
(Re)connecting Politics? Parliament, the Public and the Internet

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OVER the past decade considerable concerns have been raised about the health of parliamentary democracy in the UK. Apparently increasing levels of public distrust and cynicism about politicians and representative institutions along with the dramatic fall in turnout at the 2001 election have prompted a debate about possible means of connecting the public with politics. One area that has attracted attention is whether the rise of new media technologies, such as the internet and e-mail, could help facilitate a new level of engagement. So far, however, whilst there has been sustained criticism of MPs', parties' and parliaments' online efforts, there is only limited evidence about the public's use of new media technologies for political engagement and communication.² In order to address this gap, this article reports the findings from a public opinion survey commissioned from NOP which examines citizen knowledge, attitudes and behaviour regarding information communication technologies (ICTs) as means of connecting with parliament and MPs. The survey confirms that whilst the net has a potential to deepen public engagement with our representatives and parliamentary institutions currently it attracts only a small minority of voters who are generally already politically active and privileged. Moreover, such potential will remain untapped without considerable effort from legislatures and legislators to change the culture of representation.

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

It has become increasingly commonplace to talk of a crisis in parliamentary representation. This supposed decline of parliamentary representation is, arguably, signalled by an increasing gulf between the parliament and its members and the British public, in three interrelated respects. First, the House of Commons (HoC) has lost touch with electors, who are largely unaware of and uninterested in parliamentary work; second, citizens trust representative institutions, including the parliament, to a lesser degree than in the past; and finally, decreasing trends of electoral engagement culminated at the 2001 election, which recorded the lowest turnout in the UK since 1918. Yet, long-term general trends of support for the political system—interest in politics and views

of the election outcome—have changed little between 1960 and 2001 in Britain. As was recently noted, ‘contrary to the conjectures offered by some observers, there is no evidence to suggest that engagement with the political system has declined significantly since the early 1960s’.³ The same largely goes for internal efficacy, the perceived capacity to influence the direction of government, and external efficacy, the responsiveness of institutions. Furthermore, these longer term trends are set against a backdrop of continuing support for democracy. Britons are fairly satisfied with how democracy works in general, regardless of party politics. Euro Barometer data clearly show that British subjects have been substantially happy with the state of democracy for the last 30 years. Also, they are consistently more satisfied with their democracy than EU citizens in general.⁴

Recent trends of disengagement

However, a number of observers have noted a shorter term decline over the past decade on a range of indicators, especially concerning external efficacy, voter turnout and trust in politicians. Recent data, in particular, have highlighted increasing concerns in these areas.⁵ First, interest in politics has decreased since the 1997 election, from the 59% of people who had at least some interest in politics in 1997 and 2001, to just above 50% in 2004. Although, this average also hides further differences between citizens’ continued interest in local and national ‘issues’ and increasing disengagement from ‘politics’ in general. In fact, the alleged recent crisis of British democracy largely rests on the lower ‘levels of trust in government and confidence in the political system’ than a decade ago.⁶ Also, self-reported political knowledge is not very high. More than half of the voting age public claimed in 2004 and 2005 that they ‘did not know very much’ or even ‘nothing at all’ about politics.⁷

Politicians and the government of the day bear the brunt of citizens’ disengagement. Both MORI and British Social Attitudes data suggest that public trust and support of the government has been decreasing since 1994.⁸ According to European Social Survey figures, about 60% of Britons and other European citizens think that most or all politicians are interested in votes rather than citizens’ opinions. Trust in politicians is consequently low, 3.8 on average on a 0–10 scale of trust. 47% of Britons think that very few or hardly any politicians care what people think.⁹ Furthermore, politicians (along with journalists and government ministers) are the professional category trusted least by the British public to tell the truth and the professional category with which the public is least satisfied.¹⁰

On the measure of electoral turnout the past decade has apparently seen a significant fall from more than 75% to 60% in general elections. Although as many as 19 possible causes were recently identified for this fall,¹¹ people voted less in 2001 mainly due to the policy proximity of the two main parties and the one-sided nature of the electoral contest,

rather than to ingrained political apathy.¹² Although turnout increased marginally at the 2005 election there are few signs of a sustained long-term reversal of turnout trends. Whilst one might argue that declining electoral participation has been countered by engagement in other forms of political participation,¹³ low turnout is problematic for parliamentary legitimacy and government mandate and equally damaging for political equality, as it erodes the preferences of citizens from deprived backgrounds who are less likely to vote.

