THIS IS THE FINAL AUTHOR VERSION POST PEER REVIEW OF CLARKE N, HILL A, AND MOSS J (FORTHCOMING) 'MASS OBSERVING BRITISH POLITICS', ***BRITISH POLITICS***

Abstract

The current political moment in Britain is characterised by disaffection, affective polarisation, and populist mobilisation of these (dis)affections. How best to research these moody times? We argue that political studies could utilise Mass Observation (MO) more than it has done. An independent research organisation, MO has collected observations, diaries, and responses to 'directives' – sets of open-ended questions and tasks – from across the UK during two periods: 1937 to 1949, and 1981 to the present. These collections have been described as a 'rare resource' (Dalton 2020: 964) of 'exceptional quality' (Hay 2024: 482). We introduce MO, review existing uses of MO by scholars of British politics, locate MO in political studies' methodological division of labour, and provide a guide for new users of the archive. We argue that MO provides distinctive access to public opinion, feeling, and behaviour in biographical context, historical context, and the context of everyday life.

Key words

Britain, citizenship, emotion, engagement, Mass Observation, mood

Introduction

Moody times

In recent years, British political studies has been debating how best to research the current political moment. This is a moment characterised by disaffection, affective polarisation, and populist mobilisation of these (dis)affections (Flinders 2020). It is a moment characterised by 'polycrisis' (Allen 2025, after Tooze 2022): not only a phenomenon of multiple intersecting crises – environmental, economic, political – but also a *feeling* about this phenomenon; a sense of chaos and paralysis. Though politics has always been emotional (Moss et al 2024), we appear to be living through especially 'moody times' (Coleman 2024) when the force and legitimacy of emotion in the public sphere is increasingly acknowledged, many more people are now able to express themselves in public settings, and the roots and ramifications of political events and processes appear to be complex and diffuse (ibid).

How best to research these moody times? Survey research does consider emotions, but usually in a particular way: as independent variables explaining political behaviour (e.g. Tilley and Hobolt 2024). Survey research also considers mood, but usually as public opinion aggregated across individuals and issues (Stimson 1991); a settled position, as opposed to an 'unsettled disposition' (Coleman 2024); a blurry sense that develops cumulatively and is multi-layered (ibid).

Some commentators have suggested the need for alternative ways of researching these times. For Coleman (2024) and Flinders (2020), lessons could be taken from sociology, where Hochschild (2016) has researched affective polarisation using interviews, visiting, and following people in their daily lives – to understand how they feel, the emotions that underlie their politics, their 'deep story' (that fits their feelings of hope, fear, pride, shame, resentment, anxiety). For Moss et al (2020), lessons could be taken from history, where Reddy (2001) has emphasised (historically contingent) emotional norms or 'regimes', while Langhamer (2016) has emphasised the (historically contingent) place of feelings in public life – as evidence ('feelings-evidence') or citizenship right ('the right to feel').

More broadly, calls have been gathering for methodological pluralism in political studies. The British Polling Council (2025) has suggested that polling errors could be reduced by a greater mixture of methods. Critical scholars have argued that polling, while claiming to capture public opinion, often works to shape such opinion – foregrounding the concerns of elite question-writers and backgrounding the voices of non-elites (Allen and Moon 2020, Mondon 2025). Concluding his largely quantitative study of political trust, Seyd (2024) recently wondered if trust might be understood better if 'top down or deductive exercises' were complemented by qualitative research focused less on 'general categories' and more on how citizens experience and express trust in their everyday lives.

In this context – of calls for methodological pluralism and debates on how best to research the current political moment – the aim of the present article is twofold: to argue that political studies might utilise Mass Observation (MO) more as one means of knowing British politics; and to facilitate future use of MO by providing an introduction and guide to this research organisation and archive. Encouragement for such an exercise has been taken from prominent figures in political studies. Russell Dalton (2020) has described MO as 'a rare resource among democratic nations' (p964), of which more could be made in British political studies. Colin Hay (2024) has described 'the (all too) little used Mass Observation Archive' as

'an amazingly rich and expressive source of data […] of rare and exceptional quality' (p482). For Hay, MO materials are particularly good for accessing the cognitive processing of citizens, their reactions to campaigns, and the 'positional character' of politics – that visceral part of politics dependent on values, identity, and emotion (ibid).

Introducing Mass Observation

In the sections below, we discuss the particularity of MO more fully. But first, before introducing the rest of this article, let us briefly introduce MO. The organisation has been active in two periods. In the first, from 1937 to 1949, it was known as Mass-Observation (with a hyphen). This original M-O was founded in a context of early social and market research, alongside organisations like Gallup's British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO). In this field, M-O's founders gave it a distinctive position. Tom Harrisson, an anthropologist, led observational research in Bolton ('Worktown') involving a team of paid investigators. Charles Madge, a journalist and surrealist poet, led a panel study from his base in London, but involving volunteer diarists and respondents to 'directives' – sets of open-ended questions and tasks – from across the UK (the National Panel). A third founder was Humprey Jennings, an artist and film-maker who applied his and Madge's surrealism to M-O's early publications e.g. *May the Twelfth* (Jennings and Madge 1937) – a collage of fragments presenting different voices and partial perspectives, without aiming for narrative wholeness (Marcus 2001).

All three founders were keen to understand the 'mass culture' of 1930s Britain. In other respects, however, including political and methodological preferences, they differed significantly. We return to some of these differences later in the article. For now, we note that Jennings left M-O in late 1937, Madge followed in 1940, and Harrisson gradually reoriented M-O away from surrealism – an art form, but also a mode of social research using collage and juxtaposition to defamiliarise everyday life, opening it up to critique by ordinary people (Highmore 2002) – towards research that would help the British state to better know its citizens (for example, through studies of 'morale' commissioned by the Home Intelligence Division of the Ministry of Information during the Second World War).

Harrisson himself was conscripted in 1942. Briefly, after the war, M-O was reoriented again towards clients willing to fund market research. Then, in 1949, this original M-O ceased activity and the name became used by other market research organisations: Mass-Observation Ltd from 1949, then M-O (UK) Ltd from 1970. However, this was not the end of

MO's life as a social research organisation. In 1975, the papers of the original M-O were archived at the University of Sussex. Over time, this archive (the MOA) established its own research projects. Inspired by the National Panel of the original M-O, the Mass Observation Project (MOP) has run a panel of volunteer writers from across the UK since 1981. Inspired by one of the original M-O's earliest publications, *May the Twelfth* (Jennings and Madge 1937), the 12th May project has collected day-diaries on that day each year since 2010.

These ongoing projects, and the papers of the original M-O, promise much to scholars of British politics (as we shall see). Though we'll return to the history of MO at various points in what follows, this fascinating story can be pursued elsewhere (see Clarke and Barnett 2023a, Hinton 2013, Hubble 2010, Sheridan et al 2000). The next section briefly reviews previous uses of MO in political studies, emphasising distinctive contributions to knowledge on political (dis)engagement, (dis)affection, cognition, and mobilisation. The section after that locates MO's place in political studies' methodological division of labour. Here, we clarify what using MO makes visible/audible (compared to survey and focus group research): what people say when given the opportunity to speak in their own words, to reflect and express themselves carefully, to speak privately and anonymously (via written directive responses); what people do (captured by observations and diaries); how political opinion and behaviour relate to biographical context, historical context, and the context of everyday life; and how people practice and experience political feelings. A fourth section guides readers to the politics they might find in the MOA: both the politics *of* MO, which gives the archive shape (as the politics of any research organisation influences its activities); and the politics *in* MO (a vast collection of materials relevant to political studies, including responses to closed survey questions and observations made by ethnographic researchers, but largely made up of reflective, expressive, biographical writing in the form of diaries and responses to open directives – with each item usually extending to multiple pages of prose, and each panellist usually contributing multiple items over a period of years). Here, our guide identifies relevant materials, their locations in the archive, and ways of analysing such materials (cross-sectionally, historical-comparatively, and longitudinally). A fifth section directly addresses the most common problem raised by social scientists when confronted by MO: representativeness, which can be solved – we argue – by sampling within the panel, focusing analysis on particular groups of cases (neglected cases or most likely cases), substituting

logical inference for statistical inference, or reading MO materials for cultural resources. The conclusion summarises the case for MO, before identifying two challenges on the horizon.

