

Anti-politics, Labour, and the Left

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Introducing anti-politics

There are many kinds of politics, but if politics describes those institutions by which plural societies achieve collective and binding decisions (Crick 1962), then anti-politics describes negative feeling towards those institutions – including politicians, parties, councils, parliaments, and governments. This negativity is targeted towards politicians and parties in general, as opposed to particular politicians or parties (which, of course, would not be quite such a generalised concern). It is targeted towards the institutions of representative democracy and the way they currently work, as opposed to the idea of democracy itself (for which there remains widespread support). Given that most theories of democracy assume a certain amount of scepticism among citizens regarding politicians and the organisations through which they operate (Held 2006), anti-politics describes a level of negativity beyond such a healthy scepticism: an unhealthy cynicism. It also describes a rather active negativity, often deeply felt, as opposed to the passive indifference often discussed under the heading of ‘apathy’.

Where do we see such negativity? Most directly, we see it in focus-group research where citizens are asked relatively open questions and given the opportunity to speak in their own, often vitriolic terms about formal politics (Stoker et al 2016). More indirectly, we see it in survey evidence of things like trust or approval regarding politicians, leaders, and government (Jennings et al 2016).

If anti-politics can be seen in such places, why should that matter? Why is anti-politics important? What are its consequences? In general terms, anti-politics is associated with non-participation such as failing to vote, and non-compliance such as failing to pay taxes (Dalton 2004). For these reasons, some commentators fear that anti-politics might lead to weak government and, ultimately, withdrawal of support for the idea of democracy itself (e.g. Nye et al 1997).

A second reason for taking anti-politics seriously is that negativity regarding formal politics is associated with support for populism. Populism is based on the positioning of one politician or party as being different from politicians and parties in general; as representing ‘the people’ against ‘elite’ politicians and parties; as representing ‘common sense’ in a field otherwise characterised by ‘vested interests’ and ‘grubby compromises’. Such a positioning is dishonest in so far as it denies what must be known: that democratic politics inevitably requires a tough process of squeezing collective decisions out of multiple and competing interests and opinions, and imposing those negotiated compromises on everyone (Stoker 2006). Nevertheless, in England this positioning is currently deployed most obviously by

UKIP. We have analysed data from surveys conducted by YouGov and Populus to show that political discontent predicts support for UKIP to an equal degree as social demographics (Jennings et al 2016). Indeed, when social group is held constant, political discontent – measured by whether citizens think politicians are knowledgeable, can make a difference, possess leadership, are focused on the short-term chasing of headlines, and are self-seeking – increases the odds of supporting UKIP by more than a half.

A final reason to frame discussion in terms of anti-politics is that, currently, negativity towards formal politics is not being compensated for by positivity towards informal politics. This is the democratisation thesis (e.g. Norris 1999); the claim that we are not seeing a crisis of democracy but a reinvention of democracy; a shift from the old, traditional, elite-directed politics of liberal democracy to a new, post-industrial, post-modern, elite-challenging politics associated with new social movements, transnational political networks, internet activism, and so on. This claim seems to be questionable from two perspectives. Empirically, alternative forms of political action such as protest do not seem to be on the rise (Stoker et al 2011). They also appear to be minority forms of action compared to, say, voting (Whiteley 2012). They also seem to be practised mostly by citizens who vote and even join mainstream political parties (Saunders 2014), making them an extension of the repertoire of already engaged citizens, as opposed to part of some alternative repertoire for discontented citizens. Finally, in functional terms, informal politics does not replace formal politics. For example, it performs interest articulation much better than interest aggregation – the latter being a function traditionally performed by parties and crucial for coherent public policy (Dalton 2004).

Taking the long view

Anti-politics matters and is the focus of our current research on ‘Popular Understandings of Politics in Britain, 1937-2015’ (see <http://antipolitics.soton.ac.uk>). The project aims to take the long view of negativity towards the institutions of formal politics, going back at least to the Second World War and the so-called ‘golden age’ of democratic engagement in Britain (when voter turnout reached 90% (adjusted) – Denver et al 2012). It also aims to listen to citizens’ voices; their understandings, expectations, and judgements regarding the institutions of formal politics. To do this, we draw on two bodies of evidence. First, we analyse survey data: especially Gallup and Ipsos-MORI data on approval or satisfaction regarding governments, prime ministers, and party leaders (because these combined series go back to the immediate post-war period); but also more recent data from the British Election Study,

British Social Attitudes survey, YouGov, Populus, and the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement.

