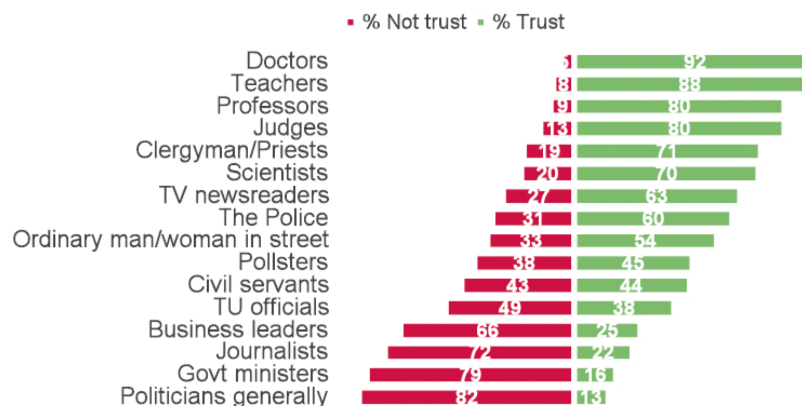
What Gives Politics Such a Bad Name?

> 'Why the politician should be so often condemned, so seldom praised, is not difficult to discern in some of his roles, but in others the reasons for his unpopularity are more elusive and, possibly, instructive. For there is a lugubrious sort of instruction to be gained from this frequently obscene spectacle.' (Lundberg 1968: 15)

In the most recent audit by the Hansard Society, respondents were asked which profession they "would be proud for a children or family member" of theirs to do (Hansard 2010: 128). Of the fourteen professions listed, only the presence of a council manager, estate agent or tabloid journalist in the family would generate less pride than that of a national or local politician. Still, that 22% would feel pride about such choice of profession by a family member shows that the remaining regard in society for politicians is perhaps slightly underestimated by surveys that ask about different professions in less personal fashion, e.g. "whether you generally trust them to tell the truth or not" (Skinner et al. 2010: 12, see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Trust in professions

Q. For each, would you tell me whether you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?



Base: 2,023 British adults aged 15+, 4-10 September 2009 Source: Ipsos MORI/RCP

What also becomes apparent from the 2010 audit by the Hansard Society is that the recent expense scandal in the UK has further exacerbated the problem. Comparing with data from previous annual reports, they find that not just trust

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in politicians but perceptions of how well the system of government works have taken a severe dip over the past twelve months (Hansard 2010: 24). While all other indicators they use in this report ("propensity to vote", "interest in politics", "knowledge of politics", efficacy of "getting involved") confirm the repeatedly found cyclical effect of elections, namely to somewhat regenerate political interest and involvement (see also Butt and Curtice 2010: 7), the expense scandal serves to further undermine the reputation of the political profession as well as the political institutions just ahead of the 2010 poll.
One could find many illustrations such as the graph in Figure 1, also from other developed Western democracies, repeatedly indicating an apparently deep distrust and dislike for the political profession. As has been most comprehensively documented by Dalton (2004), over recent decades the publics in most if not all Western democracies have come to distrust politicians (pp. 25-31), lose confidence in political institutions (pp. 34-39) and be disenchanted about how the democratic system works (pp. 39-41). There are of course some dissenting voices, challenging the idea of a systematic time trend indicating growing dissatisfaction with politics (Clarke et al. 2004, Norris 2011); however, apart from remaining questions about the reliability of the data used in these cases,[1] the overwhelming picture from the literature is one that indicates a serious problem (see summary in Norris 2011: Chapter 1). Corroborating evidence also comes from increasingly apparent trends in declining turnout across established democracies (see Mair 2006).

This paper aims to discuss the nature and root cause of this problem that the public apparently has with politics as such. And I propose a 'deep' explanation, i.e. one that goes beyond either blaming the media, the politicians and institutions themselves or the changing public, or indeed beyond claiming that

[1] While Clarke et al. (2004) can certainly not be faulted on their methodology in testing attitudes to democracy; they do seem to understate the problem resulting from changes in British Election Study survey questions that measure trust in institutions. These have varied substantially over recent decades and render any claim of time trends in general questionable. In Norris' (2011: Chapter 4) case, she presents a picture of volatility rather than any systematic trends in attitudes towards politicians and institutions across European countries but the Eurobarometer data she uses appears overly noisy, producing inexplicably upwards or downwards movements from one year to the next of up to 20%. Why would for example "trust in parliament" in West Germany rise by 18% from 2006 to 2007 (36%→54%) and fall again by as much as 11% in the following year? Nothing happened in Germany at that time that could possible account for such extreme movements in public opinion.