Mass Observation in political studies

Political (dis)engagement after the Second World War

Despite being under-utilised in political studies, MO has been used previously by some scholars of British politics: historians, geographers, and a few political scientists. An early example was Fielding and colleagues (Fielding 1992, Fielding et al 1995), who used MO to enter debates about why Labour won the general election of 1945 and whether that victory provides evidence of political engagement or apathy in the post-war period. Fielding and colleagues used File Reports from the original M-O – thematic summaries of collected material, produced by M-O researchers during the late 1930s and 1940s – alongside polling data from BIPO, to argue that Labour won the general election of 1945 less because the public fully understood and supported Labour's programme, or because there had been a strengthening of left-wing feeling during the Second World War, and more because a tired, indifferent, apathetic public were disaffected with the Conservatives and thought Labour might just provide a return to private, independent, normal life.

This argument has been critiqued by others, not least for the way it mobilises evidence from M-O. Hinton (1997) labelled it 'the Apathy School'. He thought the material summarised in the File Reports on which Fielding and colleagues relied – observations, ephemera, and questionnaire responses collected by investigators, along with diaries, directive responses, and day surveys provided by volunteer writers – was too suggestive and ambiguous to support such a confident, polemical argument. More recently, studies have re-analysed the materials themselves, instead of relying on summaries (M-O's File Reports). Moss et al (2016) re-analysed directive responses from the late 1940s. In place of the Apathy School's position (disengagement, bordering on hostility to politics) and the position it argued against (a 'golden age' of engagement, evidenced by high voter turnout), they develop a third position: many citizens held a 'stealth' understanding of politics in which democracy was viewed as important and voting was viewed as a duty (hence the high voter turnout), but government was best practised by experts in the national interest (hence the hostility to partisan politics).

Thackeray (2022) also re-analysed the materials themselves. Instead of the disinterest claimed by Fielding and colleagues, Thackeray found evidence for engagement with Labour's

campaign literature. He also found support for Moss et al; that citizens generally viewed partisan mud-slinging negatively, but otherwise were positively engaged by promises and programmes for government. Most recently, Goldsmith (2023) has provided a particularly close reading of certain materials behind the File Reports used by Fielding and colleagues: the questionnaire responses collected by M-O in Fulham East during the general election of 1945. How to interpret the 'don't know' answers given by respondents? For the Apathy School, these were evidence of indifference. For Goldsmith, an alternative interpretation is plausible. Middle-class investigators had entered a working-class neighbourhood to investigate a particular version of political competence (rational, informed, educated, responsible). Their interviewees did not welcome such a test. They resisted by disengaging. They would have preferred an alternative version of political competence: just knowing one's class and the party aligned with one's class.

Political (dis)engagement and (dis)affection over the last century

If Goldsmith narrows the focus – to just one type of response to questions in one constituency during one general election – then other scholars have mobilised evidence from MO in more broadly focused studies of British politics. The context, here, is concern regarding political disengagement and disaffection around the turn of the twenty-first century. Associated debates include whether engagement and affection have declined since a golden age after the Second World War, and just what counts as political engagement anyway.

Jeffreys (2007) responded to this context by tracing political attitudes and behaviour since the First World War in a variety of sources: statistics on party membership and voter turnout; M-O's File Reports; BIPO's polling data; and, for the late twentieth century, data from the British Election Study and British Social Attitudes survey. His argument recalls Fielding (the Apathy School): we are not currently witnessing a period of democratic decline or crisis because Britain never had a vibrant political culture; the majority have always been indifferent or cynical. An alternative argument is provided by Clarke et al (2018), who compared two periods – the so-called 'golden age' of democratic engagement around the Second World War and the so-called 'age of anti-politics' around the turn of the twenty-first century – using commercial polling data (starting with BIPO in 1937) and directive responses collected by MO (1945-1950 and 2001-2015). For these researchers, the earlier period may not have been a golden age, but anti-political sentiment has grown since that earlier period

in social scope (the range of citizens expressing it), political scope (the breadth of grievances held by citizens), and intensity (the *depth* of grievances held by citizens). While growing social scope is demonstrated by the polling data, growing political scope and intensity are demonstrated by the MO materials.

Two recent additions to this literature on political (dis)engagement and (dis)affection over the last century or so are Bingham (2024) and Cowen (2024). Again, MO appears here among other ways of knowing British citizens: polling, survey research, political and business archives, autobiographies, oral histories, and media content. Against narratives of decline, Bingham's account is of democratisation: strengthening of the democratic ideal; the rise of informed, critical citizens; increasing demands on the state. Against claims of conventional political inactivity, Cowen's account is of alternative political activity: story-telling in the family home, through which people argue about politics – what individuals deserve from the state, for example – treating family members as sources of political information and authority. These accounts have relevance for current debates in political studies on whether people are disengaged from politics and lack political knowledge, or constantly do politics in their everyday lives – in dealing with public services, for example – drawing on and developing experiential political knowledge (Allen 2025).

The 2016 UK EU Membership Referendum

A third use of MO by scholars of British politics has focused on the 2016 UK EU Membership Referendum and particularly debates about the rise of Euroscepticism in Britain since the 1970s (and the extent to which it was elite-led) and explanations for the Brexit vote (especially the roles played by elite cues and emotions). MO asked panellists to write about the referendum – the campaign, the vote, the aftermath – in three directives (Spring 2016, Summer 2017, and Spring 2019). Panellists had first been asked to write about Britain's membership of the European Economic Community in autumn 1982. Moss and Clarke (2021) analysed responses to this earlier directive, prompted by the Brexit vote and standard accounts of 'the road to Brexit', which for many was paved by Eurosceptic elites – for example, Thatcher's Bruges speech of 1988. The writing of MO panellists in 1982 suggests a different account. A folk theory of Euroscepticism was circulating among British citizens in the early 1980s, partly based on elite representations of the EEC, but partly based on grievances developed from experiences (especially of prices at the shops).

These authors and colleagues have also used directive responses from 2016 and 2017 to study cognition and voting in the second referendum. Faced with a difficult task and a campaign providing few trustworthy facts, many voters engaged with the referendum via heuristics: 'imaginative geographies', or different images of Britain and its place in the world (Clarke and Moss 2021); and 'negative elite cues', or political opponents to be voted against (Clarke et al 2023). Faced with accounts of emotion in politics – that voting should be rational (not emotional), that Remain supporters were more rational (than Leave supporters), that mixing emotion and politics is dangerous (leading to polarisation and post-truth politics) – citizens found themselves caught between emotional regimes: one favouring rationality over emotion; another favouring honest, sincere, authentic politics (Moss et al 2020, 2024). They found themselves uncertain of how to speak with family and friends – which, during a democratic event, was not ideal. This research using MO to study Brexit is what Hay picked up in his article cited in our introductory section (Hay 2024). Hay develops his own argument from this research: MO materials capture how Leavers and Remainers imagined Brexit differently, with the former giving it a 'positional' character, imagining Brexit in terms of values, identity, and emotion, and the latter giving it a 'valence' character, imagining Brexit in terms of technical and economic matters. For Hay, it is hardly surprising that Leavers turned out decisively, motivated by a more visceral politics than Remainers.