Finally, decline also directly concerns representative institutions, although to a more limited extent. Citizens know less about MPs and the Parliament than was the case in the past. Only 42% of the public can correctly name their MP, a 10% decrease from the early 1990s.¹⁴ Similarly, relatively few people (33%) claim to know 'a fair amount' about the Westminster Parliament, though more claim knowledge about the role of MPs (45%), thus suggesting the prevalence of politicians over institutions in the public imagination. Not many have contacted their MP either to present their opinions, only around one in ten, or mostly to express a grievance.¹⁵ However, unlike other trends discussed above, more people are contacting representatives today than in the 1970s. Again, in contrast with wider societal trends, electors are relatively satisfied with the work of the Parliament (36% versus 32% unsatisfied), a balance which has remained stable over the last 10 years. The Parliament also enjoys an average trust score, rated by Britons at 4.6 out of a maximum ten. It fares better than 'politicians' in general (3.8) but below other institutions such as the judiciary (5.0), the police (6.0) or even the United Nations (5.3).¹⁶ However, MPs score even higher in terms of citizen satisfaction (over 40% versus 13% dissatisfied), especially when respondents are asked to appraise their own MP rather than MPs in general.

Connecting with the public

Overall then, the health of British democracy and parliamentary representation, whilst not in jeopardy, rests on thinner ground than in the past. There are evident trends of decreasing engagement, cognitive and behavioural, with institutions, of increasing reliance on vague generalisation to relate to politics and of 'political detachment'. As Inglehart has noted, the sociopolitical values associated with political modernisation, especially with a post-modern lessening of deference, might imply declining respect for authority, although they also engender growing support for democracy.¹⁷

In this context, it has been argued that institutions need to do some catching up with citizens, increasingly engaged with 'issues' rather than with institutions, and wary of politicians. Whilst one might argue that this is partly an image problem for the politicians, who look cynical and untrustworthy, and parliament, which appears shabby, unprofessional and unrepresentative to the outside,¹⁸ legitimacy and respect remain

crucial, positive values for traditional representative institutions. Indeed, following concerns about parliamentary reputation, visibility and trust, legislators have taken steps to try to improve the public perception of the HoC and the standards of conduct in the Parliament. Following the Nolan Report, new procedures were introduced in 1995 to regulate and oversee the conduct of MPs and public affairs in parliament. Principally, a Code of Conduct was drafted which regulated the public role and dealings of MPs. A Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards was appointed who was responsible to oversee (and sanction) MPs conduct and watch over members declared private interest interests. Finally, a Committee on Standards and Privileges was established with the remit to investigate complaints concerning MPs' behaviour and to oversee the work of the Commissioner. The parliament has also embarked in a process of modernisation which aims to redefine the HoC working routines, including family-friendly working hours, more inclusive debate procedures, enhanced government scrutiny and increased access to public records.

Information communication technologies and the representative nexus

ICTs were one of the elements heralded as capable of assisting the parliament in reconnecting with the public. The desire of UK MPs and the HoC to connect with the public via electronic means is palpable. In the last few years a number of reports have been drafted and released by parliamentary committees concerning the adoption and use of ICTs to strengthen representation. In July 2002, a report of the Information Select Committee, *Digital Technology*, stipulated five areas where ICTs might enhance efficiency and representation: to increase accessibility to the HoC and MPs by the public by the means most convenient to the citizen; to enhance professionalism of members; to increase public participation especially among the excluded; to 'open up' parliamentary proceedings and increase transparency; and to network with other institutions to keep ahead of ICTs developments.¹⁹