Second, we analyse volunteer writing for 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, storylines, and folk theories that are shared between panellists – and, plausibly, between panellists and citizens in wider society – these responses allow a comparison between how citizens understood formal politics in the so-called golden age of democratic engagement after the Second World War, and the so-called 'crisis' period of recent decades (when voter turnout fell as low as 62% (adjusted) – Denver et al 2012). We now turn to some of the findings of this research.

Anti-politics on the rise

Historical accounts describe a golden age of democratic engagement followed by decline (e.g. Putnam 2000), or a relatively permanent culture of apathy (e.g. Jefferys 2007), or just trendless fluctuation of political support (e.g. Norris 2011). Focusing on the case of Britain, and analysing survey data alongside volunteer writing for MO, our project has reached two main findings on the historical development of anti-politics.

First, *there never was a golden age of democratic engagement in Britain*. Gallup collected data on things like approval and satisfaction during the 1940s and 50s. It found that on average only about 40% of citizens approved of the record of the Government during this period, and roughly 50% were satisfied with the Prime Minister (with only a little fluctuation around these figures depending on the particular Government or Prime Minister in question). In 1944, 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? As many as 35% of respondents chose 'out merely for themselves', with another 22% selecting 'for their party'. After the General Election of 1945, Gallup asked: in general, did you approve or disapprove of the way the election campaign was conducted by the various parties? As many as 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'. Finally, also 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 categories here being the 'self-seeker' and the 'place-seeker'. They were also viewed as being not straight-talking; as being 'gas-bags' and 'gift-of-the-gabbers'.

So, there never was a golden age of democratic engagement in Britain. 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. However, and this is our second main finding, *things have got worse*. Since the 1940s and 50s, government approval has dropped by about 10% to 30%, and prime ministerial satisfaction has dropped by roughly 15% to 35% (again, with some fluctuation for things like the honeymoon periods of new governments, but with a falling line of best fit that is very clear). In 2014, we partnered with YouGov to ask the same question asked by Gallup in 1944. 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'!

In 2014, we also 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 being 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 has long been broken and unfair (with too many safe seats and wasted votes).

In summary, we might say that *anti-politics is on the rise in terms of its social scope*. More and more citizens disapprove of governments and prime ministers. More and more citizens judge politicians to be out for themselves and their party (as opposed to their country). We might also say that *anti-politics is on the rise in terms of its political scope*. Citizens hold more and more grievances with formal politics. 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. Finally, we might say that *anti-politics is on the rise in terms of its intensity*. 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 generalised 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 used 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, contemptible, 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.

Explaining the rise of anti-politics

In the academic literature, explanations are often categorised into demand-side, supply-side, and political-communication explanations (e.g. Norris 2011). On the demand-side, it is argued that citizens have changed. They have become wealthier and better educated (Inglehart 1997), less aligned to the main parties (Dalton and Wattenburg 2000), and more consumerist in their approach to politics (Stoker 2006). On the supply-side, it is argued that politics has changed (that politics is to blame). Governments perform less well against an expanded set of criteria (Mulgan 1994). Depoliticisation, in so far as it distributes power to other actors, means that politicians are now viewed as less powerful and less worthy of engagement by citizens. Depoliticisation, in so far as it makes politicians and parties look indistinguishable in ideological terms, means that citizens fail to see how engaging with formal politics could substantially change their lives (Hay 2007). Finally, some scholars argue that political communication has changed. Politics has become increasingly mediated and journalists have increasingly framed politics in negative terms (Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1997). 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 citizens).

We can add something to these explanations by drawing on 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, 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. 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, 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). Lacking opportunities to calibrate judgements of politicians themselves, citizens fall back on the suspicion and negativity that have seemingly always been one part of popular responses to formal politics in Britain.

Challenges and opportunities for Labour and the left

What all this means for the left depends on what is meant by the left. There are some on the left who believe the state is always captured by the capitalist class (because, in a capitalist system, even social-democratic governments rely on the material resources provided by capitalist economic actors). For these people, formal politics is fatally compromised in a capitalist system anyway and hardly worth worrying about. There are others on the left who welcome the turbulence brought by a rise of anti-political sentiment. The SNP and the Green Party provide their own interpretations of this phenomenon. For them, it should be interpreted as negativity towards the main parties and not formal politics in general. As such, it provides an opportunity for the SNP to position itself as 'not Westminster', and the Green Party to position itself as 'not one of the compromised main parties'. Our view is that such interpretations strategically overplay supply-side explanations for anti-politics ('the main parties are to blame'), while underplaying demand-side and political-communication explanations (for what is a generalised withdrawal of political support, and not just a shift of support from one set of parties to another).