Mobilisation by governments and campaigns

A final use of MO to study British politics has been for research on how citizens respond to mobilisation by governments and campaigns. Why do such mobilisation attempts succeed or fail? How is political messaging received by citizens – when often, in theories of liberal governmentality, it is assumed to work rather smoothly through interpellation and subjectification (see Barnett et al 2008)? An early example was Adams and Raisborough (2010), who used MO to study fairtrade campaigns attempting to mobilise people as ethical consumers. In responses to a directive on 'Shopping and making a difference' (Summer 2007), they found that people receive such campaign messaging with a mixture of positive regard, questions about definitions, and scepticism. A second example is Clarke and Barnett (2023b, 2023c). They used MO's Covid-19 collection – almost 10,000 diaries and directive responses collected by MO during the Covid-19 pandemic – to study how citizens processed and practised new rules and guidance from government and health professionals. For most

people, this involved more than simple compliance or non-compliance (a primary focus of survey research during the pandemic). It involved: critical engagement with epidemiological concepts and subject positions (e.g. 'vulnerable groups'); practical reasoning in response to concrete situations; working through dilemmas by deliberating and weighing justifications; and recourse to heuristics (especially 'rules of thumb'). A final example is McCarthy (2025) on the Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) campaign. Why hasn't the campaign made more of an impact on women born in the 1950s and so adversely impacted by equalisation of the state pension age in 2015? Reading responses to an MO directive on 'Retirement' (Spring 2024), McCarthy offers two explanations: many of these women have been cushioned from the financial impact by male spousal income; and many of these women articulate a 'lucky boomer' identity that fits poorly into WASPI representations of generational injustice.

In this last article, McCarthy uses evidence from MO alongside evidence from other sources like the UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society). We have seen this before. While some researchers have just focused on what MO can tell us about particular topics – what MO can add to literatures developed from other sources and datasets – researchers focused on the topics themselves have often used MO materials alongside other evidence, especially from commercial polling (starting with BIPO, founded in the same year as the original M-O) and, later, major surveys like the British Election Study, the British Social Attitudes Survey, and Understanding Society. These latter scholars have appreciated that MO is not a replacement for these other sources of evidence in political studies. Rather, as the next section argues, MO has a particular and valuable role to play in the discipline's methodological division of labour.

Ways of knowing British citizens

Comparing Mass Observation, surveys, and focus groups

How to know British citizens, their political understandings and behaviours, especially in moody times? The primary way of knowing citizens in political studies is the extensive poll or survey. How does MO compare? What does it offer that polling and large-scale questionnaire surveys don't offer? Conversely, what are its limitations compared to these other approaches?

Such questions were considered right from the birth of the original M-O, when it was born into a world of existing social surveys and emerging commercial polling and market research. Bronislaw Malinowski, the eminent anthropologist, was a supporter of M-O and member of the committee controlling its funds. Guest-authoring the final chapter of M-O's *First Year's Work* (Madge and Harrisson 1938), he raised concerns about M-O's scientific basis. It was missing theory, which would have given its research more direction. It was practising 'crude empiricism': observing everything, regardless of what might be relevant to existing knowledge. If Malinowski was a critical friend, Henry Durant was a less friendly competitor. Durant had founded BIPO in 1937, just as M-O was being established. Competing for the same contracts from government and the newspapers, BIPO and MO would become characterised as opponents (quantitative versus qualitative, objective versus subjective). This was not a nuanced assessment, but debates between the two main characters behind each organisation are illuminating. One such debate, at the British Psychological Society in 1942, was reported in *Nature* (see Harrisson and Durant 1942). Durant proposed that 'empirical methods in the social sciences should be predominantly quantitative' (p516). It is the role of social scientists, he argued, to develop units and techniques of measurement for what they study, so as to eliminate subjective bias from their studies. Harrisson opposed Durant's proposition, arguing that quantitative methods are essential, but should be secondary (to qualitative methods). For Harrisson, the random sample and interview method (used by Durant) allows for study of what people say to a stranger (the interviewer), but not what people say to a friend, or what people think and do, which may not be the same as what they say. To study these items, Harrisson argued, we need M-O's 'observational technique' (practised by Harrisson's team of investigators in Bolton) and 'individual analysis' (led by Madge via the National Panel of volunteer writers).

Another critic of the original M-O was Mark Abrams, head of market research at the London Press Exchange during the 1930s, from which he spun Research Services Ltd in 1946. In *Social Surveys and Social Action* (Abrams 1951), Abrams critiqued M-O for its small samples, indirect interviewing (i.e. open conversations, not driven by theory), untrained investigators, and self-analysis (by panel members asked to write about their own motivations and behaviour). Some of these charges recall Malinowski and Durant. In recent decades, however, M-O has been defended convincingly against such charges. For Goot (2008), what M-O lacked in breadth of vision (due to its small samples), it made up for in depth of understanding – by

observing what people do in addition to what they say, and by asking a wider range of questions than pollsters and market researchers, which ultimately allowed political motivation and behaviour to be placed in context (something we return to shortly). For Moran (2008), M-O covered the rituals of electoral politics and the politics of everyday life missed by most political research of the time. It was able to place shifts in political interest and electoral participation in the context of emergent forms of mass culture and community – the football pools, for example, which preoccupied many ordinary people at the time, and which more tightly focused, theory-driven research failed to register. M-O offered something different to large-N surveys. While it struggled to quantify public opinion, it thickly described public feelings. This met research needs of the time. Government wished to gauge collective psychology and political mood, selecting M-O to complete such work during the war via commissions for the Ministry of Information (ibid). Indeed, M-O's research on morale – its contributions to the invention of 'morale' as an object of study – inspired creation of the Ministry's Home Intelligence Division, tasked with tracking and orchestrating public mood on the home front (Highmore 2017).

These debates about the original M-O help to clarify MO's way of knowing British citizens compared to polling and survey research. The original M-O collected observations, ephemera, and questionnaire responses via paid investigators, and personal writing – diaries and directive responses – from volunteer panellists. The revived MO, currently operating from the MOA, continues to collect diaries and directive responses (the latter, usually three times per year). More detail of these methods and datasets are provided in the next section. The point, here, is that generally MO may not achieve large or representative samples – though we return to this question of representativeness later in the article – and it may not ask questions in a way that makes testing of existing theory straightforward, but it does capture aspects of politics missed by other ways of knowing: what people do (captured in the observations of investigators or the diaries kept by volunteer writers); and what people say privately (as speakers overheard by investigators or panellists writing anonymously to the archive).