In the 2003 annual report of the HoC Commission the use of the internet looms large as a device to support the services provided by the House, to support individual members and their staff's working life, to support the work of committees and, especially, to provide information and access for the public through webcasting, the new www.parliament.uk website and e-mail access to the institution and its members.²⁰ The main point of the report concerns a 'corporate plan' for improving public understanding and access which focuses on implementing 'the high priority recommendations of the Information Committee on using IT to connect with the public'.²¹ Following this, in May 2004, the report of the Modernisation Select Committee, *Connecting Parliament with the Public* sets out a series of practical recommendations designed

to: make the building more accessible and welcoming to constituents; make greater efforts to engage young people; and encourage better use of information and communication technology.²² In the case of the latter two points, the report has far-reaching implications: it recommends a radical upgrading of the website, including a more engaging youth section and a constant review of digital broadcasting of the HoC proceedings. It also strongly recommends to select committees and joint committees to make a greater use of online consultations, and, albeit cautiously, to allow for 'typescript' petitions to be tabled. As a measure of the widespread support for the use of ICTs to 'open up' the Parliament, only 14 MPs voted against the report 'Connecting Parliament with the Public', in January 2005.²³

In line with the concerns of the parliamentary elite, some research has confirmed that new information technologies have the potential to incrementally improve the ways parliaments operate and their representative functions. They could increase the administrative efficiency of the institution, improve information access and dissemination, and finally enhance MPs' and assemblies' interaction with citizens.²⁴ In principle at least, politicians across a range of countries, including the UK, have expressed optimism concerning the capacity of new media to revive the representative nexus.²⁵ However, the actual uptake of the internet by both British representative institutions and individual MPs has been fairly slow and patchy.²⁶ Having been lambasted by the media for their lack of awareness of the internet,²⁷ British MPs seem to have recently realised the importance of being available electronically via e-mail and personal websites, albeit rather to 'inform' than to 'engage' citizens.²⁸ Increasingly, legislative assemblies across Europe have adapted ICTs to inform, interact and engage with citizens.²⁹ Strikingly however, very few of these studies have examined directly public perceptions of new media technologies to connect with the Parliament and MPs. As Coleman and Spiller recently noted, academic literature has 'tended to neglect the effects of the new media upon the represented'.³⁰ Where studies exist, they tend to focus on access to dissemination and accessibility rather than directly about citizen engagement, possibly due to the small numbers of citizens currently involved in e-politics in Britain.

According to the limited evidence available, a minority of users have engaged with representative institutions electronically and more would do so if they had a chance. A poll of internet users conducted in 2002 by the Hansard Society reveals that one in four British users had visited the Westminster website, more than had visited the Parliament building.³¹ Furthermore, young people were twice as likely to visit online as offline. Such visits might not have created more engagement though, as only 19% thought that the site was 'good'. E-mail was also high on the list of preferred means of obtaining information about the HoC, being rated first by 44% of users, vis-à-vis 36% for the phone. Coleman and Spiller compare these results with the findings of HoC research on

Britons who contacted by phone, the web and in person, in February 2002.³² Despite significant differences in the proportions, e-mail was mentioned as the preferred method to obtain information. Finally, a large proportion of users displayed 'significant enthusiasm' for a number of proposals to further connect the Parliament through ICTs: having e-mail response to e-mails, rather than sending letters back (63%); having speeches and releases online 56%; and discussing policy issue in online fora. It thus seems that the internet has an important role to play with respect to informing the public.