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this is indicative of a "critical public" that politics needs to re-engage with. Such a deeper explanation is to be found by trying to understand what essentially distinguishes the political process nowadays from what politics was and meant a generation ago. What seems to be missing from current debates about political apathy, public disenchantment with politics or however else the problem is framed, is any deeper discussion of why political institutions and the political profession were not always treated with as much suspicion as they are now. If we look at the collection of statements from philosophers, writers and thinkers from Plato to Ambrose Bearce or Groucho Marx that Lundberg (1968) compiled, the exercise of politics and the activities and driving motives of politicians were always a likely target of criticism, suspicion and even repulsion. So what was it then that generated not overwhelming but at least comparatively decent levels of trust in politicians and institutions during the mid-20th century?

What is political trust?

There are two fallacies in how political trust has been measured and how it is being framed and discussed nowadays. The first fallacy is embedded in the phrasing of a typical political trust question sometimes posed in, for example, British Election Study surveys: "How much do you trust politicians/parties to put the national interest before partisan interests?" This implies that trust in the political system is predicated on the ability of governments or law-makers to act in non-partisan or by-partisan fashion. However, there is no evidence to suggest that more consensual politics results in more contented citizens. It will be argued later in this paper that the exact opposite might be the case.

The second fallacy is to misinterpret political trust as either a question of character-based individual trustworthiness of office-holders or indeed as a matter of conditional trust that results from delivery in office. As Ruscio (1999) points out, political trust is indeed more conditional than personal trust, but it is conditional on perceived institutional guarantees that reassure citizens about their polity not being inherently corrupt or unfair. I would propose that trustworthiness of office-holders or satisfactory delivery in office would constitute sufficient but not necessary conditions for widespread political trust. That is to say that if everyone was to perceive all parliamentarians and government min-

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isters as generally trustworthy, things would be fine. Similarly, if government were understood by citizens to deliver excellent policies, everything would be fine too. But there is no reason to expect all politicians ever to measure up to such high standards or to expect government actions to ever be universally beneficial, so any discussion that focuses on how to ensure outstanding behaviour in office or better delivery remain futile (or at least beside the point of trying to explain why politics has become so unpopular). This is especially pertinent since there were times when political trust was higher even though there is little reason to assume that politicians were of a better moral standard in the 1960s or 1970s than they are now, or indeed that government delivery was more universally beneficial back then than it is now.

The literature on political trust tends to emphasize the notion of trust at the expense of contemplating the political nature of the supposed relationship between those who trust and those who are being trusted. An obvious starting point is to go back to basic definitions of politics. Irrespective of whether we look at Easton's (1953) more elaborate definition of politics as "the authoritative allocation of values" or Laswell's (1936) more mundane definition of politics being about "who gets what when and how", politics is essentially about distribution. This does not necessarily always involve distribution of material values, as Easton's definition implies, but whether we talk about the allocation of resources or the acknowledgement and consideration of non-material values, neither are those resources ever abundant nor are values or beliefs mutually inclusive. And indeed, Schattschneider's (1960) understanding is helpful here as he stated that matters become political whenever conflicts can no longer be solved privately but become socialised. Politics is the organization of conflict, and in Schattschneider's view such organization can only be provided by political parties determining what are the core fault lines or cleavages that divide society. The reliance of the public on parties to help structure societal conflict and on that basis to effectively compete over the running of government is a necessary representative substitute, not actual "government by the people" but "government by consent of the governed" (Schattschneider 1967: 58). This substitute is necessary because of the nature and scale of modern societies and serves to structure political conflict in mass societies.