Having compared MO to polling and survey research, let us now compare MO to perhaps the second most prominent way of knowing in political studies: focus groups. Moran (2008) suggests that political focus groups actually began with MO, or at least their story can be traced back through British political campaigning of the mid-1990s, and the US-based

advertising industry of the mid-1960s, to the original M-O's eclectic range of methods drawn from anthropology and social psychology, and mobilised for the purposes of understanding voters (or non-voters, where M-O's concern was apathy). Our own view is that MO in its current incarnation offers researchers an alternative to both focus groups and in-depth interviews – those two staples of qualitative political research (e.g. Carvalho and Winters 2015). Like talk generated by focus groups or interviews, writing generated by MO is co-produced through intersubjective dialogue. Letters or emails are exchanged between archivists and panellists, the latter of whom have been termed 'correspondents' – purposefully – as opposed to just 'respondents' (Sheridan et al 2000). Each party in the conversation is influenced by the other (Pollen 2014). Archivists and researchers imagine panellists as historically conscious, civic-minded individuals – and address them accordingly. For their part, most panellists imagine readers of their submissions to be future historians (ibid). All this is to be acknowledged. Nevertheless, writing generated by MO arguably remains less intersubjective than talk generated by focus groups or interviews. This writing tends to happen alone, in private. Panellists are given weeks or months to consider directives or diary tasks. They make submissions anonymously, or at least in the knowledge that submissions will only ever be archived by the MOA after careful checks for anonymity. The result of all this is that writing for MO tends to be particularly frank and reflective. Purcell and Courage (2024) found this when using MO to access popular understandings of the Royal Family. Writing in private, with anonymity guaranteed, correspondents expressed views they feared went against mainstream opinion; views they would not be comfortable expressing in other contexts. Drawing on a different MO collection – diaries kept during the Covid-19 pandemic – Clarke (2024, pp6-7) gives examples of diarists laying themselves bare ('Writing this now, I am flooding with tears…'), disclosing secrets ('We've never said it out loud, but…'), expressing themselves carefully ('I feel quite detached from this description as I'm writing, because it doesn't fully convey…'), analysing their lives patiently ('I have spent time reflecting on this and I think…').

Mass Observation's distinctive offer to political studies

MO emerges from comparisons with polls, surveys, focus groups, and interviews as a distinctive way of knowing British citizens. To complete the present section, four additional players in MO's distinctiveness warrant brief discussion. First, writing collected by the MOP is

biographical in character (Ashplant 2021). Dorothy Sheridan, long-term director of the MOA from 1990 to 2008, imagined the MOP as a life history project in the traditions of oral history and community writing (Sheridan 1996). For Hinton (2016, 2021), this makes directive responses particularly useful for researching subjectivity and the mutually constitutive relationship between subjectivity and social change – especially if the archive is approached 'vertically', following a small number of panellists over time, instead of 'horizontally', analysing all responses to just one directive at one moment in time. This longitudinal approach is described more fully in the next section, but what it enables, from the perspective of political studies, is the location of political writing – including reports of political action – in *biographical context*. MO provides access to not only citizens understandings of politics, but also the way these understandings fit into the life course.

Second, while MO provides biographical context that helps interpretation of what people write, think, feel, and do (politically), it also provides other contexts that similarly help interpretation. Having existed since 1937, though not continuously, MO provides *historical context*. General election diaries can be compared across the decades (see Clarke et al 2017). Instead of inferring universal truths from particular historical moments, as when Fielding (2008) infers a necessary relationship between populism and democracy from evidence of populism in the two decades following the Second World War, such moments can be compared with other moments, and academic judgements calibrated accordingly. Clarke et al (2018) sought to do precisely this in their comparison of evidence for populist understandings of politics in Britain around the middle and end of the twentieth century (both periods covered by MO). They even commissioned MO to repeat questions from a 1945 directive in 2014. We return to the option of commissioning directives in the next section. Before then, another context deserves mention. In addition to biographical and historical context, MO locates politics in *the context of everyday life*. For example, the diaries collected during the Covid-19 pandemic capture how citizens responded to new government rules and guidance, and how those responses fitted with other commitments and practices – caring for family and friends, earning a living, being a good neighbour, shopping (see Clarke 2024).

Third, not only is writing for MO biographical. It is also *diarological*. This is most obviously the case for diaries collected by the original M-O and the ongoing 12th May project. But it is also the case for some directive responses, which some panellists provide in diary-like format or style, either because of the directive wording – e.g. directives asking for reports

on general election campaigns – or because certain panellists, it would seem, hold to an image of MO developed in the late 1930s: Mass Observers working for Harrisson in Bolton, reporting what they see and (over)hear, and doing so against time (over the course of a day or week). How might this diarological writing help scholars of British politics? In such writing, especially when focused on elections or campaigns, we can follow political information – where it is encountered, how it is processed, the way it informs political decisions like voting – almost in real time. Such concerns with political cognition are central to current agendas in political psychology (Stoker et al 2016, Leruth and Stoker 2020). Examples of research using MO in this vein include: Clarke et al (2017), in which citizens' interactions with campaigns and associated judgements of politicians are followed through general election diaries collected in 1945, 1987, and 2001; Clarke et al (2023), in which citizens' struggles to process information and allocate their support in the 2016 UK EU Membership Referendum are followed through campaign diaries; and Clarke and Barnett (2023b), in which citizens' attempts to make sense of and put into practice new rules and guidance during the Covid-19 pandemic are followed through diaries kept during the lockdown of spring 2020.

A final distinctive strength of MO returns discussion to where this article began: how to research the current moment of British politics, characterised by political disaffection, affective polarisation, and populist mobilisation of such (dis)affections? MO has been described as an 'archive of feeling' (Langhamer 2016). It has always asked people not only what they think, but also how they feel. Therefore, the MOA provides access to emotions. To be clear, however, emotions do not appear in the archive as independent variables – as they do in the survey experiments favoured by political psychology (e.g. Barnfield and Johns 2025, Tilley and Hobolt 2024). Instead, emotions appear in MO as governed, practised, and experienced (Langhamer 2016) – both individually, via narrative, and collectively, via norms and styles (components, for Raymond Williams, of 'structures of feeling'). Again, some examples to finish: Langhamer (2016) used MO to study what people thought about emotions in public life – their appropriate role or place in political discourse – in that pivotal year of 1945. Moss et al (2020, 2024) used MO to study feelings around the 2016 Brexit referendum: how they were used or dismissed (as evidence); and how they were experienced.

This section has clarified a distinctive role for MO in political studies' methodological division of labour. The argument is not that MO should replace other ways of knowing British citizens. It is that we need multiple ways of knowing. We need polls, surveys, focus groups,

and interviews. We need the 'close-up' ethnographies of Hochschild (2016) and Cramer (2016), in which focus groups and interviews are supplemented by visiting, following, and general community participation and observation over an extended period of time. We need innovative ways of knowing like Hart's (2018) analysis of letters published by local newspapers, or Coleman and Brogden's (2020) study of Bradford during the general election of 2019; a study difficult to summarise or categorise, that sought to capture the mood of politics – in that place, at that moment – by walking around, observing body language, listening to conversations, asking questions of people met, exchanging phone numbers and later text messages with those willing to do so. And we need MO: the eclectic methods and materials of the original M-O; and the writing still collected by the MOA – an archive of what people say privately, anonymously, frankly, reflectively, on a wide range of topics; an archive of biographical, diarological writing; an archive of feeling.

