

The Inquiry's key questions – background briefing

1. How can political party membership and allegiance be made more attractive? Are there more effective ways of involving people in politics than through parties?

This information is designed to inform and inspire discussion. It is not an exhaustive account of all the factors and issues you may wish to include in your response to this question.

What is the problem?

Membership of the main political parties has been in decline since the 1960s. The number of people feeling strong support for one or other of the main parties has also declined severely over the same period.

- Membership of the three main political parties now stands at less than one quarter of membership in 1964. If these trends continue, the main parties will have no members at all in ten years' time.
- In 1964, 44% of people said they felt very strong support for a political party. Only 15% felt this in 1997.

Why is this a problem?

Political parties have been central to the way Britain's democracy works. Without strong links to the wider public, the parties cannot act as a channel for dialogue between government and citizens. Nor can they recruit our representatives and leaders from a wide pool of candidates. Most importantly, if people do not feel any party represents their views and interests then people's influence over the system is reduced.

What has caused the problem?

The main parties, as we know them, were created when people felt a much stronger link to the working or middle classes and to big political ideologies like socialism or conservatism. The main parties drew most of their support from members of each class and supporters of each ideology. Since the 1960s class identity has weakened and the big political ideologies

have lost much of their credibility. This has significantly dented the appeal of the main parties.

In addition, people today are less loyal to organisations and brands, preferring instead to make their own informed choices about what suits their own needs.

Finally, parties are mainly concerned with influencing or forming government; but, many people today want to influence other bodies such as businesses or international organisations as well.

What are the possible solutions?

An illustrative list of commonly cited proposals is presented below. These are by no means exhaustive and are only intended as a springboard for your own thoughts and proposals.

- Allowing voters to register as supporters of a party rather than having to become a full member. It has been suggested that registered supporters would be allowed to attend some meetings and possibly help select parliamentary or local council candidates but would not have the full rights of a member.
- Limits be placed on the size of financial donations to political parties. Or, more party funds be made available to local parties which may encourage greater contact between local party members and citizens. These measures may force the parties to build contact with a wider group of small donors rather than relying on a handful of very large donations.
- Introducing 'primaries' where some or all voters in a constituency can select a party's candidate rather than just leaving the decision to party members.
- Encouraging parties to act more like community organisations – they may, for example, set up informative websites, or initiate activities such as graffiti clean-ups or popular social events.
- Encouraging parties to discuss and campaign on single issues such as environmental or social concerns.
- Encourage parties to be more outward-looking by encouraging them to knock on voters' doors more often, use the internet to contact voters and holding meetings for non-members.

- Make party membership more attractive by making meetings less formal, training meeting Chairs, or allowing members to join party branches even if they do not live in the relevant area.

Or are all these ideas pointless? Some argue that political parties are past their sell-by date, having been in decline for years. Parties now, it has been argued, are reduced to a tiny elite of political obsessives with no real wish to turn outwards. The alternative is to use other methods to engage the public with politics such as those covered in the section dealing with question 5.

2. Would greater powers for local councils, devolved institutions and our elected representatives encourage more people to get involved in politics? Would such change help more people feel more confident about the possibility of influencing political decisions?

This information is designed to inform and inspire discussion. It is not an exhaustive account of all the factors and issues you may wish to include in your response to this question.

What is the problem?

It is often claimed that the people we elect to represent us do not have enough power. Instead, too much power is held by unelected bodies like big business, public authorities appointed by the government (quangos) and international organisations such as the European Union. There is also an argument that too much power resides with the Prime Minister, Cabinet and the civil service at the expense of our elected representatives.

Some claim that this situation has intensified in recent years with more powers being concentrated in the Prime Minister's office, more quangos being established, business exerting ever greater influence and treaties being agreed which give national powers to international bodies.

Why is this a problem?

There have long been fears that this situation leads to government which is not kept in check by our elected representatives. This may lead to poor policy-making and bad decisions and may also mean that the democratic will of the British people is not properly exercised.

