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The rise of anti-politics in Britain

Introduction

This document was published to accompany an event of the same title. On 19 May 2016, in the Macmillan Room of Portcullis House, Westminster, a team of researchers from the University of Southampton – Nick Clarke, Will Jennings, Jonathan Moss, and Gerry Stoker – discussed the rise of anti-politics in Britain with MP and historian Tristram Hunt, journalist Isabel Hardman, and audience members.

In turn, this event was organised to accompany a research project: 'Popular Understandings of Politics in Britain, 1937-2015'. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and led by Dr Nick Clarke (Geography and Environment, University of Southampton, n.clarke@soton.ac.uk, 07708 099056). Further details of the project can be found at http://antipolitics.soton.ac.uk. Here, we provide a brief introduction.

The objectives of the project were:
1. To establish the understandings and orientations of British citizens towards formal politics (politicians, parties, Parliament, councils, governments).
2. To establish how these have changed over time.
3. To take a longer view of these understandings and orientations than has been done by most existing research in the field.
4. To listen more to citizens' voices – their understandings, expectations, and judgements, as expressed in their own terms – than has been done by most existing research in the field.
5. To suggest explanations for these understandings and orientations, and how they have changed over time.

To meet these objectives, we analysed two types of data. First, we analysed survey responses collected by the British Institute for Public Opinion (BIPO, which later became the UK Gallup Poll), Ipsos-MORI, the British Election Study, the British Social Attitudes Survey, YouGov, Populus, and the Hansard Society. Second, we analysed volunteer writing collected by Mass Observation (MO).

Between 1939 and 1955, MO ran a panel of between 400 and 1000 volunteer writers (depending on the year). In 1981, it revived this panel, which is still running today. In both periods, MO asked panellists to write about formal politics on several occasions. We sampled 13 of these 'directives' across the two periods, and 60 responses to each directive (spread across different age groups, genders, regions, and occupational categories). When sampled carefully, and read carefully for categories and storylines that are shared between panellists – and, plausibly, between panellists and citizens in wider society – these responses allow a comparison between citizens' understandings and orientations in the so-called 'golden age' of democratic engagement immediately after the Second World War (when voter turnout reached as high as 84.1%) and the so-called 'crisis' period of recent years (when voter turnout reached as low as 59.1%).

Key findings

1) There never was a 'golden age' of democratic engagement.

Even in the immediate post-war period, substantial proportions of the population disapproved of governments and prime ministers (whatever their political persuasion); thought politicians to be out for themselves and their party (as opposed to their country); associated political campaigning with vote-catching stunts, mud-slinging, and a focus on personalities over policies; and imagined politicians to be self-serving gas-bags.

BIPO/Gallup collected survey data on things like approval and satisfaction during the 1940s and 50s. It found that on average just over 40% of citizens disapproved of the record of the Government during this period, and just under 40% were dissatisfied with the Prime Minister (with only a little fluctuation around these figures depending on the particular Government or Prime Minister in question).

In 1944, BIPO/Gallup asked citizens: do you think that British politicians are out merely for themselves, for their party, or to do the best for their country? Some 35% of respondents chose 'out merely for themselves', with another 22% selecting 'for their party'.

Following the General Election of 1945, BIPO/Gallup asked: in general, did you approve or disapprove of the way the election campaign was conducted by the various parties? Some 42% of respondents disapproved, giving reasons including 'too many vote catching stunts', 'too much mud-slinging', 'too little stress laid on policy', and 'too much Churchill, too little policy'.

In 1945, MO asked its panel to write about their 'normal conversational attitude when talk gets round to politicians'. Two clear storylines are repeated across the writing of a wide range of panellists. Politicians were viewed as self-serving, with prototypical characters here including the 'self-seeker' and the 'place-seeker'. They were also viewed as not being straight-talking; as being 'gas-bags' and 'gift-of-the-gabbers'.

2) Nevertheless, there has been a rise of anti-political sentiment over the last six decades.

