It is General-Election year in the UK and there is much public discussion of 'anti-politics'. Interest in anti-politics built during 2014. On 5 June, Mark Leonard wrote in the *New Statesman* of "the rise of anti-politics", evident in elections for the European Parliament that witnessed low turnout combined with support for populist parties (UKIP, Front National, Syriza, Podemas etc.). In October, UKIP's success in the Clacton by-election was viewed by many in the frame of anti-politics. In *The Guardian* (17 October), for example, Deborah Orr wrote that "anti-politics is all the rage", evident in negativity towards Westminster politicians from both Right (Nigel Farage) and Left (Russell Brand). On 10 November, James Landale described "an era of anti-politics" for *BBC News*: when citizens don't join political parties, don't vote, don't trust politicians, feel alienated from politics, feel that Westminster is powerless to effect meaningful change, turn to small parties like UKIP and the Green Party, prefer their MPs to be more constituency-focused, and prefer coalition government to majority government. For Steve Richards, writing in *The Independent* (16 February 2015), this is now "the age of anti-politics" when voters feel disconnected from politics and angry with politicians, while politicians feel insecure in the face of such anger.

If "anti-politics is all the rage", then we might ask: what is this anti-politics and how should geographers and related scholars respond to it? Previously, I have described anti-politics as an elite strategy (see Clarke 2012, Clarke and Cochrane 2013). My starting point was politics as approached in the tradition running from Aristotle (see Weiler 1997) through Crick (1962), to Stoker (2006), where politics involves all those activities required to govern in plural societies comprised of different interest groups confronting each other across complex moral terrains. These activities include tolerating, canvassing, listening, negotiating, conciliating, and compromising. They are how collective and binding decisions might be reached in plural societies. And they leave a definition of anti-politics in two parts (see Schedler 1997): activities that seek to abolish the political domain by replacing collective problems with self-regulating orders (e.g. the market), plurality with uniformity (e.g. 'the people' of populism), or contingency with necessity (e.g. 'there is no alternative' or 'TINA'); and activities that seek to replace the communicative rationality of the political domain with another rationality e.g. science and technology or moral absolutism (ibid).

At first look, this definition of anti-politics does not really fit with how anti-politics is used by the journalists cited above. However, let us take a second look. The Anti-Politics and Depoliticisation Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association[1] focuses on the marginalisation of normative political debates in contemporary society. But it connects up this depoliticisation to disinterest in, disaffection with, and disengagement from politics among citizens. Depoliticisation is thought to be one explanation for these attitudes and practices. On this basis, having written about anti-politics as depoliticisation by elites, I am now studying anti-politics as negativity towards formal politics among citizens[2] – evident in such things as historically low voter turnout and declining reported 'interest in politics' and 'approval of the system of governing' (Hansard Society 2013).

My argument is that anti-politics is not quite the sprawling or confused concept it might appear to be at first look. It does capture at least two different things, but they are logically related as cause (elite strategies of depoliticisation) and effect (citizen negativity towards formal politics). Mair (2013) puts this well in *Ruling the Void*, describing the mutual withdrawal of politicians and citizens; the mutual abandonment of the space where citizens and politicians would interact ('the void'). For Mair, elites have withdrawn from adversary politics. They have formed a new governing class that is no longer comprised of social actors interested in mobilisation of the citizenry, representation, and the aggregation of interests (i.e. popular democracy). Rather, it is comprised of state actors interested in the recruitment of political leaders, the staffing of public offices, stakeholder involvement, transparency, legality, procedural legitimacy, and output legitimacy (i.e. constitutional democracy). Meanwhile, citizens have withdrawn from this limited politics, disengaging completely or transferring their support to populist parties (most commonly of the far right).

Now, of course anti-politics does not capture everything of current developments in formal politics. There are many other explanations than anti-politics for the changing party system (e.g. see Ford and Goodwin 2014 on explanations for the rise of UKIP). And there are many other explanations for contemporary alienation and disengagement from politics – from partisan dealignment, post-modernisation, the collapse of social capital, and consumerisation, to declining government performance, the modernisation of political campaigning, video-malaise, and globalisation (see Norris 2011 for a summary). Also, of course there is much to unpack here. Disinterest is not the same as disaffection. Disengagement is not the same as shifting support to third parties. Nevertheless, defined as mutual withdrawal by politicians

and citizens, anti-politics does appear to capture something important of the present moment – in the UK and many other countries.