From the Power Inquiry's perspective the question is whether this situation dampens political participation. An important argument is that citizens do not get involved in politics if they feel they cannot have an influence. In a system that is highly centralised or where power is held by people who are not formally held to account, then people may see little point in political involvement.

What has caused this problem?

There are many possible reasons why political power in Britain is distributed in this way. These include, amongst others:

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- The complex nature of the policies that are required to manage today's society mean that experts, civil servants and professional politicians have ever greater power. This has led to the rise of quangos which are led and staffed by professionals and experts.
- Business has become increasingly powerful as it becomes more global in its activities. Instead of the government controlling the activities of business through law, the government is now competing with other governments for the investment that business can bring to the UK. This puts corporations in a very powerful position to influence the policies and decisions of the government.
- Unlike most countries, Britain has never written its own constitution. Thus, the powers of different parts of the government and the way power is kept in check has never been formally agreed or distributed in accordance with democratic principles.

What are the possible solutions?

An illustrative list of commonly cited proposals is presented below. These are by no means exhaustive and are only intended as a springboard for your own thoughts and proposals.

The solution to this problem may be to give greater powers to our elected representatives. This would include:

- more powers for parliament to scrutinise and challenge government and, maybe, to initiate legislation;
- more powers over taxation and legislation for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly;
- more powers for local councils to raise and spend money as they wish and regain greater control of a much wider range of services;
- the establishment of regional assemblies in England with significant powers.

Some, however, would argue that this misses the point. While strengthening the power of elected politicians at the expense of central government may be good for democracy, it will do little to encourage greater political participation. Distrust of politicians is high in today's society and many express that they would rather have a more direct say over political decisions.

One solution may be to simultaneously strengthen the powers of elected politicians and introduce reforms which will ensure direct citizen influence. This could be done through such reforms as allowing more referendums, using people's assemblies to make key decisions, making elected representatives more accountable to their voters rather than the parties, giving voters the power to sack elected representatives before an election (*see question 5 for more detail on these ideas*).

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3. Is it true that the media breeds cynicism about politics and politicians which discourages political interest and involvement? If so, how can the media play a positive role in encouraging political involvement?

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What is the problem?

Politicians often claim that the media is too cynical about politics. Journalists, they argue, only report negative news stories or assume the worst about the motivations behind policies and political decisions. It is also sometimes claimed that the media is more interested in personalities and the conflicts between individual politicians rather than the content of policy debate.

Why is this a problem?

It is argued if with the media presenting politicians and politics in a predominantly negative way, it is unsurprising that large numbers of people are turned off established politics and have very low levels of trust in politicians.

A counter argument to this point of view is the claim that the media are simply reflecting a much broader disenchantment with politics which has other causes (*as outlined elsewhere in this leaflet*).

There is also an argument which states that while politicians claim the media has become particularly cynical in recent years, declining participation and low trust in politics has existed for far longer.

What has caused the problem?

If you take the view that the media are indeed too cynical, then you may lay the blame at the door of the journalists themselves. In a more competitive market with an expanding number of television channels, internet sources and twenty-four hour news, journalists are constantly seeking the easiest and quickest way to attract viewers, listeners or readers. In short, scandal stories and personal conflict often sell far better than detailed, thoughtful analysis of the questions politicians face.

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Others, however, would point to more complex causes.

- The lack of significant policy or ideological difference between the main parties has led politicians themselves to differentiate themselves on personality, trustworthiness and competence. Thus the culture of personality, scandal and petty conflict is the result of political campaigning not journalism.
- The media's attitude is not overly cynical but simply challenging of authority and sceptical about what those in authority say to justify their actions. This reflects much wider changes in society since the 1950s where old respectful attitudes towards those in authority have given way to a more critical and self-confident approach on the part of most individuals.

What are the possible solutions?