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> ‘The immobility and inertia of large masses are to politics what the law of gravity is to physics. This characteristic compels people to submit to a great channelization of the expression of their will, and is due to numbers, not to want of intelligence. An electorate of sixty million Aristotles would be equally restricted.’ (Schattschneider 1942: 52)

Schattschneider invoked the notion of responsible parties (Adamany 1972: 1325), which together with the idea of people being compelled to “submit to a great channelization of the expression of their will” circumscribes the meaning of political trust. Democracy is an exercise in community-building, and “the boundaries of voting […] correspond roughly to the boundaries of social community – that segment of the population who share values as well as goods” (Adamany 1972: 1332). In this model of democracy, social conflict and partisanship is not eroding community but quite the opposite; it is structuring politics, and if parties are successful in adequately organizing the different sides in the major social conflicts political trust emerges as an individual and collective understanding of one’s own or one’s own side’s stakes being adequately represented and voiced. This idea is also reflected in the picture that Mair (2006) paints of the traditional cleavage-based model of mass politics which means that political parties are rooted within society, allowing individuals to have their interests and stakes in the social distribution of values and goods being adequately represented, because they share their interests and stakes with their fellow partisan constituents. Schattschneider (1967) was already concerned with the exclusion and alienation of 40 Million Americans, which he understood to result from the political system not adequately working to organise their grievances into meaningful political representation.

Representation and trust

Dalton’s (2004) analysis of increasing political discontent over recent decades across many if not all developed democracies highlights an important point: citizens have lost trust in politicians, in institutions and in how the political system in their country works, but they have not lost belief in the superiority of democracy as a political system. As many other scholars, Dalton concludes this to mean that we are dealing with more critical and demanding citizens (see also Norris 2011, Coleman 2005). However, serious doubts can be raised

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about the idea of a more demanding democratic citizenry. Van Deth (2009) points out that all evidence points towards citizens not being willing to invest more time and energy in additional forms of participation, and also the findings from the Hansard audit of political engagement (2010: 57) that most of the discontented citizens are best characterised as either bored or apathetic, disengaged and distrustful or some even openly hostile. There is little reason to assume that the problem of declining trust in politics could be rectified by engaging citizens more, consulting more, or by increasing possibilities of direct involvement. An alternative interpretation of Dalton's (2004) finding is rather that distrust in politicians, institutions and the working of the system amount to an increasingly outright rejection of the representative model of democracy, as advocated most forcefully by Schattschneider. Citizens continue to like the idea of democracy but appear increasingly dissatisfied with the representative model, however without indicating that a move to more direct democracy would be the solution.

It seems reasonable to understand declining trust as synonymous with a feeling of no longer being adequately represented, hence a reduced willingness of citizens to make that giant leap and "submit to a great channelization of the expression of their will" (Schattschneider 1942: 52). The concept of representation is rarely invoked in discussions about declining political trust; arguments centre on external factors like media images, or social change (decline of social capital), or indeed the quality of delivery in government. And in surveys, respondents are in various forms being asked what they expect or want from politicians and parties, never what they expect from politics. One might even argue that a disregard for the importance and meaning of representation is why Downsian models of voting have not been overly successful in modelling voting and party behaviour:

> 'Directional voters ask of their parties "Are you on my side?" and "Can I trust you to be responsible" – as opposed to the classic proximity question: "How close is your position to mine?"' (Macdonald and Rabinowitz 1998: 282)

What I am trying to argue in the remainder of this paper is that politics in the Schattschneiderian sense, namely the partisan organisation of societal conflict

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has lost its significance, and that as a result political trust has not so much declined but rather morphed into a distinctly non-political form of institutional trust that is decidedly more and differently conditional than its political predecessor. The partisan political systems of Britain and other Western democracies have essentially been depoliticised. This process shares some similarities with Downs' predictions about party convergence but derives less from deductive premises about utility maximisation and more from a historical understanding of the interconnected and mutually exacerbating processes of social change and partisan professionalisation and modernization.

Valence politics

Partisan dealignment is widely understood to be a result of social change, of people being less likely to regard themselves as members of a particular social class, of individualization, value change etc. (Butler and Stokes 1974; Clark and Lipset 1991; Inglehart 1990). However, the political parties' response to this, by professionalizing their campaign activities, adopting modern marketing strategies, in the Downsian sense converging on median policy positions has reinforced this process, raising important questions about causal direction.