Marcella et al. (2002) examined citizen information needs through 79 computer-assisted interviews in a roadshow environment, where respondents were asked to browse, retrieve and assess information from UK parliaments' websites.³³ Although websites were found cumbersome to navigate, information difficult to search and negative comments were made about website design features (the legibility of text, the poor structure of sites and broken and interrupted hypertext links), the assessment of the range and quality of information provided was largely good. Most respondents (68/79) found the websites they examined a useful information source, interesting and relatively easy to understand. Interestingly, most of those who thought they might search for further information mentioned the web as a way to proceed. Marcella and colleagues, however, conclude with a note of caution on the capacity of institutions to 'engage' with citizens, warning that:

In order to encourage participation, communications via ICTs must visibly enable meaningful and useful interaction that is relevant to citizens' everyday lives ... While the majority indicated that they would use electronic sources in the future, few felt that this was likely to be for reasons of democratic participation.³⁴

This importance of relevance was confirmed by public opinion research conducted by MORI for the Hansard Society.³⁵ Offered a range of services constituents might want to see on MPs' websites (multiple-choice), respondents overwhelmingly opted for 'pragmatic' features they could relate to: 39% rated as most useful an online surgery so that they could raise problems; 32% chose an e-mail address to contact an MP; and 22% mentioned a consultation forum where the MP could gather constituents' views. Other features, such as the MP diary and e-mail updates from the MP, were much less popular. Consistent results were recorded when citizens were asked what online services they most wanted to see in the next 5 years (multiple-choice): access to government services in the main (30%); voting via the internet (25%); and MPs having websites or e-mail addresses (28%) topped the table. Finally, in all the studies reviewed, the shadow of the digital divide looms large: citizens mention the lack of access to information technologies, more than anything else, as the major obstacle for democratisation via ICTs. As Coleman notes, 'It is clear that the public accepts

that the digital divide is a barrier to any kind of democratic uses of the internet'.³⁶

Exploring public attitudes to parliament and the internet

In light of the concerns about political disengagement and some of the rhetoric from parliaments and politicians about the net (as well as criticism of their efforts), we wanted to explore public perceptions of the ICT-assisted representative nexus. To what extent are ICTs likely to fulfill some of the expectations outlined above in terms of supposedly reconnecting the public to parliament? As we noted, whilst there has been growing amount of research looking at party and politicians' websites and also studies of elites' attitudes and behaviour, there is considerably less evidence coming from a bottom-up public perspective. Our survey, conducted by NOP between 9 and 14 December 2004, essentially explored four principal areas:³⁷

- Citizens' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour concerning their MP and representative institutions.
- Citizens' use of, and attitudes towards, the internet—the web and e-mail—to interact with representative institutions and MPs.
- Citizens' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, an array of currently available online political transactions involving a range of political institutions.
- Sociodemographic controls including: gender, age, education, working status, social grade, income and digital technologies in the home.

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

Survey results

THE TECHNOPOLITICAL MILIEU: NEW MEDIA AND OLD POLITICS. The survey confirms once again the increasing prevalence of the internet in British society: 63% of survey respondents have access to a PC at home, 53% of the sample had used the internet in the previous 3 months and 27% of respondents have broadband at home.³⁸ Figures for internet adoption compare favourably with digital TV in its various forms—32% receive satellite, 14% cable and 12% freeview. In addition, our data confirm the intensification of internet use reported in previous surveys, as 22% use the internet up to 1 hour a week, 24% between 1 and 3 hours, while the majority (53%) connects for 4+ hours a week. We also see an 'ageing' of the internet audience, as most users have now

been online for three or more years. Specifically, 16% commenced one year ago or less, 13% between one and 2 years, 40% between three and 5 years and 31% have started more than 5 years ago. Respondents who have adopted the internet at an earlier time and earlier in their life tend also to spend more time online per week.

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

Although many surveys have documented the lack of trust in, and scepticism towards, politicians collectively, most of our respondents hold no extreme opinions about their own MP's efforts: 33% are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the work of their MP, while 21% do not know or have no opinion. Those who do have an opinion hold largely positive views: 34% are quite or very satisfied with their MP, while only 12% are not very or not at all satisfied. Again, not surprisingly, one can see the electoral link at work, as less non-voters have an opinion (–16%) while voters are, on average, more satisfied with their MP's work (+15%). In short, there appears to be a widening engagement divide between those who know and trust, and those who do not know and seemingly do not care about representative institutions.