This rise of anti-politics has taken three forms:

First, increased social scope. More and more citizens disapprove of governments and prime ministers, with more and more citizens judging politicians to be out for themselves and their party. Since the 1940s and 50s, the average level of government disapproval has risen by about 20% to just over 60%, and prime ministerial dissatisfaction has increased by almost 20% to around 55% (again, with some fluctuation for things like the honeymoon periods of new governments, but with a rising line of best fit that is very clear – see Figure 1).

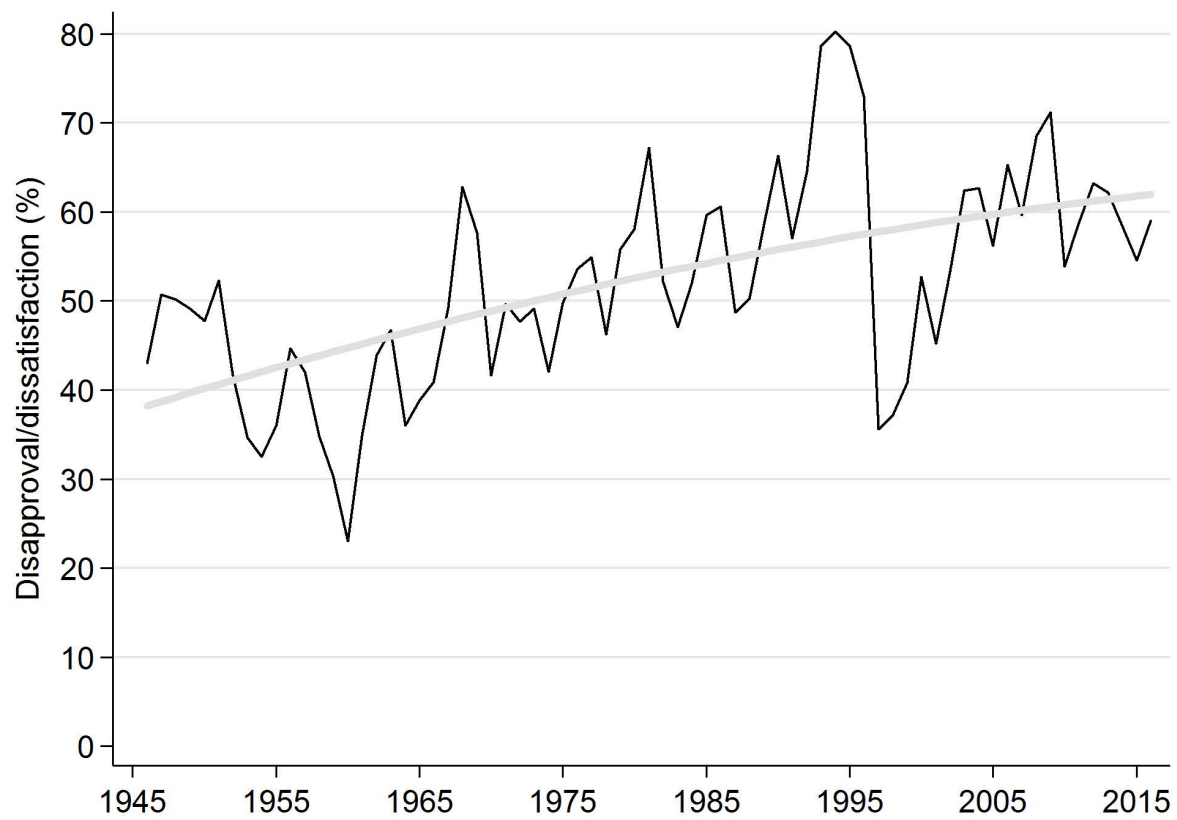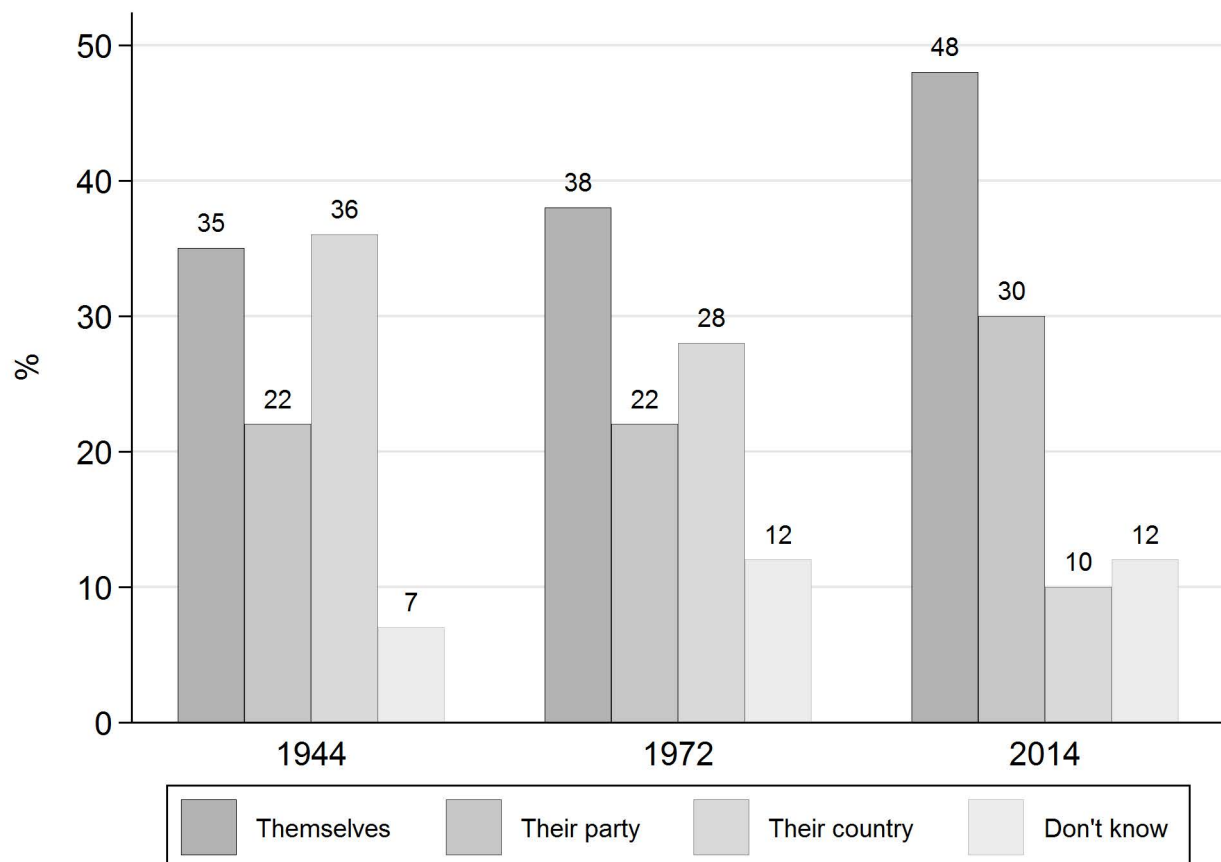Figure 1: Government disapproval (BIPO/Gallup and Ipsos-MORI)