An illustrative list of commonly cited proposals is presented below. These are by no means exhaustive and are only intended as a springboard for your own thoughts and proposals.

For many, the solution to this problem is tighter control of the way the media reports and analyses politics. Possibilities are either a code of conduct agreed voluntarily by journalists and regulated by a body independent of government. Or much tighter regulation possibly imposed by government and even enforced by the courts.

However, for those who do not see the media to blame for political disengagement, this would be a pointless and undemocratic move. They might argue that the real goal should be to confront the much wider popular cynicism towards politics and politicians through reform of the political system itself rather than the media.

The Power Inquiry is also exploring how the media might play a more direct role in involving people in politics. It is exploring if it is right and possible to allow larger numbers of people to take part in political debate and decision-making through digital television and the internet.

4. What changes would encourage a larger number of people to feel it is worth voting?

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What is the problem?

The number of people turning out to vote has dropped severely in the last two general elections. In 2001, only 59% of registered voters voted – the lowest level since the 1918 election. Turnout in local and European parliamentary elections has been very low for many years. Turnout for the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales was below 50% in 2003.

Why is this a problem?

Democracy is fundamentally based on the principle that a government has a legal and moral right to rule if it has the consent of a majority of its citizens. A situation in which fewer and fewer people are providing that consent challenges the legal and moral right to govern.

What has caused this problem?

Surveys of those who have failed to vote in recent years identify a series of reasons, but the two factors that are most frequently identified are:

- the political parties are too similar and do not offer a meaningful choice to voters;
- recent elections have been uncompetitive with the Labour party certain to win meaning that individual votes have little impact on the overall result.

Some take heart from this suggesting that the decline in turnout is simply the result of short-term factors and that once the Labour party's appeal drops and the parties become less similar, voters will return to the polls. However, it is quite possible that these short-term factors are having a more intense impact on turnout than when they existed in the past. This is because of the deeper distrust of politicians and a decline in strong support for the political parties. This suggests low general election turnout is just one aspect of a much wider disconnection between politics and people.

Other factors have also been identified as weakening election turnout. These include:

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- poor knowledge of the political system;
- a weak sense of civic duty particularly amongst the young;
- the inconvenience of voting.

What are the possible solutions?

An illustrative list of commonly cited proposals is presented below. These are by no means exhaustive and are only intended as a springboard for your own thoughts and proposals.

There are many different ideas proposed to encourage voting. Some of these are:

- more education and information for young people and voters about politics and elections;
- making voting easier through postal voting or voting by text messaging or the internet;
- offering incentives to vote such as a lottery ticket or retail vouchers for all voters;
- making voting compulsory.

Those who see a deeper set of social or political problems behind declining turnout might argue that more profound reforms are required to increase voting and make it meaningful for people. These might include, amongst others:

- a shift to a proportional electoral system;
- giving MPs greater powers to scrutinise and challenge the government;
- making MPs more accountable to their constituents rather than their party leaderships;
- encouraging candidates who are more like the wider electorate – particularly, encouraging female, younger and black and minority ethnic candidates.

5. Would more opportunities to discuss and have a direct say over individual policies through techniques such as referendums, internet forums and public assemblies attract participants and encourage greater trust in policies?

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What is the problem?

It is argued that there is a growing dissatisfaction with a political system which expects citizens to be satisfied with one national vote every four or five years. The decline of party membership and allegiance, the fall in election turnout, and the rise of single-issue campaigning is the result of citizens no longer identifying with the all-encompassing programmes presented by parties.

Why is this a problem?

This gives rise to a number of issues, including:

- as people identify less and less with big party programmes the disconnection between politics and citizens grows wider;
- if people feel they are given little or no real say over the individual issues that affect them or they care about, they will become increasingly frustrated by the political system;
- the rise of single-issue campaigns may bring more people into politics but these campaigns can act in undemocratic ways, gaining attention and winning change through stunts and pressure rather than through being part of an open policy process based on discussion and representation.