So what does my own discipline, Geography, have to say on this topic? Two bodies of work come to mind that engage this topic, if not directly then at least indirectly. The first is the now large and still growing literature on post-politics. It owes much to Swyngedouw's reading of radical theory – Rancière, Mouffe, Žižek etc. – in a series of articles for Geography and related journals (e.g. Swyngedouw 2009, 2010, 2011). In brief, post-politics describes the exclusion of certain participants and topics from policy discussion in order that consensus may be reached. Antagonism, conflict, critique, disagreement, dissent etc. are removed from policy discussion. There is no challenge to existing arrangements and nothing really changes. The excluded turn away from the policy process and towards insurgency, revolt, and rebellion. Elsewhere, I have raised concerns about this literature (see Clarke and Cochrane 2013). For example, its definition of politics – as made up of uncompromising attempts to universalise demands – is rather narrow and not particularly appropriate to plural societies where knowledge is partial and moral issues are complex. I have argued for anti-politics as an alternative concept that better captures the active and historically contingent depoliticisation strategies of elites (ibid).

The second body of work draws on feminist and post-structuralist theory, worries less about declining old-style political engagement (e.g. voting or joining parties) – which is no longer thought to be where the action is anyway – and celebrates or seeks to foster new-style political engagement. One example would be Amin and Thrift (2005), for whom new forms of political action follow from new fields of conflict, new sites of power and exploitation, and new geographies of organisation and belonging. Another example would be Gibson-Graham (2006), for whom politics – in a world characterised by emergence, contingency, and diversity – involves the cultivation of desiring subjects, and local transformation through ethical action by these subjects. I also have concerns about this literature. There is little empirical evidence that new forms of political action are replacing those more traditional forms now in decline. Reviewing the evidence for the UK – available from the World Values Survey, the International Social Survey Programme's Citizenship Survey, the European Social Survey, and the British Election Study – Whiteley (2012) found that while most people still vote, relatively few people sign petitions, buy products for political reasons, wear campaign badges, work in voluntary organisations, donate money to political causes, take

part in demonstrations, or participate in illegal protests – and, in nearly all of these cases, proportions have been declining, not growing. Another concern is that new and informal modes of political action tend to privilege voice and interest articulation over interest aggregation and the making of collective and binding decisions. We must not forget how centralised decision-making is both hazardous and unavoidable (Barnett and Low 2004); that democracy involves both the formation of a demos and the exercise of rule (Barnett 2012); that democratic politics needs both an experimental sensibility to address the problem of participation in complex, unequal, and distanciated societies, and an institutional imagination to address problems of coordination, institutional design, and justification of the common good (Barnett and Bridge 2013). In short, there is a need for a healthy formal politics (maybe with a capital 'P') in addition to a healthy informal politics. This is not least because formal and informal politics often depend on each other – for example, as when social movement organisations promoting fair-trade consumption use sales figures of fair-trade products to lobby national governments regarding trade rules (see Clarke et al 2007).

Anti-politics, defined as mutual withdrawal by politicians and citizens, describes a problem deserving of serious treatment by scholars. Among other potential contributions, geographers could provide a sophisticated understanding of those spatial processes often presented as explanations for anti-politics: the nationalisation of political campaigning; the globalisation and/or Europeanisation of political power; and uneven development (that sees London – and especially 'the Westminster village' – lose touch with people and places in the rest of the UK). Geographers could also provide a sophisticated understanding of spatial strategies used by politicians both to depoliticise issues (anti-politics as cause) and to address citizen disengagement (anti-politics as effect). Elsewhere, I have analysed the localism agendas of recent UK Governments in these terms (Clarke and Cochrane 2013). This brings us to the other participants in this 'debate', each of whom have plenty to say about localism, politics, and much more besides (e.g. Featherstone 2009, Featherstone et al 2012, Wills 2012, Wills et al 2009).

Notes
1. http://www.psa.ac.uk/psa-communities/specialist-groups/anti-politics-and-depoliticisation.
2. http://blog.soton.ac.uk/antipolitics.

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