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH REPRESENTATIVES. A wide and growing range of channels are available to citizens for conveying their views and grievances to their elected representatives (Table 1). Among the various contacting methods, the phone is reportedly the medium of choice (39% first mention and 61% all mentions). Letter-writing comes a distant second (20%), followed by e-mail (12%) and face-to-face contact (11%).

E-mail is becoming increasingly entrenched in the public imagination as a principal means to contact MPs especially for 18–34 years olds (20%), notably students (37%) and graduates (20%), from B and C1 social grades (20%). Of course, e-mail is also favoured by those who use the internet (23%) and particularly by more frequent and long-term users (32% for those who use the net more than 4 hours per week and approximately 30% for those who have used it for 3 years or more).

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

	Total mentions (%)*	First mention (%)*	Last actual contact (%)**
Telephone inquiry	61	39	20
Letter to the constituency/HoC office	43	20	41
Send them an e-mail	25	12	9
Personal meeting	23	11	24
Contact them via their website	12	4	1
Send them a fax	2	0	0
None of these/would not contact	11	11	5
Don't know	2	2	0
Total %	(multiple)	99	99
n	1,932	1,932	191

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

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

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

Traditionally, however, actively contacting one's MP is only taken up by a small minority. Indeed, only one in ten respondents had contacted their local MP in the last 2–3 years, while an additional 4% had contacted some other government official. This is substantially similar to MORI data for 2001–03, and in line with trends which originate in the 1970s (Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, 2003). Interestingly, most citizens have last contacted their MP by post (41%) rather than by phone (20%), reversing the figures for contacting intentions. Face-to-face meetings are also relatively common (24%).³⁹ Yet, approximately only one in ten have last contacted their MP by e-mail, which is in line with the intention figure. As e-mail has been around for at least a decade, one might have expected that considerably more than 1% of the public would have vented their opinions electronically to their representatives. Whilst MPs routinely lament an increase in their workload due to e-mail, electronic correspondence with constituents seems a rather unlikely culprit; although this figure will undoubtedly increase

over the coming decade, MPs' fears of being overwhelmed by e-mail appear unfounded. However, the problem may not be so much with the volume of electronic correspondence, as with the expectation of speedier response times for e-mail.

Those who have contacted their MP, but eschewed the internet as a means of contact, mention: the lack of internet access (37%); the preference for traditional means (32%); and/or a combination of lack of skills and knowledge (27%). For a significant number of respondents, therefore, new media technologies still present technical/skills challenges. Even those who favour using e-mail may be put off by some MPs' refusal to use it as a means of communication. Moreover, many MPs, are often keen to avoid prioritising e-mail users, who are seen as likely to come from the already privileged middle class.

THE INTERNET AND VIRTUAL REPRESENTATION. Despite the prevalence of the internet, online politics is still very much a minority sport (Table 2). Internet users visit news and current affairs websites (40%) far more often than the websites of any overtly political organisations or institutions. In the latter category, users visit the websites of local councils (28%) and government departments/agencies (21%) much more frequently than any other political website—parties, NGOs and other political institutions. Outside news and government services the numbers are considerably more modest with representative institutions lagging far behind. Only 5% of internet users have visited the HoC website within the last 12 months, while a combined 3% visited the websites of the devolved legislative assemblies/parliaments (in Scotland and Wales). Finally, less than 2% visited MPs' personal websites. Parliaments and their Members thus seem farther away than other institutions from citizen's everyday needs. However, our survey data indicate the potential of the internet to assist British representative institutions to engage with a wider proportion of the public in two respects.