What has caused this problem?

Some argue that today's citizens are very different from those that existed when our political system and our political parties were developed. In particular, today's citizens are more likely to be better educated, less respectful of authority, better off and used to taking more decisions for themselves. In addition, the bonds which used to encourage large numbers of people to trust in the decisions taken by their elected representatives have disappeared: a shared ideological perspective and/or a shared class background or outlook.

People nowadays understand complex issues, make more choices for themselves and their families on a regular basis and will inevitably lose respect for decision-making systems which do not respect their capacity to do this. As a result, increasing numbers of people turn away from a political system which expects them to delegate decision-making to a group of political representatives with whom they do not identify.

What are the possible solutions?

An illustrative list of commonly cited proposals is presented below. These are by no means exhaustive and are only intended as a springboard for your own thoughts and proposals.

There are many ways by which citizens can be given greater direct influence over political decision making. Some of these are:

- more referendums;
- people's assemblies (possibly chosen at random like a jury) who make recommendations to the government on a key issue;
- referendums which can be launched when a certain number of signatures have been collected – often called “citizens’ initiative referendum”;
- referendums to decide to keep or sack a political leader; these are held when a certain number of signatures have been collected – often called “recall”;
- the use of large-scale citizens’ meetings to establish priorities for policies in particular areas; for example, a number of cities in Brazil, Spain and Italy now have annual processes where citizens make key decisions about local budgets; similarly, some cities and states in America have called meetings of thousands of citizens to decide priorities for many different policy areas;
- the internet and digital television can also be used in all of these techniques to allow more people to educate themselves about an issue and take part in the debates.

6. What action would encourage greater political involvement by the groups that are least involved with politics – young people, members of black and minority ethnic communities, and the poorest sections of society?

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What is the problem?

While the number of people voting in elections has been low recently amongst the whole population, it is particularly low amongst young people, black and minority ethnic communities (BME) and the poorest sections of society.

In the 2001 election only 39% of 18-24 year olds voted, only 53% of the least affluent, and only 47% of members of BME communities. In 2001 the average turnout was 59%.

In addition, there is also evidence that low income earners and members of BME communities are less likely to be involved in other forms of political activity such as party membership or active support for single issue campaigns.

Why is this a problem?

If certain sections of society have more influence and more engagement than others the practice of political equality for all that underpins democracy may well be undermined. It may also lead to a situation where the most engaged sections of society benefit more from the policies implemented by government while the least engaged face ever greater exclusion.

Furthermore, if some sections of society feel more excluded than others, it may offer opportunities for extremist or violent political groups to gain support and possibly political representation.

What has caused this problem?

There is no clear consensus on why certain groups are less politically active than others. Possible causes include:

- the groups which see the least improvement in their difficult circumstances will have the least faith in the possibility of bringing about change through political involvement;

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- individuals with the least confidence of their own abilities or knowledge to engage in politics are inevitably less likely to take part in political activity;
- some groups, particularly the young, lack the strong sense of civic duty which may encourage voting and political activity.

What are the possible solutions?

An illustrative list of commonly cited proposals is presented below. These are by no means exhaustive and are only intended as a springboard for your own thoughts and proposals.

The solutions for those who are least engaged in politics has centred on the following approaches:

- greater education and information about politics and the political system provided to the least engaged;
- training and support to enhance the skills required by the least engaged to give them the confidence and ability to engage in politics;
- providing resources – particularly money – to support those amongst the least engaged who wish to undertake political activity;
- encouraging the organisations and networks amongst the least engaged – such as community groups – which often lead to political activity.

However, some argue that this emphasis on the problems of the least engaged themselves misses two crucial changes which have to be made elsewhere:

- those in power need to be more aware of and trained to recognise how they can include the least engaged groups in political decision-making;
- the involvement of the least engaged will only occur and be maintained if it leads to concrete changes in their daily lives – a factor which may require deeper change in the political system.