

Question 1: Should voting be made compulsory?

Turnout in General Elections has dropped very severely since 1997.

Some argue that voting should be made compulsory, as in a number of other countries, to address this problem. Some claim that if people do not take their civic duty to vote seriously then they must be required to do so under law. Others state that compulsory voting would mean that parties would have to pay more attention to the concerns and needs of those who do not usually vote – for example those on low incomes – in order to win their support.

Others however object to the idea that anyone should have to take part in elections which they do not see as worthwhile. In addition, there is the fear that if large numbers still failed to vote following the introduction of compulsory voting, many otherwise law-abiding citizens would face a fine and possibly court proceedings.

Question 2: Should you have a more direct say over political decisions?

Some people argue that voting in elections is not enough. They believe today's educated and self-confident citizens have less faith in decisions taken by their political representatives. Instead, they need an opportunity to discuss and have a direct say over individual policies. Other countries give their citizens opportunities to launch their own referendums, force politicians to face an election before their term of office is over, or decide how public money is spent in their local area.

However, some claim that these techniques undermine the role of the elected representative in our political system. There are also concerns that some of these methods could be manipulated by those with money or access to the media. It is also sometimes feared that people will participate in these events just as poorly as they do in elections.

Question 3: Would you ever consider standing for election to public office? If not, what puts you off? If yes, what changes might make this more likely?

These days it has become common to criticise the quality and trustworthiness of our elected representatives but only a very small number ever try to get elected and do the job themselves. Indeed, there is evidence that the number of people standing to become local councillors is falling. There are also concerns that the make-up of Parliament and other elected bodies is rarely representative of the gender, ethnic, class and age mix of Britain.

Some people argue they don't have the time, money or understanding to stand for election. Others don't like the idea of having to join a political party before they could realistically get elected. But the most common objection is the feeling that the work of an elected official is carried-out in a world that seems very distant from the usual concerns and activities of most peoples' lives. What is your reason?

Chocolates: Should ballot papers include a 'None of the Above' option?

It is sometimes argued that many people don't vote because they don't like any of the candidates or parties on the ballot paper. Offering an option to vote for 'None of the Above' (NOTA) would bring such people back into the polling station and place great pressure on politicians to engage with voters and persuade them of their worth.

Others, however, feel that a NOTA option is impractical. What happens if NOTA wins? If a new election is held there is extra expense and no guarantee that new candidates will come forward or that NOTA will not win again. The alternative of letting the second placed candidate after NOTA take-up office does not seem very satisfactory. Some have argued that NOTA could just become the lazy option for those who cannot be bothered to understand the issues at election time or who fall into an easy cynicism towards politics perpetuated by the media.



A Host's Guide

POWER

An independent inquiry
into Britain's democracy

Democracy Dinners

Introducing Democracy Dinners

The evidence is clear. The depth of the disconnection between the British people and their elected leaders is profound. Surveys show that our trust in politicians is extremely low. The number of us who feel it is worth voting has dropped to levels not experienced for almost a century. Less than 2% join a political party – a massive fall over the last forty years. And this is not just a short-term problem caused by sleaze or spin. In fact, similar problems are challenging the older democracies throughout Europe and the world.

The **POWER** Inquiry was formed last November in response to one of the greatest challenges facing our democracy: the profound disconnection that has arisen between the British people and their elected leaders. It has been collecting evidence from the public, witnesses and through its own research over the past ten months.

The Commission leading the **POWER** Inquiry is now convinced that the root of the problem is the fact that our political system has been outstripped by the ways people live their lives and view themselves and the world. The days when a British citizen was happy with little more than one vote every five years and relied on trusted representatives to look after their interests is long gone. Today we are better educated than ever before, have greater confidence in our own ability to make reasoned decisions and no longer assume that those in positions of authority know best.

Whereas we increasingly expect to make important decisions for ourselves and our families in many areas of our lives, the prospect of handing over decision-making powers on major national and local issues to distant MPs is often a recipe for frustration. The **POWER** Inquiry has repeatedly heard these sentiments from people of all backgrounds and from different parts of the country; people who share the sense that they have no real connection to politics and insufficient influence over it.

This is why the **POWER** Inquiry is now looking for the concrete ideas and changes that could bring our political system into line with our contemporary values and attitudes. The Inquiry is exploring how elections can be made more meaningful; whether parties can be reinvigorated, or whether they need to be replaced altogether; what role the media and new technology might play as our democracy adapts to new challenges; and a whole range of other issues.

The Commission leading the **POWER** Inquiry completed its formal evidence-taking in July and is now entering a period of deliberation. By hosting a Democracy Dinner you are feeding directly into the Commission's deliberations and helping to keep it in tune with what the British people are thinking, as it develops its final report.

We want you to be as creative as you like with your ideas and we look forward to hearing some positive suggestions coming out of our week of Democracy Dinners.

A Step-by-step Guide

Once your guests arrive you are ready to begin. The following is a simple step-by-step guide for you to refer to before and during your meal.

- Introduce your guests to the **POWER** Inquiry, the problems with British democracy and why Democracy Dinners are important. You can use the Introduction on the opposite page to help you.
- Raise and discuss the questions on the menu card during your meal; if you are having a full-scale dinner you could discuss one question per course. You can go through all the questions if you like, but a detailed discussion on just one of the questions is just as good if you have limited time.
- Don't forget to explain to your guests the background to the issues they are discussing – a short brief for each question is included in this guide.
- You will probably want to take notes during the discussion, or ask somebody else to do so.
- You will find some **POWER** Chocolates in your pack. At the end of the meal, you should pose the following question: Should ballot papers include a 'none of the above' option? Each guest should write 'yes' or 'no' on the back of the outer wrapper of their chocolate.
- After the dinner, fill in the feedback form, summarising your discussion of the questions. Collect the chocolate wrappers and write down how many answered 'yes' and how many answered 'no'. Please do not send us the chocolate wrappers.
- Finally, please remember to tell us the outcome of your discussion! Either you can do this via our online form, or put the Feedback Form from your pack in the pre-addressed FREEPOST envelope and drop it in a post-box. We also look forward to receiving some of your photos.

Your responses will be considered by the **POWER** Commission when they develop their recommendations in the autumn. The report will probably be published in February 2006. More information and regular updates will be available on our website www.powerinquiry.org.