2. Websites visited in last 12 months

	Percentage of internet users	Percentage of public
None	42	69
News for current affairs	40	21
Local councils	28	15
Government/departments	21	11
NGO/political groups	8	4
House of Commons	5	3
Scotland/Wales Assemblies	3	1
Parties	3	2
MPs	2	1
Number 10	2	1
Total n	1,018	1,932

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

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

Second, MPs' websites are visible to voters from varied social, technical and political backgrounds. There are, however, some interesting exceptions. While sites are slightly less known to young people (-5%),⁴⁰ topical variables play an important role. Those who can name their MPs also know about their sites (+6%) also being relatively certain that they have one (+7%). Conversely, those who are unsure of the party affiliation of their MP are correspondingly less likely to know about their MP's online whereabouts (-8%). Then, those who are very satisfied with the work of their MP know much more (+18%) and repute their MP to have a website well above average (+21%). Finally, those who participate in politics are more likely to know about their MP's site (+8%): those who donate (17%), campaign (12%) and rally (+10%). A 'virtuous circle' grounded in political habits and attitudes predating the internet may well be at play here and deserves further investigation.⁴¹

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

Online government services are also quite popular (36% would like to see, 37% don't mind), which reflects the relatively high levels of

3. Support for various e-government and e-democracy features

	Would like to see (%)	Don't mind (%)	Would not like to see (%)	Don't know (%)
All MPs using e-mail addresses	44	28	19	8
All MPs having websites	42	31	19	8
Being able to comment via e-mail to the Parliament on major laws being discussed	43	25	25	7
Access to all Government services via the internet	36	37	19	8
Government online polling on policy issues	34	32	26	8
Voting in national elections via the internet	34	18	41	7
Special discussion forums for the public to engage in debate about important Government issues	29	33	30	8
Regular government e-mail bulletins on policy issues of interest to you	27	31	34	8

Q.8, I am going to read out various services and for each one I read out, I would like you to tell me if would like to see it, you would not like to see it or if you have no preference either way?
Entire sample, n=1,932.

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

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

The study also sheds additional light on the background of those who support and oppose electronic transactions of different types. For all questions asked, the respondents' internet proximity/proficiency—e.g. PC in the home, broadband access, internet use at all and also length and intensity of internet use—provides the most important predictors of positive attitudes. In addition to the positive effect of internet use, different sociodemographic combination shape the support/opposition for discrete implementations. Specifically:

Support for access to government services

Males, 35–44 years old, AB grade, University graduates plus students, higher income

Support for online voting

Females, below 35 years old, urban, students, higher income. Polarised for AB grade (no 'don't mind')

Support for commenting on HoC laws by e-mail

No gender difference, young, C1 grade but homogeneous ('not like to see' evenly distributed), medium-high income, not-so-expert user

Support for all MPs having websites

Slightly more male, 18–54, C1 grade ('not like to see' and 'don't mind' evenly distributed), medium-high income, at least GCSE

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

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

4. Features of importance on MPs' websites

	Percent of public
An online advice surgery so that you can raise any problems you may have	45
Information on your MP's policy positions	36
An online survey to express your views in general	31
Information on the voting record of your MP in the House of Commons	24
E-mail updates sent to constituents on matters of importance	20
A consultation forum where you can discuss issues with others and MPs can read constituents' views	17
Information on your MP's daily diary/schedule	11
None of the above	27
Don't know	6

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

Entire sample, n=1,932.

When we compare these figures with Hansard Society data collected in 2001, we notice a consistent growth of citizens' expectations.⁴² Specifically, online surgeries score a higher preference than in the past (+6%), as do e-mail updates from MPs (+5%). However, more interactive features such as forums score lower than previously (-5%). Compared to Coleman's conclusion in 2001 that Britons want more interaction with, than information from, their MPs online, we found that the expectations, in 2005, have moved towards increasingly pragmatic, direct communications. This is also confirmed by the dramatic increase in public expectations regarding what are now baseline services, which were only beginning to emerge in 2001: all MPs having e-mail addresses (+30% increase) and all MPs having websites (+28% increase). Figures for online transactions with a range of institutions instead record a modest increase: +6% for government services online and +9% for e-voting at national elections.