Politics in the Mass Observation Archive

The politics of Mass Observation

For students of British politics tempted to use MO, what politics might be found in the MOA? In this section, we describe the materials relevant to political studies, their locations, and ways of approaching and analysing these materials. Before introducing this *politics in* the MOA, however, we briefly consider the *politics of* MO. Like any research organisation, what MO collects, and how materials get organised into collections, is influenced by the interests of those leading the organisation. This was especially the case for the original M-O, which pursued a clear, if complex, political agenda (see Campsie 2016, Clarke 2024, Clarke and Barnett 2023a, Goldsmith 2023, Harrison 2014, Highmore 2002, 2017, 2022, Hinton 2013, Hubble 2010, Jeffery 1978, Savage 2010). The context of the 1930s included: a young and seemingly fragile mass democracy; a new mass literacy beginning to be used by propagandists; and the rise of fascism in Europe. M-O's founders were concerned that citizens were not being represented well, neither in Parliament nor in the news media. On the news media, they wrote (Madge and Harrisson 1939: 7): 'This is a democratic country, so we are supposed to have some idea of what is going on. For this we depend on wireless and newspaper presentation of news. But can we believe what we read and hear?'. On Parliament, they continued (pp8-9):

> It is the function of the 615 members of our democratic Parliament to voice the wishes, feelings, wants, needs, hopes, opinions, grouses, aspirations, and criticisms of 45,000,000 people. But this democratic system has broken down in other countries, and may break down in our own, because the 45,000,000 do not feel sufficiently strongly that they are able to speak through Parliament. So they give it up as a bad job and resign themselves to being voiceless or get annoyed with the whole system.

How to respond to the 'gulf – of understanding, of information, and of interest' between 'the political focus, which centres round government policy and diplomacy' and 'the ordinary focus of the ordinary man or woman' (p25)? How to counter myths of 'the people' promoted by politicians and journalists? How to stop citizens becoming anxious or apathetic in the face of crises and poor quality information?

M-O adopted two main strategies. Initially, influenced by Madge and Jennings, who in turn were influenced by surrealism, it tried to raise mass consciousness by mobilising citizens as observers and readers. Its 'mass method' would not only provide 'data for scientists' (Madge and Harrisson 1937: 45):

> It will encourage people to look more closely at their social environment than ever before and will place before them facts about other social environments of which they know little or nothing. This will effectively contribute to an increase in the general social consciousness. It will counteract the tendency so universal in modern life to perform all our actions through sheer habit, with as little consciousness of our surroundings as though we were talking in our sleep.

Participants would observe their own social environment and read about the social environments of others. Materials collected by M-O would be 'of interest to the social worker, the field anthropologist, the politician, the historian, the advertising agent, the realistic novelist, and indeed any person who is concerned to know what people really want and think'. But in addition to these 'special scientific uses', wrote Jennings and Madge (1937: iv), 'we believe that observing is itself of real value to the Observer. It heightens his power of seeing

what is around him and gives him new interest in and understanding of it. He also benefits from seeing specimens of others reports'.

Once Jennings and Madge left M-O, this initial strategy – one response to the perceived crisis of democratic representation in 1930s Britain – gradually became replaced by another. Harrisson was less interested in the consciousness of citizens and more interested in the competence of government. Compared to Jennings and Madge, he was less interested in revolution and more interested in reform. Under the leadership of Harrisson, M-O took commissions from the Ministry of Information. It also continued publishing on mass culture, but more with an audience of planners in mind. For example, *The Pub and the People* (Mass Observation 1943) approached the pub as a 'social institution' – an important base for customs, rituals, and traditions – and described it with a view to informing post-war planning. In the preface (p9), Harrisson wrote: 'plans are being made about the future of Britain, and these are often being made as if the prejudices and habits of ordinary people can be ignored'. This was personal for Harrisson: 'my family have lived at Letchworth Garden City, one of the key towns of the planning movement, and one of the few places in England where no pub is allowed'.

When interpreting the materials collected by the original M-O, knowing the interests of those leading data collection and archiving would appear to be important. We have suggested previously that some researchers have appreciated this (e.g. Goldsmith 2023) more than others (e.g. the Apathy School of Fielding and colleagues). This also needs appreciating for the MOA and its ongoing research projects. The MOP was founded by David Pocock, an anthropologist with particular interests in how people experience social change; especially how people were experiencing inflation, unemployment, and welfare cuts in the early 1980s (Sheridan et al 2000). The director of the MOA for much of the 1990s and 2000s was Dorothy Sheridan, a feminist scholar with particular interests in women's experiences and the relationship – in women's lives, but also more generally – between private and public, the personal and political (Sheridan 1996, 2021). These concerns influenced the questions asked in directives, which in turn influenced the panellists willing to participate. Still, the point bears repeating: *all* research reflects the politics of those designing it, who see particular problems and puzzles from their own position or situation.

A guide to the Mass Observation Archive for students of politics

We are now in a position to describe what students of politics might find in the MOA. The period covered by the original M-O was 1937 to 1949, though a few research activities limped on through the 1950s and even the 1960s. Data collected, along with initial analysis by M-O researchers, can be accessed in person at the MOA in Brighton, or remotely via AM Digital (Mass Observation Online, a subscription service purchased by many UK universities). The categories used by Mass Observation Online give a sense of what might be found there (Table 1). For the category of 'Directive responses', details of directives most relevant to formal British politics are provided in Table 2. Other topics covered by directives from this period, relevant at least indirectly to political studies, include: feelings about other races and foreign leaders (June 1939); class belonging and mobility (June 1939); reactions to government posters and public information leaflets (October 1939); views on war-time saving, evacuation, and black-out regulations (November 1939); newspaper reading (May 1940); and so on.

INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 HERE

For the period since 1981, the picture is much simpler. Materials have been collected by one of two main ways: the MOP, which collects directive responses from panellists; and the 12th May project, which collects annual day-diaries. While the 12th May diaries do contain material relevant to formal politics – for example, on governance of the Covid-19 pandemic (see Clarke 2024) – this is not generally their primary purpose. The MOP directives, by contrast, have often focused explicitly on formal politics. Table 3 provides details of these most relevant directives. Other topics covered by directives over the years, relevant at least indirectly to political studies, include: the railways strike (Spring 1982); the Falkland Islands Crisis (Special 1982); cuts to public services (Summer 1982); foodstuffs and boycotts (Winter 1982) … the royal family (Summer 2022); the Coronation of King Charles III (Spring 2023); Israel-Palestine (Autumn 2023); the cost of living (Autumn 2024).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

All these materials provide three main options for analysis. First, researchers might focus on responses to just one or two directives. An example of such cross-sectional analysis is Clarke

and Moss (2021), in which responses to directives on the UK EU Membership Referendum (Spring 2016 and Summer 2017) are compared between Leave and Remain supporters. Second, researchers might compare materials collected in different periods. An example of such historical-comparative analysis is Clarke et al (2018), in which political (dis)affection is compared between the immediate post-war period and the current ('crisis') period. Third, researchers might focus on a sample of panellists and follow them over a period of time, through responses to multiple directives on multiple different topics. An example of such longitudinal analysis is Lindsey and Mohan (2019), in which 38 panellists are tracked across three decades (1981-2012) to study volunteering across the life course.

A final option worth mentioning is that of commissioning directives from the MOA, either to repeat tasks/questions from earlier directives (e.g. Clarke et al 2018 – who repeated parts of a 1945 directive in 2014) or to field entirely new topics. Costs and wording can be negotiated with the archivists. Researchers can expect to reach roughly 500 panellists and to receive roughly 200 responses of various lengths and styles, but an average response – based on recent collections – would be four sides of prose. If choosing this option, researchers may wish to know the demographic and other characteristics of expected respondents.