Figure 2: Do you think that British politicians are out merely for themselves, for their party, or to do their best for their country? (BIPO/Gallup and YouGov/University of Southampton)

In 2014, we partnered with YouGov to ask the same question asked by BIPO/Gallup in 1944 (and again in 1972). This time, 48% of respondents judged politicians to be 'out merely for themselves (up from 35%), and 30% selected 'for their party' (up from 22%). Only 10% of respondents judged politicians to be out 'to do their best for their country' (Figure 2).

Table 1: 'Strongly agree' or 'agree' responses for survey items on anti-politics (YouGov/University of Southampton)

	Q1. Have technical knowledge	Q2. Can make difference	Q3. Possess leadership to tell truth	Q4. Focused on short-term chasing of headlines	Q5. Politicians self-serving, protecting interests of rich and powerful
All	20%	63%	33%	80%	72%
Gender					
Female	19%	62%	36%	78%	72%
Male	21%	64%	29%	82%	73%
Age					
18-24	21%	58%	33%	69%	56%
25-39	23%	61%	32%	74%	69%
40-59	18%	59%	29%	82%	75%
60+	18%	70%	37%	88%	78%
Social grade					
Professional and clerical	19%	65%	32%	80%	68%
Semi-skilled and manual	21%	60%	33%	80%	78%

On this question of social scope, we partnered with YouGov in 2013 to ask citizens about some common critiques of politicians. We asked them: 1) if politicians have the technical expertise/capacity to deal with the complex problems facing the country; 2) if politicians can make a difference to pressing social and economic problems; 3) if politicians possess the leadership to tell the public the truth about tough decisions that need to be made; 4) if politicians are too focused on short-term chasing of media headlines; and 5) if politicians are more concerned with protecting the interests of the already rich and powerful in society. Responses are presented in Table 1. We see a few differences between social groups, but overall negativity towards politics appears to be widespread. For example, the strongest negative response that politicians are too short-term and media-driven in their behaviour is endorsed by 8 in 10, with little variation by gender, age, or social grade.

The second form taken by the rise of anti-politics is increased political scope. Citizens hold more and more grievances with formal politics. In the current period, they judge politicians to be self-serving and not straight-talking, but also to be out of touch, all the same, a joke, and part of a broken and unfair system. In 2014, we partnered with MO to ask the same question asked by MO in 1945: 'What would you say is your normal conversational attitude when talk gets round to

politicians, clergy, doctors, lawyers, and advertising agents?'. The number of negative storylines about politicians has grown since 1945. Put differently, the number of distinct grievances citizens hold against politicians has grown. Politicians are still described as self-interested and not straight-talking. But now they are also described as out of touch, with prototypical categories in this storyline including 'the toff' (who went from public school to Oxbridge to Parliament) and 'the career politician' (with little experience of life beyond politics). They are also thought to be 'all the same' (just focused on swing voters in marginal seats), a joke (like schoolboys or students who make gaffes), and beneficiaries of a system that is broken and unfair (with too many safe seats and wasted votes).

The third form taken is rising intensity. Citizens disapprove and hold grievances more and more strongly. We see this in the language used by MO panellists. In 1945, respondents wrote about politicians in relatively measured terms. This did not just reflect a culture of deference at the time. In the same responses, they wrote about clergy as 'intellectually dishonest' and 'spoil-sports'; doctors as 'uncaring' and 'protective of their own interests'; lawyers as 'tricksters' and 'money-grabbers'; and advertising agents as 'frauds' and 'social parasites'. By 2014, the terms for these other professionals had not really strengthened in the writing of MO panellists. But the terms used for

politicians had certainly strengthened. Citizens now described their 'hatred' for politicians who made them 'angry', 'incensed', 'outraged', 'disgusted', and 'sickened'. They described politicians as arrogant, boorish, cheating contemptable, corrupt, creepy, deceitful, devious, disgraceful, fake, feeble, loathsome, lying, money-grabbing, parasitical, patronising, pompous, privileged, shameful, sleazy, slimy, slippery, smarmy, smooth, smug, spineless, timid, traitorous, weak, and wet.

3) Anti-politics describes negative feeling towards politicians, parties, Parliament, councils, and governments.

Anti-politics, used here, describes negative feeling towards politicians, parties, Parliament, councils, and governments in general (as opposed to particular politicians, parties etc. – which is to be expected in a partisan system). It describes negative feeling towards these institutions of democracy, as opposed to the idea of democracy itself (for which there is widespread support – so anti-politics does not equate to a crisis for democracy). It describes something more active and deeply felt than apathy or indifference. It describes something more negative than healthy scepticism (i.e. unhealthy cynicism).

4) We should be concerned about the rise of anti-politics.

