

Submission to the Speaker's Digital Democracy Commission

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This submission is based on ongoing research, specifically a large survey completed in partnership with YouGov in August of 2014. The full analysis and discussion is being prepared as a set of journal articles and will be available in 2015.

Summary

- This submission is based on a survey of 1,676 adults in England, Wales and Scotland carried out in August of 2014 in partnership with YouGov
- The survey investigated attitudes towards representation and how the public want to engage in decision making in Parliament
- There is a significant gap between perceived involvement (7%) and the public's stated desire to be involved (53%) in decision-making in Parliament
- Whether government should follow expert input or public opinion is a divisive issue, with one-third of respondents preferring expert led decision-making, one-third preferring public opinion led decision-making and one third saying neither
- The modes of engagement preferred are working through online petitions or responding to consultations, while online engagement via Facebook, Twitter or through wikis received low levels of support
- In terms of representation, the responses to this survey appear to indicate that a delegate model is preferred, with a blend of constituency and national level opinion forming reported
- Across all of the questions there are significant age, gender and social grade effects indicating that any attempts to engage the public online or otherwise in decision-making in Parliament has to control carefully in existing biases for who would engage

Background

Through the life of the current UK Parliament there have been growing calls for greater public engagement in policy making, exemplified by the Public Administration Select Committee's report titled *Public Engagement in Policy-Making*. The Coalition government which came to power in 2010 enshrined their position on public engagement in the *Plan for Civil Service Reform* which stated that "Open policy-making will become the default". It appears that there is a large desire to open up the policy-making process to both improve the outcomes of the process and to disperse power away from Westminster and to the individual.

In an attempt to understand public opinion towards issues of representation and engagement for the UK public a survey was designed and completed in partnership with YouGov in August of 2014.¹ The survey asked a series of questions which looked at what the public feel is important when MPs are making decisions, their current and desired levels of involvement in decision making in Parliament, and the channels or activities that they say they would use to engage.

The following sections provide an overview of the initial findings, as this research work is ongoing and the completed analysis is being prepared for submission to academic journals in 2015.

Characteristics of the sample

Age	Percentage of respondents	Social grade	Percentage of respondents	Vote in 2010 election	Percentage of respondents
18 – 24	5.5	ABC1	67.9	Labour	23.8
25 – 39	25.4	C2DE	32.1	Conservative	30.9
40 – 59	39.3			Liberal Democrat	21.1
60+	29.8			Other/Don't Know	24.2

Table 1 – descriptive statistics for the sample including in this analysis

¹ Headline figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,676 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 10th - 11th August 2014. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

How involved do the public feel and want to be?

Response	Generally how involved do you feel, if at all, in the decision-making processes of the UK Parliament?	And generally how involved do you **want to be** , if at all, in the decision-making processes of the UK Parliament?
Very involved	0.6%	9.1%
Fairly involved	6.1%	44.3%
Not very involved	36.6%	26.8%
Not involved at all	52.2%	10.4%
Don't know	4.4%	9.3%

Table 2 – summary results for current and desired involvement in decision making

The obvious comparison for these linked questions is that while just under 7% of the sample feel that they have some involvement in decisions made in Parliament, over 53% would like to be involved in some form. This is a significant gap of 46% between the current perceived involvement and the desired involvement of the public across Great Britain.

There are gender and party affiliation differences in these responses. These include –

- More women (56%) than men (44%) indicating that they want to be involved in decision making in Parliament
- Fewer Liberal Democrat voters (4%) saying they feel involved than Labour (9%) or Conservatives (9%)
- Fewer Conservative voters expressed a desire to be involved (51%) than Liberal Democrats (56%) or Labour (60%)

Should decision making be left to experts?

Attempting to get a different perspective on the desire of the public to be involved in decision making, a contrast question was included which asked each respondent to choose from one of two statements when thinking about how the government makes decisions on issues such as housing, healthcare, and education –

- If a majority of experts share similar views on a particular issue, the government should generally do what they suggest even if it goes against what a majority of the public would prefer
- If a majority of the general public share similar views on a particular issue, the government should generally do what they prefer, even if it goes against what a majority of experts suggest

The results are interestingly relatively evenly divided between these options, neither option and those who say they don't know (Table 3).

		GENDER		2010 VOTE		
		Overall	Male	Female	Conservative	Labour
If a majority of experts share similar views on a particular issue, the government should generally do what they suggest even if it goes against what a majority of the public would prefer	29	38	21	28	27	36
If a majority of the general public share similar views on a particular issue, the government should generally do what they prefer, even if it goes against what a majority of experts suggest	32	30	33	37	36	24
Neither of these	21	18	24	19	22	26
Don't know	18	14	21	15	14	14

Table 3 – should the experts or the public lead decisions?