Representativeness

Mass Observation's panellists

The first question often raised by social scientists regarding the MO panels is that of representativeness. Who are these panellists and how representative are they of the national population?

Hinton (2013) has done the painstaking work to answer these questions for the National Panel of the original M-O. Two of his tables are reproduced here (in adapted form) as Tables 4 and 5. Over 2,000 participants joined the panel between 1939 and 1945, though some left as others arrived, meaning the average size across the period was roughly 1,000. Of these, around one third replied to each directive, with numbers of replies to each directive varying between roughly 200 and 500 (during what was a turbulent time for potential respondents). In 1939, young men tended to be over-represented. By 1945, this was less the case, not least because young men were taken by war. Other groups over-represented across the entire period were: the middle classes; people from London and the South East (from

where the panel was administered); people on the left (since one avenue for recruitment was advertising in the *New Statesman*); and, of course, volunteers (ibid).

INSERT TABLES 4 AND 5 HERE

It is sometimes unclear whether Hinton's figures refer to panel members or directive respondents. He slips between 'panellists', 'recruits', and 'respondents' in the surrounding text. Nevertheless, the general message is clear: volunteer writers for the original M-O were not quite representative of the population as a whole. Beyond this general message, however, other messages are worth emphasising. Some coverage of most groups was achieved. It was hardly the case that other research at the time, including early polling and market research, was using much larger samples or other sampling approaches to M-O's quota sampling (Goot 2008). When results achieved via M-O's panel were compared to results achieved by panels known to have different social constitutions, the results tended to be confirmed. This was the case for the Ministry of Information's Home Intelligence Panel, to which members were invited and vetted by officers, and so probably veered to the right (Hinton 2013). It was also the case for BIPO, seen as the standard for representativeness during this period (Goot 2008).

Turning to the MOP panel, established in 1981 and still running today, what can be said about representativeness? To date, roughly 4,500 volunteers have written for the MOP. At any one time, typically, directives have been sent to roughly 500 active panellists and roughly 200 responses have been received. In Tables 6-9, we focus on respondents – the authors of writing scholars might actually find in the archive. Among these respondents, certain groups have been over-represented: women; older people; people in South East England; and people in professional, associate professional and technical, and administrative and secretarial occupations. Correspondingly, certain groups have been under-represented: men; younger people; people in the Midlands and Northern Ireland; and people at either end of the occupational hierarchy. The archivists have been aware of this and have tried at various points to rebalance the panel through recruitment drives (Sheridan et al 2000). Ultimately, however, they have also learned to accept that MO is a particular research community attracting particular participants (ibid). The same could be said, of course, for many research communities. The challenge, then, becomes one familiar to historians or qualitative social

scientists: how to generate claims from sources considered unrepresentative (in a formal or statistical sense)?

INSERT TABLES 6-9 HERE

Generating claims from Mass Observation

Users of the MOP have adopted at least four strategies in response to this problem. First, some have sampled within responses to correct any skews. Clarke et al (2018), for example, sampled 60 respondents for each directive included in their study, allowing quotas to be filled for age, gender, occupation, and place of residence (the four categories of metadata collected by the MOP during this period; since 2021, metadata has also been collected for ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and disability); allowing a range of perspectives to be surfaced; and, within this figure of 60, allowing descriptive saturation to be reached.

Second, instead of seeking to correct for skews, some researchers have opted to work with existing skews; to make a virtue of the over-representation of certain groups in the MOP. Baker and Geiringer (2018), for example, focused on MO's women writers. Giving voice to these women could help to redress the traditional privileging of men's voices in British public life (ibid; see also Sheridan 1994). In this way, MO's women writers were treated not as representative cases, but as *neglected cases*. Another example is Manning's (2018) use of MO to study political (dis)engagement and (dis)affection. The fact that panellists for the MOP tend to be particularly engaged individuals – volunteers for a social history project – could be seen as a problem for such a study. Manning made it a virtue. Rather than representative cases, panellists were treated as *most likely cases*. If these particularly engaged citizens were found to be disaffected (something disguised by their dutiful voting), it could be inferred that less engaged citizens would also be disaffected – perhaps even more so.

A third strategy has been to exchange statistical inference from representative cases for logical inference from *telling cases*. Bloome et al (1993) first recommended this approach in a paper for the MOA that has since been influential in MO studies. In doing so, they drew from Clyde Mitchell's distinction between 'enumerative induction' (generalising from numerous cases) and 'analytical induction' (exploring theoretical propositions through specific cases). The former requires 'typical cases'. The latter requires only 'telling cases' – of the kind found in MO. Further clarification can be added if we recognise that, in making his

distinction, Mitchell was himself drawing from Florian Znaniecki (Clarke and Barnett 2023a; see also Morgan 2021). Enumerative induction involves generalising from many cases with the same characteristics. By contrast, analytical induction involves abstracting essential findings from one or more concrete cases; findings that might then be presumed relevant in other cases.

A final strategy is to read writing in the MOA not for cases – whether representative, neglected, most/least likely, or telling – but for evidence of the cultural resources circulating in society at a particular moment in time, used by panellists to make sense of the world and their place within it; and, plausibly, by non-panellists too. Clarke et al (2018) took this approach. MO materials were used to identify the repertoire of categories, storylines, and folk theories available to citizens, from which popular understandings of politics might be constructed. There is a tradition of such work in political studies. Gamson (1992) used focus groups to identify conversational resources available to social movement participants. Lakoff (1996) distinguished the models and metaphors used by conservatives and liberals to think about politics.

Conclusion

The case for Mass Observation

A conversation is ongoing about the current moment in British politics (moody, populist) and the degree to which the challenge is being met by the standard methodological toolkit of political studies (polls, surveys, focus groups, interviews). In this article, the case has been made for more use of MO in British political studies. Materials in the MOA constitute a resource of rare quality that has been underused in political studies to date. MO provides a complement to mainstream approaches, providing more depth of understanding and thick description than polls and surveys, while providing more frankness and reflexivity than focus groups and interviews. The MOA is an archive of feeling that gives access to emotions; how they are practised, experienced, and governed. Volunteer writing in the MOA is biographical, allowing political understandings and behaviours to be situated in biographical context. It is diarological, allowing political understandings and behaviours to be situated in the context of everyday life, and providing real-time records of information-processing and decision-making (i.e. political cognition). This evidence covers much of the period since 1937 and continues to be collected today, making possible historical-comparative and longitudinal analysis, in

addition to cross-sectional analysis. While the question remains about MO's representativeness, this question can be answered – to the satisfaction of many – using carefully applied sampling and analytical strategies.

Challenges on the horizon

Given all this, readers may wonder why MO has not been used more in British political studies. Relevant, here, are two challenges (and opportunities). First, the MOA is a vast and growing archive. While its relatively unstructured contents pose difficulties for quantitative researchers, its size increasingly poses difficulties for qualitative researchers. What to select for close reading? Regarding selected items, how to account for the context of those items (in the archive as a whole)? Regarding claims based on such items, how to answer questions of validation; questions about frequency, typicality, scope, or significance? These questions have been central to recent more broadly focused discussions of archives, digitisation, source abundance – as opposed to the previous challenge, for history and allied disciplines, of source scarcity – and computational analysis (see Blaxill 2013, 2023). These questions represent a challenge to users of MO, but also an opportunity: mixed-methods research combining interpretivist approaches with techniques from the digital humanities. We are aware of just one example to date, from the field of linguistics, approximating such research using MO (Robinson et al 2023).