The rise of anti-politics is concerning for at least four reasons:

First, existing research tells us that anti-political sentiment is associated with non-participation such as failing to vote, and non-compliance such as failing to pay taxes.

Second, existing research tells us that negativity regarding formal politics is not being compensated for by positivity towards informal politics. In terms of participant numbers, alternative forms of political action – from protesting and demonstrating to donating and volunteering – do not seem to be on the rise. They also appear to be minority forms of action compared to, say, voting. They also seem to be practised mostly by citizens who vote and even join mainstream political parties (making them an extension of the repertoire of already engaged citizens, as opposed to part of some alternative repertoire for discontented citizens).

Third, anti-political sentiment is associated with support for populism. Populists position themselves as being different from politicians and parties in general; as representing 'the people' against 'the out of touch and corrupt elites'; as representing 'common sense' in a field otherwise characterised by 'vested interests' and 'grubby compromises'. In doing so, they make a series of misrepresentations: that there is just one people; that they are of that people (and other politicians are not); that there is no mutual interdependence between that people and other peoples (whether external populations or internal minorities); that there is no need for negotiation and compromise between multiple and competing interests and opinions; and that there is no need for procedures and institutions oriented towards negotiation, compromise, the

making of collective decisions, and the imposing of binding decisions (what populists disparage as 'bureaucracy').

In Britain, UKIP is often described as a populist party. We analysed survey data from YouGov and Populus, and found that negative feeling towards the institutions of formal politics predicts support for UKIP to an equal degree as key social demographics. Indeed, when social group is held constant, anti-political sentiment increases the odds of supporting UKIP by more than a half.

Fourth, anti-political sentiment probably makes government more difficult. Ministers or councillors may feel they are faced with a diversity of demands, not aggregated by parties, that make responsive government and coherent public policy all but impossible. Ministers or councillors may also feel they lack the legitimacy necessary to request sacrifices from citizens (of the kind often required to solve major policy problems).

5) The rise of anti-politics is a complex problem and is likely to be explained by multiple factors.

In the existing literature, explanations are often categorised into demand-side, supply-side, and political communication explanations:

On the demand-side, it is argued that citizens have changed. They have become wealthier and better educated, less aligned to the main parties, and more consumerist in their approach to politics.

On the supply-side, it is argued that politics has changed. Governments perform less well against an expanded set of criteria. Power has been distributed to other actors, such that politicians are now viewed as less powerful and less worthy of engagement by citizens. Politicians and parties are less distinguishable in ideological terms (the so-called 'neoliberal consensus'), such that citizens fail to see how engaging with formal politics could substantially change their lives.

It is also argued that political communication has changed. Politics has become increasingly mediated and journalists have increasingly framed politics in negative terms. Political campaigning has become professionalised and focused on controlled rallies, photo opportunities, and soundbites; agenda-setting; the personalities of party leaders; and floating voters in marginal seats (to the exclusion of other voters).

6) The rise of anti-politics is explained in part by citizens' changing images of the good politician, and changing modes of interaction between citizens and politicians.

Volunteer writing for MO suggests two changes that help to explain the rise of anti-politics in Britain:

Images of the good politician have changed and become more difficult for politicians to achieve. In 1950, MO asked panellists: how do you feel about Attlee, Churchill, Bevin, Cripps, and

Bevan? The responses provide access to the criteria citizens used to judge politicians in the immediate post-war period. These criteria suggest an imagined 'good politician' of good character, principles, a mind of their own, self-control, strength, competency, vision, and personality. We partnered with MO to ask a similar question in 2014: how do you feel about Cameron, Miliband, Clegg, Hague, and Osborne? The criteria used to judge politicians have changed, suggesting a changed image of the good politician – who should now be strong, intelligent, competent, principled, and trustworthy; but also sensible yet fun, hard-working yet cool and effortless, an exceptional personality yet normal and ordinary. The image of the good politician used to be multi-faceted but coherent and just about achievable for some politicians. It has become characterised by tensions and contradictions, and would be difficult to achieve under any circumstances. It is especially difficult to achieve by current forms of political interaction – our next point.