The differences for men and women are significant, with almost twice as many men indicating that the experts' view should be taken above that of the public. Again the responses from those who voted Liberal Democrat in the 2010 election are statistically different from the other parties, as they trust the experts more than other parties (36% for Liberal Democrats compared to 28% for Conservatives and 27% for Labour supporters). It appears that Conservative and Labour supporters trust the public more than experts, where the reverse is true for the Liberal Democrats.

What modes of engagement are most popular?

Whether people are or are not engaged is one aspect of this problem, another is the channels that they are likely to use to be engaged in decision making. A series of questions asked how likely respondents were to use a set of channels in the future for an issue of importance to them. These were

- Focus groups
- Online Twitter discussions
- Online Facebook discussion
- Respond to a consultation (via email or letter)
- Sign an online petition
- Contribute to a wiki

The high level response shows a wide variety of enthusiasm for these different approaches to engaging, with online petitions ranking first (65% for very likely plus fairly likely) as compared to responding to a consultation (48%), participating in a focus group (26%), taking part in a Facebook discussion (23%), a Twitter discussion (13%) and finally contributing to a wiki (11%). These results are summarised in table 4.

	Focus group	Online Twitter discussion	Online Facebook discussion	Responding to a consultation (email or post)	Signing an online petition	Contributing to a wiki
Very likely	5	4	7	16	30	2
Fairly likely	21	9	16	31	35	9
Neither	23	14	17	18	14	17
Fairly unlikely	15	13	13	10	5	17
Very unlikely	30	54	41	19	11	46
Don't know	6	6	6	6	5	8

Table 4 – responses on modes of engagement by type (% respondents in each case)

A series of logistic regressions were run for each channel of engagement, using age, gender, party affiliation, region and social grade as predictors and taking very likely and fairly likely to construct a binary outcome variable in each case. Table 5 summarises which predictors were significant in each case, showing the relevant odds-ratio and the significance level. It should be noted that all the models were overall significant but that the pseudo R² values were low (ranging between 3% and 9%).

Channel	Significant predictors
Focus group	Social grade, with ABC1s more likely to engage (OR = 1.693, p<0.01)
Twitter discussion	Age, with decreasing likelihood of using this channel with increasing age (OR = 0.968, p<0.01) Gender, with men more likely to participate (OR = 1.717, p<0.01)
Facebook discussion	Age, with decreasing likelihood of using this channel with increasing age (OR = 0.975, p<0.01)
Responding to a consultation	Age, with increasing likelihood of responding with increasing age (OR = 1.02, p<0.01) Social grade, with ABC1s more likely to respond (OR = 1.679, p<0.01)
Signing an online petition	Age, with increasing likelihood of signing a petition with increasing age (OR = 1.010, p<0.01) Gender, with men less likely to sign (OR = 0.80, p<0.05) Social grade, with ABC1s more likely to sign (OR = 1.342, p<0.01)
Contribute to a wiki	Age, with decreasing likelihood as people get older (OR= 0.985, p<0.01) Gender, with men more likely to contribute (OR = 2.011, p<0.01)

Table 5 – summary of channel logistic regressions showing significant predictors where OR is the Odds Ratio

While the overall variance explained by these models is low, and so care should be taken not to over emphasis these effects, it appears that across the channels social grade and age matter a lot, and gender has an impact in a number of areas. This would imply that channel selection is going to strongly bias the groups who will engage.

Analysing how the British public expect to be represented by their MPs

Since there is very little work that directly asks the public how they want to be represented this survey also asked how important each of the following should be when MPs are making decisions (respondents rated each on a four point scale from 'A great deal of impact' to 'No impact at all') –

- The MP's own views
- The majority view of the MP's constituency
- The majority view at the national level
- The official position of the MP's party on the issue

These questions allow us to see how strong the response is for the traditional categories of representation (trustee where the representative is expected to make their own decisions versus delegate where the representative is expected to reflect the desire or opinions of their constituents) and to see the influence of party in the opinion of the public.

This question was asked in a generic sense to get a baseline response and then was asked again for a set of different issues (declaring war or taking military action, membership of the European Union, setting or changing tax rates, and setting or changing the retirement age).

The generic response preferences the opinions of the constituency with 74% choosing a great deal of impact or some impact, compared to 62% for the national level and 55% for both the MP's views and those of the party.

However, comparing the responses for the generic question to those for the specific issues there is a consistent pattern, with respondents deemphasising the MP's views and that of the constituency in favour of national opinion.