The second challenge, on which this article concludes, concerns the ability of MO to continue collecting data relevant to politics, and to continue making such data available to researchers. In both cases, this ability depends on funding. Currently, MO is a registered charity funded by a combination of: contributions from the University of Sussex; commissioning fees from directives; royalties from publications; private donations; and subscription fees for AM Digital. Individually, researchers can support MO by commissioning directives and requesting institutional subscriptions to AM Digital. But ideally the challenge would be met strategically – just as the challenge of collecting and making available survey data relevant to British politics has been met strategically over the decades (e.g. by ESRC funding for the British Election Study).

Discussions of how to secure MO are nothing new and will continue. But they are important because the current funding model is not ideal. In particular, reliance on subscription fees from AM Digital places remote access to MO materials behind a paywall,

restricting access to certain researchers at certain institutions. These discussions also connect to broader discussions currently underway in sociology and history regarding how to make better use of existing qualitative data – in general (see Hilliard 2022), but especially the qualitative data collected by the British Birth Cohort Studies (Carpentieri et al 2024, Elliott 2008, Elliott et al 2025). The question is not only how to make better use of existing qualitative data, but also how to collect better qualitative data in the future – especially general-use qualitative data that is both representative and repeated (Elliott 2022, Elliott et al 2025). The promise of such developments is a better understanding of how individuals and social change relate. This is a pressing matter for political studies, as it is for sociology and history.

Perspectives from political studies would no doubt be welcome in these ongoing discussions. This is what political studies might contribute, but the main focus of this article has been on what political studies might gain from engaging more with MO. In moody times, when politics is characterised by disaffection, affective polarisation, and popular mobilisation of these (dis)affections, MO might provide political studies with better access to how people feel, their deep stories, and the emotional norms they perceive; to the visceral, positional politics driving so much opinion and behaviour in the current period.

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Table 1: Politics in Mass Observation Online

Category	Period	Description	Notes
The Worktown collection	1937-1940	Papers from anthropological studies of Bolton and Blackpool	Boxes include: 'Politics, general'; 'Party politics'; 'Political activities'; 'Municipal politics'; 'Voting, parliamentary by-election'; and 'Trade unions'
Day surveys	1937-1938	Diaries kept by panellists on particular days	-
Diaries	1939-1967	Diaries kept by panellists, generally submitted in monthly instalments	-
Directive responses	1939-1955	Responses from panellists to regular directives (short lists of tasks and open-ended questions)	For directives most relevant to formal politics, see Table 2
Topic collections	1937-1965	350 collections of observations, overheards, ephemera, and questionnaire responses on particular topics	Collections include: no. 10 ('Labour party "ask your dad" campaign', 1948); no. 43 ('Propaganda and morale', 1939-1944); no. 44 ('Public administration and social services in wartime', 1941-1942); no. 46 ('By-elections', 1936-1947); no. 76 ('General elections', 1945-1955); no. 83 ('Voting attitudes', 1944); and no. 84 ('Local council elections', 1937-1951)
File reports	1937-1951	Almost 2000 thematic summaries of collected material, produced by M-O researchers	Examples include: 'Silvertown by-election'; 'Opinion formation in Worktown'; 'Reactions to Eden's speech'; 'General trends in morale'; 'Communist Party leaflet'; 'Public opinion about Mr Chamberlain'…

Table 2: Directives most relevant to formal British Politics, 1939-1955

Code	Date	Most relevant tasks/questions	Responses
SxMOA1/3/42	August 1940	Report on your own opinion or general feeling and people's attitudes about the whole war. Send responses to new Government regulations, or big press campaigns.	90
SxMOA1/3/52	January 1942	What are your present feelings about Churchill, the present government, the war in the Far East, and the form of government there will be after the war?	418
SxMOA1/3/54	March 1942	What is your opinion of Winston Churchill, Stafford Cripps, Ernest Bevin, and Herbert Morrison?	425
SxMOA1/3/55	April 1942	What are your present feelings about the political truce?	460
SxMOA1/3/58	July 1942	What is your opinion of Winston Churchill, Stafford Cripps, Ernest Bevin, and Herbert Morrison?	428
SxMOA1/3/60	September 1942	How should the following problems be dealt with after the war: demobilisation, social services, unemployment, industry, agriculture, and international organisation?	311
SxMOA1/3/62	November 1942	What do you think of the following politicians: Attlee, Bevin, Churchill, Cripps, Darlan, De Gaulle, Eden, Morrison, Petain, Roosevelt?	315
SxMOA1/3/64	January 1943	Special Job: report on discussion arising from the Beveridge Report.	369
SxMOA1/3/66	April 1943	What are your present feelings about the political truce?	322
SxMOA1/3/67	May 1943	What is your opinion of Winston Churchill, Stafford Cripps, Ernest Bevin, and Herbert Morrison?	297
SxMOA1/3/69	July 1943	Give in as much detail as possible your views on a State Medical Service. What educational reforms do you think necessary after the war?	293
SxMOA1/3/71	September 1943	What part does politics play in your life nowadays? How much will it affect you personally after the war? What are your present feelings about the political truce?	251
SxMOA1/3/73	November 1943	If you had been appointed in Lord Woolton's place as Minister of Reconstruction, what aspects of reconstruction would you concentrate on now?	293
SxMOA1/3/74	December 1943	What are your feelings about Sir Oswald Mosley?	297
SxMOA1/3/78	May 1944	How far does the Education Bill meet your own views on how education should be run after the war? […] What do you think about the future of the coal mines? How do you think they should be run in peacetime?	232
SxMOA1/3/79	June 1944	Has you attitude to politics changed at all since the war began?	298
SxMOA1/3/81	September 1944	What are your views on the government's Social Security plan?	153
SxMOA1/3/83	January 1945	What are your views on the political truce now?	224

SxMOA1/3/84	February 1945	What would you say is your normal conversational attitude when talk gets round to each of the following groups of people: clergymen, politicians, doctors, advertising agents, lawyers, scientists, the rich, the poor?	161
SxMOA1/3/86	May 1945	Report at intervals on the election campaign. What is your attitude to the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Party, the Communist Party, and the Commonwealth Party? How do Liberal policies differ from Labour's and the Conservatives'?	98
SxMOA1/3/87	August 1945	What do you think of the new Government?	184
SxMOA1/3/88	November 1945	How much interest do you take in municipal election? Did you vote in your election last month? Discuss the idea of a world state. Is it desirable?	160
SxMOA1/3/89	December 1945	What do you think of the Labour Government so far? What do you think of: Ernest Bevin, Aneurin Bevan, Herbert Morrison, Clement Attlee, Stafford Cripps, Winston Churchill, and Ben Smith?	152
SxMOA1/3/97	February 1947	What is your opinion, and what are the general feelings of people you meet about Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill, Stafford Cripps, Ernest Bevin, and Herbert Morrison?	192
SxMOA1/3/102	June 1947	Give your views on recent pronouncements of policy by the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party, the Communist Party, and the Government. If you have any recent political party publications in the house, please refer to them and describe your reactions.	420
SxMOA1/3/110	January 1948	What do you think are the three most satisfactory and the three most unsatisfactory things that the present Government has done?	271
SxMOA1/3/115	October 1948	Has your attitude to any of the following things changed since the end of the war, and, if so, in what ways has it changed? Money, clothes, […] politics.	381
SxMOA1/3/120	April 1949	How do you feel about the Labour Government at present?	311
SxMOA1/3/121	May 1949	What is your attitude to the principle of obedience to a 'party line' in the case of Members of Parliament, and rank and file members of a political party?	476
SxMOA1/3/123	August 1949	Do you intend to vote the same way at the next Parliamentary elections as you did at the last? How effectively dos you think the MP for your constituency represents you in Parliament?	351
SxMOA1/3/127	July 1950	How do you feel about Attlee, Churchill, Bevin, Cripps, and Bevan?	369
SxMOA1/3/130	November 1950	Which political party do you most of all sympathise with at present? What changes have taken place in your political outlook? What influences would you say have been most effective in determining your present political opinions?	336
SxMOA1/3/133	November 1955	Which political party do you most sympathise with?	232