In the rest of this section, we focus on the implications of growth in anti-political sentiment for the Labour Party – which, despite recent political turbulence, remains the primary institutional vehicle for left politics in the UK taken as a whole. As we have shown elsewhere (Jennings and Stoker 2015), a climate of anti-politics makes it harder for Labour to

win a majority under the current system. For anti-political reasons – among other reasons, of course – voters are abandoning Labour for the SNP, the Green Party, and UKIP (positioned under Nigel Farage as with ‘the people’ and against ‘the north-London metropolitan elite’). It is important, then, for Labour to find ways of responding to this anti-political climate. But what can it do? It can’t deny its history and adopt its own anti-political position. Nor can it do much about long-term sociological processes like postmodernisation and partisan dealignment. In the rest of this paper, we suggest three ways forward.

First, Labour could respond to some of those particular grievances commonly raised by a wide range of citizens. If politicians are thought to be self-serving – or serving on behalf of their cronies – it could take up distinctive positions on MPs’ pay and expenses, MPs’ second jobs, the so-called ‘revolving door’ between Westminster and certain highly-rewarded parts of the private sector, campaign finance, lobbying, and so on. If politicians are thought to be out of touch and all the same, Labour could look again at how candidates and leaders are selected. If the system is thought to be broken and unfair, with too many safe seats and wasted votes, how long before Labour must reconsider its (apparently self-serving) opposition to constitutional reform in this area?

Connected to this, a long-standing component of anti-political sentiment, going back at least to the Second World War, is a belief in the singular public interest, anti-party feeling, an aversion to mud-slinging, and a preference for independents, statesmen, coalitions, and national governments (working on behalf of that singular public interest). Such beliefs and preferences demand a united Labour Party but also invite serious consideration of a ‘progressive alliance’ involving Labour, the Greens, maybe the SNP and Plaid Cymru, and maybe the Liberal Democrats.

A second response by Labour could specifically address depoliticisation as one explanation for the rise of anti-politics. Labour could talk up fundamental ideological differences between itself and the Tories. It could talk up the power of politicians, councils, parliaments, and governments to make a difference. When in office, it could actually give some of these institutions more power (instead of taking it away, as was often the case during the late 1990s and early 2000s).

Third, Labour could address citizens as they wish to be addressed. The diaries kept by MO panellists during the General Election campaign of 2015 provide some guidance here. Politicians should avoid the petty, the tedious, and the trivial. They should avoid accusations, bickering, mud-slinging, slagging off, slanging, trading of insults, tribalism. They should avoid constant announcements, photo opportunities, promises, slogans, soundbites. They

should avoid gimmicks, tweaks, and bribes that are back-of-the-fag-packet, knee-jerk, and safety-first in character. Put more positively, politicians should address the important issues of the day. They should provide vision and inspiration. They should campaign on principles, speaking directly and frankly about such things. They should put themselves forward for testing by audiences that are not vetted and in situations that are not overly time-constrained and stage-managed.

What is required is a new willingness to interact with citizens in fora that are not tightly manipulated and controlled. Throughout the post-war period, our research suggests that citizens have always seen politicians as potential chancers, liars, and cheats. So the suspicion driving anti-politics is not new, but what have been lost are the contexts in which members of the public can come to an unvarnished and direct judgement for themselves, that sets aside these suspicions, and concludes that this politician and this party are more honest than dishonest, and more interested in the public interest than being self-serving. What is required is not the false authenticity of a populist – a Nigel or a Boris – but instead the willingness for elected representatives at all levels to place themselves in a position to be judged. Some of that could be face-to-face but much of it could be through the internet. Talking, engaging, explaining – and not just at election time – will defeat anti-politics and enable Labour politicians to be respected, if not to be loved, for trying to do a decent job for their country and locality. Many are already delivering that kind of engagement so there is good practice on which to build.

Finally, anti-political sentiment should not be confused with a demand from citizens for more opportunities to participate. We are not opposed to democratic innovations and new forms of engagement, but we think the main message of citizens to politicians is: do your own jobs better! We have found no evidence of a widespread desire among ordinary citizens for more participation in decision-making. Instead, we have found a long-standing preference for what Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) call ‘stealth democracy’. Citizens want government to operate well and in the background, while they get on with living their own lives. They want an improved liberal democracy, as opposed to a more participatory democracy. They want a better system for selecting and electing politicians, and then for politicians to behave better once in office (Stoker and Hay 2016). Labour can’t exploit anti-politics or manipulate it through promises set in stone. Rather it needs to address anti-politics head-on by giving citizens the opportunity to see Labour consistently behaving differently, and talking and campaigning on issues that matter. It needs to give citizens opportunities to

judge the performance of Labour politicians through forms of interaction and exchange that are less message-oriented and managed, and more open and continuous.

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