from other regions (38% compared to 48%).

4.2 Relevance

Parliament is regarded as fairly relevant to the lives of most people. Nearly half of people (49%) disagree with the statement that 'Parliament is *not* relevant to the lives of ordinary people'. While 27% agree with the statement, 22% neither agree nor disagree.

Those who are more likely to disagree with the statement include young people (22% of 18-24 year-olds), ABs and people from the South East (both 21%). People from Scotland are most likely to disagree strongly (39% compared to 29% overall).

The groups that are more likely to agree with the statement are people aged 65+ (33%), people from lower social grades (around 32%), and people from the North (33%). Middle aged people (aged 55-64) are most likely to agree strongly with the statement (22% compared to 14% overall).

4.3 Accessibility

When asked whether they agree with the statement that 'it is difficult to find out what happens in Parliament', just under a half of people (45%) disagree. On the other hand, a little over a quarter (27%) agree with the statement and another 27% are neutral.

There are few significant demographic differences, although people from the lowest social grades are more likely to agree (33% compared to 21% of ABs and 27% overall). DEs and people from Scotland are most likely to say they agree strongly (21% versus 14% overall).

Our past research suggests that most people are not willing to pro-actively seek information about Parliament and are almost totally reliant on what they see on television or read in the newspapers for information.⁹ The Hansard Society has frequently stressed the importance of making information about Parliament easily accessible to the public.¹⁰

4.4 Efficacy

Only 19% of the public agree with the statement 'Parliament is working for me', while over half – 52% – disagree. Around a quarter (27%) neither agrees nor disagrees.

Those who are most likely to agree with the statement are people aged 65+. They are also most likely to agree strongly (13% compared to 8% overall).

People most likely to disagree with the statement include those from Scotland (64%), DEs (61%) and those aged 35-44 (60%). DEs are most likely to disagree strongly (38% compared to 28% overall). Interestingly, young people are *less* likely to disagree (37%).

4.5 Representativeness

Over half of the population (54%) disagrees with the statement 'Parliament broadly reflects the make-up of British society', accurately reflecting the under-representation of women and ethnic minority groups at Westminster. Only 18% agree with the statement and a little over a quarter (27%) are neutral.

⁹ V. Ram (2005), *Enhancing Engagement: What people think, know and expect of Parliament* (London: Hansard Society), p. 31.

¹⁰ See Hansard Society (2005), *Report of the Hansard Society Commission on the Communication of Parliamentary Democracy, Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye* (London: Hansard Society).

Given the content of the question, it is striking that it produced fewer demographic cleavages than many of the other questions asked in this survey. For example, there is little difference in the responses of men and women despite the fact that less than 20% of MPs are female. However, people from the lower social grades are more likely to agree strongly (12% of DEs versus 4% of ABs and 8% overall) and disagree strongly (35% of DEs versus 30% of ABs and 30% overall).¹¹

5.0 Conclusion: important but not working?

Large numbers of the population – around two thirds – do not feel they have a good understanding of how Parliament works. In fact, only half recognise that Parliament and government are not the same entity. Fortunately, interest in Parliament is higher than knowledge, with around half of the public claiming they are interested in Parliament and would potentially like to know more about its work.

The same familiar demographic differences which have turned up in past polls about political engagement appear in this survey, with men, older people (65+), people from higher social grades (ABs), and people from the South East all disproportionately likely to be both knowledgeable about and interested in Parliament.

However, the desire to know more about Parliament is not always linked to knowledge and interest, as women and younger people are more likely to want to know more than men and older people. People from lower social grades, however, are much less likely to want to know more.

In examining people's perceptions of Parliament's importance, relevance, efficacy representativeness and accessibility, some light is shed on the reasons for the relatively low levels of interest in the institution. Given that 52% of people disagree that 'Parliament is working for me', and 54% do not believe Parliament is representative of the British public, it is perhaps not surprising that 53% say that they are not interested in Parliament.

Nevertheless, nearly half of people (48%) agree that Parliament performs important functions that no other body can undertake.¹² Similarly, half disagree that it is irrelevant to the lives of ordinary people. Younger people are more likely to agree that Parliament is both important and relevant to their lives than older people.

Parliament is held in high regard by at least half of the population, but most people are disconnected from the institution and do not feel it works for them. The survey findings suggest that Parliament is viewed by the public less as a medium for participatory government and more as a necessary part of non-participatory government.

¹¹ The survey results cannot be broken down by race or ethnicity.

¹² Elsewhere, we have found that the overwhelming majority of people – 75% – agree that a strong Parliament is good for democracy. See Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (London: Hansard Society), p.33-4.

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Appendix A

Guide to social grade definitions

The table below contains a brief list of social grade definitions as used by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising.

| Grade | Definition |
|-----------|---|
| A | Professionals such as doctors, surgeons, solicitors or dentists; chartered people like architects; fully qualified people with a large degree of responsibility such as senior editors, senior civil servants, town clerks, senior business executives and managers, and high ranking grades of the Services. |
| B | People with very responsible jobs such as university lecturers, hospital matrons, heads of local government departments, middle management in business, qualified scientists, bank managers, police inspectors, and upper grades of the Services. |
| C1 | All others doing non-manual jobs; nurses, technicians, pharmacists, salesmen, publicans, people in clerical positions, police sergeants/constables, and middle ranks of the Services. |
| C2 | Skilled manual workers/craftsmen who have served apprenticeships; foremen, manual workers with special qualifications such as long distance lorry drivers, security officers, and lower grades of Services. |
| D | Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, including labourers and mates of occupations in the C2 grade and people serving apprenticeships; machine minders, farm labourers, bus and railway conductors, laboratory assistants, postmen, door-to-door and van salesmen. |
| E | Those on lowest levels of subsistence including pensioners, casual workers, and others with minimum levels of income. |

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