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

'WANT NOTS', 'SCEPTICS' AND 'ENTHUSIASTS'. Respondents were then profiled according to their knowledge of, and attitudes and behaviour towards, online representation and, in particular, their responses to three key questions from the survey (knowledge of their MP's website; preference for online governmental services; the importance attached to a variety of online facilities provided by MPs—Q.4., Q.8 and Q.9). On

5. Profile of virtual representation ‘want nots’, ‘sceptics’ and ‘enthusiasts’

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

this basis, three distinct groups were identified (Table 5).⁴³ First, the ‘want nots’ are those who ignore whether their MP has a website, would prefer them not to have one, and basically think websites contribute little to public life. This category comprises approximately 11% of British adults. The ‘sceptics’ are the second group, who largely expresses mildly negative or neutral views about ‘virtual representation’. They often don’t know whether their MP has a site, they don’t mind if (s)he does, but are generally sceptical of the benefits of MPs’ websites (10% of entire sample). Finally, there are the ‘enthusiasts’—those who know whether their MP has a website, think they should have one and would like to see two or more of the features listed above on their sites (8.5% of the sample).

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

The rest of the British public, some 70%, are located between the sceptics and the enthusiasts. They hold mixed views but might be

categorised as being mildly positive towards online engagement although currently most are not active participants. It is this large pool of potential online participants that British institutions need to take aim at, if they want to revive the representative link by electronic means.

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

Conclusions: amplification not reconnection?

The results of this survey certainly provide a sobering antidote to the hype that often surrounds the role of the internet in the political world. Not only are those engaging via e-channels few in numbers, but they largely resemble traditional political participants and activists. The danger remains that e-politics will simply exacerbate existing participation and engagement gaps by amplifying those voices that are already prominent in the parliamentary system.⁴⁴ Simply adding new electronic channels of communication to pre-existing structures or putting information

online will not automatically produce a democratic nirvana. Nevertheless, we should not write off new technologies as being of no consequence for representative institutions. First, the survey indicates a potential to attract new citizens and deepen people's engagement especially amongst younger people. As we noted above, a significant number of voters want, and expect, MPs and parliamentary institutions to do more but not necessarily more of the same. Second, as new media technologies become more prevalent in day-to-day life, then such demands and usage will also increase. Yet, the gap between hypothetical support for, and actual use of, new technologies will remain unless institutions rethink their new (and old) media engagement strategies. Clearly, publicising and marketing online initiatives might be a start but not enough on its own. If parliaments and MPs are serious about engaging with the public, then it requires a change in culture of representation in terms of both who they engage with and the style and the frequency of communications. Representative institutions need to actively recruit participants outside the normal suspects. Most people will not participate without being asked to do so, though nearly all have expertise and everyday experiences which ought to be valuable to policymakers. Moreover, it will require a demonstration that their participation and communication is valued and listened to and a willingness to open up the policy agenda on a more regular basis. Thus the dialogue needs to be ongoing, considerably less top-down and less formalised. In short, it needs to be on the citizens' terms not those of the institutions and politicians. Technology can facilitate some of these changes but political will and institutional flexibility will be even more crucial if the representative political system is to be renewed.

- 1 The authors are grateful for the support of the Economic and Social Research Council's E-Society programme—Award no. RES-335-25-0029.
- 2 There are only two studies of public attitudes towards online communication with parliament: S. Coleman, *Democracy Online: What do we want from MPs' web sites?* Hansard Society, 2001. Omnibus survey of UK adults (18+) conducted 9–14 August 2001, n=1,921; R. Marcella, G. Baxter and N. Moore, 'The effectiveness of parliamentary information services in the United Kingdom', *Government Information Quarterly*, 20, 2003, pp. 29–46.
- 3 H. Clarke, D. Sanders, M. Stewart and P. Whiteley, *Political Choice in Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 284.
- 4 Source: Euro Barometer data. Country: UK. Period: From September 1973 (EB1) to April 2004 (EB61). Q. On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in (your country)? Would you say you are ... ? Very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, not at all satisfied, DK.
- 5 C. Bromley, J. Curtice and B. Seyd, *Is Britain Facing a Crisis of Democracy?* Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends, 2004; Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, *An audit of political engagement*, The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, 2004; Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, *An audit of political engagement 2*, The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, 2005.
- 6 C. Bromley et al., p. 20.
- 7 Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, 2004, 2005, op. cit.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 16; C. Bromley et al., op. cit., pp. 4–7.
- 9 Source: European Social Survey 2002/2003, edition 5.