Political interaction between citizens and politicians has changed, making it more difficult for politicians to perform virtues to citizens and for citizens to calibrate judgements of politicians. This can be seen in the General Election diaries of MO panellists (kept on seven occasions between 1945 and 2015). In the immediate post-war period, citizens encountered politicians most prominently in long radio speeches and rowdy political meetings. Politicians spoke on the radio for a testing length of time without interruption. They spoke at meetings where citizens could react, heckle, and ask their own questions. As a result of this political interaction, citizens could listen to, hear, challenge, and judge politicians as good or bad speakers, and better or worse candidates. In the current period, citizens encounter politicians most prominently in televised debates and associated news reporting. Interaction is heavily mediated. Many citizens find televised debates to be stage-managed, with topics avoided and questions not answered. They find news reporting to favour soundbites, photo opportunities, gaffes, polling results, and expert analysis. As a result, many citizens delegate their judgements to pollsters and experts, or else judge politicians to be frauds (who stick to the salesperson's script) or buffoons (who mistakenly go 'off script' and make gaffes).

What is to be done?

We should not expect that much can be done about anti-politics. There never was a golden age of politics in Britain. Democracy – with all of its promises and compromises – was always destined to disappoint citizens.

But we should expect that *something* can be done, because the scope and intensity of anti-politics are broader and higher than they were in the past. Things, as they say, could be otherwise.

On the demand-side, we should not expect much. Little can be done about long-term sociological factors like partisan dealignment and rising consumerism. Indeed, nothing should be done to reverse rising wealth and education levels. But citizenship education could be supported – especially where

it focuses on criteria for judging politicians and images of the good politician.

On the supply-side, we should not expect much either. Those with the power to change politics tend to be the incumbents who feel they benefit most from the current arrangements. Still, if politicians want citizens to participate in and legitimate formal politics, to shun the populists, and to make possible responsive, coherent, and effective government, they could respond to the specific grievances of citizens. They could respond to accusations of self-interest by looking again at issues around pay and expenses, campaign finance, lobbying, and so on. They could respond to accusations of being out of touch with ordinary people by looking again at issues around candidate and leader selection. They could respond to accusations that politics is broken and unfair, with too many safe seats and wasted votes, by looking again at issues around electoral reform and especially proportional representation.

Regarding political communication, we should not expect much either. The present situation came about for a number of good reasons – from expansion of the franchise to very real concerns about the security of politicians. A free press is also essential for democracy. But politicians could listen to citizens and respond with less mud-slinging, fewer gimmicks, more vision, more straight-talking, more direct public engagement, more engagement with issues that matter most to citizens. There may even be votes in such a response! Meanwhile, journalists could learn from the post-war period and give politicians more time to speak – which, in some cases, would equate to more rope by which to hang themselves. They could also give citizens more of a role in setting agendas, posing questions, and responding to answers received. If all this left less time for repetitive reporting of soundbites, photo opportunities, opinion poll results etc. then so much the better.

Finally, there is much talk at the moment of democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies. We are not opposed to these in principle, but the evidence from this project suggests that citizens on the whole are not clamouring for more opportunities to participate in formal politics. First and foremost, they want politicians to behave better and for representative democracy to work better for citizens.

Further reading

To date, the project has produced the following papers:

'Golden age, apathy, or stealth? Democratic engagement in Britain, 1945-1950', forthcoming in *Contemporary British History*, see
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fcbh20#.VxTvBXqij1g.

'The dimensions and impact of political discontent in Britain', forthcoming in *Parliamentary Affairs*, see
http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2016/01/23/ pa.gsv067.abstract.

'Anti-politics, Labour, and the left', forthcoming in *Renewal* (with responses from Andrew Gamble, Gavin Shuker, and Oliver Escobar), see
http://www.renewal.org.uk/.

'The bifurcation of politics: Two Englands', forthcoming in *The Political Quarterly*, see
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.12228/ abstract.

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