Table 3: Directives most relevant to formal British politics, 1981-2024

Code	Date	Most relevant tasks/questions (summarised)	Responses
SxMOA2/1/3/1	Autumn 1981	The political climate, incl. the Liberal-SDP Alliance and the Deputy Leadership election in the Labour Party	214
SxMOA2/1/4/1	Spring 1982	Local elections: awareness, voting intentions, reports of canvassing	217
SxMOA2/1/11/1	Spring 1983	The coming general election: considerations that will determine voting	373
SxMOA2/1/22/1	May 1987	The coming general election: factors that will determine voting; predictions of who will win; changing views during the campaign; reports of campaigning styles, canvassing, posters; reaction to the result	669
SxMOA2/1/29/2	Summer 1989	Day diary completed on the day of the European parliamentary election	531
SxMOA2/1/36/4	Spring 1992	General election diaries covering thoughts on events, issues, programmes, politicians, and voting	208
SxMOA2/1/49/3	Autumn/winter 1996	Diaries in the run up to the next general election	281
SxMOA2/1/50/2	Spring 1997	General election diaries covering reactions to issues, feelings about the political situation, hopes and fears regarding the potential result, reactions to the actual result	267
SxMOA2/1/56/2	Spring 1999	The private lives of politicians, including recent scandals and exposures	234
SxMOA2/1/61/2	Autumn 2000	The Party conferences, including personalities, issues, and relevance to everyday life; views on New Labour and Tony Blair	193
SxMOA2/1/62/2	Spring/summer 2001	General election diaries covering reactions to the news, local activities, election broadcasts, overheard conversations; key issues; voting, including tactical voting; reactions to the outcome	237
SxMOA2/1/69/3	Spring 2003	War with Iraq: anti-war campaigns; the anti-war demonstration in London on 15 February	126
SxMOA2/1/75/3	Summer 2005	The general election, including key issues, voting, and reaction to the result; the G8 summit; the Make Poverty History campaign	196
SxMOA2/1/88/3	Spring 2010	The general election: levels of (dis)interest and (dis)engagement	203
SxMOA2/1/99/1	Spring 2014	Attitudes to politicians, political parties, voting, local elections, and local councils	175
SxMOA2/1/99/2	Spring 2014	Scottish Independence Referendum diaries covering news media coverage, the key issues, the SNP and Alex Salmond, political speeches	164
SxMOA2/1/102/2	Spring 2015	The general election: level of interest; use of news media; reactions to televised leaders debates; intention to vote/abstain; key policies; hopes and fears; diaries of polling day; reactions to the result; thoughts on the new government	169
SxMOA2/1/105/3	Spring 2016	The EU referendum: intention to vote/abstain; key issues; hopes and fears; use of news media; reactions to the campaigns; diaries of (changing) opinions during the campaign	247

SxMOA2/1/109/1	Summer 2017	The EU referendum – one year on: reflections on the vote, the issues, the impact of the result, feelings of belonging, views about British politics and particular politicians, expectations for the future	160
SxMOA2/1/114/3	Spring 2019	Brexit Day diary covering use of news media, feelings on the day, activities on the day	154
SxMOA2/1/116/3	Winter 2019	General election day diary covering mood, issues, feelings about the party leaders, voting, reactions to the result, expectations of the next government	146
SxMOA2/1/123/3	Autumn 2021	The murder of the Conservative MP Sir David Amess; the conduct of MP Owen Paterson	146
SxMOA2/1/126/2	Autumn 2022	Current events, including Liz Truss and then Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister	123
SxMOA2/1/131/2	Summer 2024	The general election: reflections on the lead up, news coverage, the televised leaders debates, local campaigns, the key issues, the parties and party leaders, voting, the results, expectations of the new government, hopes for the future	219

Table 4: M-O panel by gender and age (%), 1939-1945

	1939	1939	1945	1945	1939
	Male	Female	Male	Female	National Register
18 and under	12	3	0	0	-
19-24	37	21	15	5	10
25-34	29	31	29	16	23
35-44	12	24	28	19	21
45-54	5	16	9	38	18
55-64	3	5	11	16	15
65 and over	1	1	7	6	13

Source: Hinton (2013): 270.

Table 5: M-O panel by gender and self-attributed class (%), 1939

	All	Male	Female
Working class	19	22	11
Lower middle class	25	26	23
Middle class	27	25	33
Professional	11	9	14
Upper middle class	15	15	16
Upper class/gentry	3	2	4

Source: Hinton (2013): 271.

Table 6: MOP respondents by gender (%), 1981-2024

	Female	Male	Other
1981 Census	51	49	0
1983 Spring	77	23	0
2001 Census	51	49	0
2001 Spring-Summer	76	24	0
2021-22 Census	51	49	0
2024 Summer	76	23	1

Source: Mass Observation, ONS, Scotland's Census, NISRA.

Table 7: MOP respondents by age (%), 1981-2024

	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
1981 Census	20	19	15	16	14	10	6
1983 Spring	6	16	16	24	23	12	3
2001 Census	17	21	18	17	12	10	5
2001 Spring-Summer	4	7	14	18	19	28	10
2021-22 Census	16	18	16	18	14	11	7
2024 Summer	3	5	16	21	20	27	8

Source: Mass Observation, ONS, Scotland's Census, NISRA.

Table 8: MOP respondents by country/region of the UK (%), 1981-2024

	England									Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
	E Mids	E of England	London	NE	NW	SE	SW	W Mids	Yorks and Humber			
1981 Census	7	8	12	5	12	13	8	9	9	5	9	3
1983 Spring	5	13	22	1	9	21	10	4	9	4	2	0
2001 Census	7	9	12	4	11	14	8	9	9	5	9	3
2001 Spring-Summer	3	14	13	2	10	28	9	7	7	3	3	1
2021-22 Census	7	9	13	4	11	14	9	9	8	5	8	3
2024 Summer	4	8	9	7	9	24	13	6	8	3	8	1

Source: Mass Observation, ONS, Scotland's Census, NISRA.

Table 9: MOP respondents by Standard Occupational Classification (%), 1981-2024

	Managers, directors, senior officials	Professional	Associate professional and technical	Administrative and secretarial	Skilled trades	Caring, leisure, and other service	Sales and customer service	Process, plant, and machine operatives	Elementary	Not answered/not applicable
1983 Spring	3	23	13	26	2	5	7	2	4	15
2001 Spring-Summer	3	37	16	20	3	3	5	1	1	11
2011 Census	11	17	13	11	12	9	9	7	11	0
2024 Summer	5	35	19	10	3	3	3	0	1	21

Source: Mass Observation Project Database (current occupation or most recent occupation if not currently in work, SOC2010); ONS, Scotland's Census, NISRA (occupation if in formal work, SOC2010).