Such questions are particularly raised in recent debates in which electoral research as well as reconceptualisations of spatial models of voting have emphasised Stokes' older notion of valence issues or indeed valence politics (Stokes 1963, 1992; Green 2007, Clarke et al. 2004, Whiteley et al. 2005; MacDonald and Rabinowitz 1998; Schofield 2003). Stoke (1963) argued that not all issues are positional issues, but that some issues are non-controversial with regard to their outcomes – everyone wants less crime, a better environment; and economic growth is increasingly also named as one such issue "on which there is agreement on the end of politics" (Green 2007: 629). However, the argument of proponents of the idea of valence politics goes much further in that they propose that almost all issues are by now valence issues, so that consensus exists about ends of politics, while conflict surrounds questions of means, i.e. how best to accomplish these ends, and indeed questions of competence and delivery (Clarke et al. 2004; Whiteley et al. 2005). Crucially, the valence politics models is different from the Downsian model insofar as it is argued that not only parties but also voters agree on these ends, so it is not the parties who

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just converge on one position because it is a median one. But, it is argued that an emerging world of valence politics can be understood as a result of Downsian strategies, because converging parties "eliminate any spatial differences between them, so voters can no longer choose between them on spatial grounds" (Whiteley et al. 2005: 804). Politics becomes a matter of "who can best deliver the equilibrium policy" (*ibid.*) where the equilibrium policy is being determined by preceding party convergence to which the public responds by assimilating their preferences. Explicitly, partisans are predicted and empirically found to become over time more similar in their preferences on issues on which parties have previously converged (Green 2007: 632). This is also understood as consensus politics, and is claimed to render voter evaluations into retrospective judgments about performance rather than prospective judgments about promises which would be more in line with a positional model of party competition (Whiteley et al. 2005: 805).

It is interesting to note that the developing paradigm about valence politics has remained limited in scope, insofar as it has only been applied to discuss and explain electoral change or revise the spatial model of voting. No one has yet pointed to a possible connection between this significant alteration of the essence of what politics is and is about and the coincidentally occurring substantial decline in public trust in and engagement with politics. If we grant any credence to Schattschneider's claim that politics is essentially about the socialisation of conflict, then valence politics no longer qualifies as politics at all. And we do not have to subscribe to Schattschneider's party-centred model of what politics is in order to come to this conclusion. Equally, if one thinks through Laswell's (1936) definition of politics as a question of "who gets what when and how" or Easton's (1953) idea of politics as "the authoritative allocation of values" it is obvious that politics, being about distribution, is inherently about temporarily creating winners and losers. This is inherent in early understandings of politics, from Rousseau onwards, namely that democratic politics creates winners and losers but deserves to be called democratic insofar as it is truly and continuously competitive, offering current losers the prospect of moving to the winning side in the future.

Not only is valence politics no longer about taking sides in social conflicts, it also not about distinguishing winners from losers. Evaluative criteria of per-

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formance, competence and delivery are bereft of any such political content. These criteria render political evaluation similar to how citizens evaluate and respond to performance of social and administrative services. In the realm of valence politics, the citizen morphs into a political consumer who is judging governments on the same terms as she judges civil servants or front line staff in the NHS or the educational sector. Then, of course, customer service criteria like better communication, accessibility and response to feedback become paramount (Coleman 2005). But this has two consequences that combine to explain low levels of political trust and increasing disaffection with and disquiet about politics. First, trust in corporations or trust in administration or other institutions cannot and should not be equated with political trust. Civil servants, companies, nurses or teachers are not representatives but politicians still are; but a trend towards valence politics may imply that representation is no longer at the heart of statements about political trust; or worse yet, if they still are part of public expectations then office holders who solely aim to perform and deliver will, even if they perform and deliver well, fall short by not fulfilling any additional demands that political trust encapsulates. Second, a remaining and quite crucial contrast between politicians and other service providers is that politicians hold power, which demands that they are held to other and most likely higher standards than civil servants or nurses. No level of customer service, good communication and responsiveness can substitute for a substantially political trust, i.e. a feeling of being meaningfully represented that alone can justify in any citizen's mind the transferral of public sovereignty (that is normatively at the heart of democracy) onto parties and politicians to act on the public's behalf.

To put it bluntly, communication, good customer service, competence, performance and delivery can result in satisfaction but never in consent.

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