- 10 For trust: MORI data for the British Medical Association, n=2,017, February 2005. See <http://www.mori.com/polls/2005/bma.shtml>. For satisfaction, see the MORI tracker at <http://www.mori.com/polls/trends/satisfaction-jobs.shtml>.
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- 16 See note 7.
- 17 R. Inglehart, 'Postmodernization Erodes Respect for Authority, But Increases Support for Democracy' in P. Norris (ed.), *Critical citizens: global support for democratic government*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 236–57.
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- 20 House of Commons Commission, *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report* (2002–03 Report), The Stationery Office Limited, 2003.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 265.
- 22 HoC Modernisation Select Committee, *Connecting Parliament with the Public* (First Report of Session 2003–04 No. HC 368), The Stationery Office Limited, 2004, p. 11.
- 23 From the Public Whip website, <http://www.publicwhip.org.uk/division.php?date=2005-01-26&number=49>. Opponents were Conservatives, except for one Liberal Democrat.
- 24 T. Kingham, *e-Parliaments: The Use of Information and Communication Technologies to Improve Parliamentary Processes* (Report No. 37210), World Bank Institute, 2003.
- 25 See for example: J. Åström, *Digital Democracy: Ideas, Intentions and Initiatives in Swedish Local Governments*. Paper presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, April 6–11 2001, Grenoble; J. Caldwell, *The Virtual Ballot Box: A Survey of Digital Democracy in Europe*. Online: Institute for Electronic Government, IBM Corporation. Available online at <http://www.ieg.ibm.com/>, 1999; A. Campbell, A. Harrop and B. Thompson, 'Towards the virtual parliament – What computers can do for MPs', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 52/3, 1999, pp. 388–403; S. Coleman, 'Westminster in the information age', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 52/3, 1999, pp. 371–87; J. Hoff, 'The democratic potentials of information technology: Attitudes of European MPs towards new technology', *Information Polity*, 9, 2004, pp. 55–66.
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- 32 S. Coleman and J. Spiller, op. cit., pp. 1–16.
- 33 Although the sample was unrepresentative of the British public (as more politically engaged and more likely to use computers), the 'information needs' of the group did on correlate with either thus making it relatively unbiased.
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- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 37 The complete questionnaire and topline frequencies can be obtained from the authors at stephen.ward@oii.ox.ac.uk.

- 38 ONS data report a higher figure for Internet access, about 60%. According to MORI's technology tracker, 56% of adults online in December 2004 (<http://www.mori.com/>).
- 39 In general, phone and e-mail intentions thus seem over-reported, while post and personal meetings are under-estimated. A number of possible explanations are available as to why people turn to paper when they finally contact representatives. Communications may commence by phone and e-mail and then move to print or face-to-face, when a document exchange is required. Additionally, surgeries and postal exchange are felt to be 'more official' on both sides. With e-mail, there might be a generational effect at play, as actual contactors are generally older than the wider pool of potential contactors.
- 40 The positive and negative percentages here represent the variation from the percentage of respondents who claim to know whether their MP has a website (22%).
- 41 P. Norris, *A Virtuous Circle*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- 42 S. Coleman, 2001, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–4.
- 43 Groups are mutually exclusive.
- 44 For an excellent discussion of the amplification model of internet's impact, see P. Agre, 'Real Time Politics: The Internet and the Political Process', *Information Society*, 18/5, 2002, pp. 311–31.